

Chapter 1

The second cataclysm began in my eleventh life, in 1996. I was dying my usual death, slipping away in a warm morphine haze, which she interrupted like an ice cube down my spine.

She was seven, I was seventy-eight. She had straight blonde hair worn in a long pigtail down her back, I had bright white hair, or at least the remnants of the same. I wore a hospital gown designed for sterile humility; she, bright-blue school uniform and a felt cap. She perched on the side of my bed, her feet dangling off it, and peered into my eyes. She examined the heart monitor plugged into my chest, observed where I'd disconnected the alarm, felt for my pulse, and said, "I nearly missed you, Dr August."

Her German was Berlin high, but she could have addressed me in any language of the world and still passed for respectable. She scratched at the back of her left leg, where her white knee-length socks had begun to itch from the rain outside. While scratching she said, "I need to send a message back through time. If time can be said to be important here. As you're conveniently dying, I ask you to relay it to the Clubs of your origin, as it has been passed down to me."

I tried to speak, but the words tumbled together on my tongue, and I said nothing.

“The world is ending,” she said. “The message has come down from child to adult, child to adult, passed back down the generations from a thousand years forward in time. The world is ending and we cannot prevent it. So now it’s up to you.”

I found that Thai was the only language which wanted to pass my lips in any coherent form, and the only word which I seemed capable of forming was, why?

Not, I hasten to add, why was the world ending?

Why did it matter?

She smiled, and understood my meaning without needing it to be said. She leaned in close and murmured in my ear, “The world is ending, as it always must. But the end of the world is getting faster.”

That was the beginning of the end.

Chapter 2

Let us begin at the beginning.

The Club, the cataclysm, my eleventh life and the deaths which followed – none peaceful – all are meaningless, a flash of violence that bursts and withers away, retribution without cause, until you understand where it all began.

My name is Harry August.

My father is Rory Edmond Hulne, my mother Elizabeth Leadmill, though I was not to know any of this until well until my third life.

I do not know whether to say that my father raped my mother or not. The law would have some difficulty in assessing the case; the jury could perhaps be swayed by a clever individual one way or the other. I am told that she did not scream, did not fight, didn't even say no when he came to her in the kitchen on the night of my conception, and in twenty-five inglorious minutes of passion – in that anger and jealousy and rage are passions of their kind – took revenge on his faithless wife by means of the kitchen girl. In this regard my mother was not forced, but then, as a girl of some twenty years old, living and working in my father's house, dependent for

her future on his money and his family's goodwill, I would argue that she was given no chance to resist, coerced by her situation as much as by any blade held to the throat.

By the time my mother's pregnancy began to show, my father had returned to active duty in France, where he was to serve out the rest of the First World War as a largely undistinguished major in the Scots Guards. In a conflict where whole regiments could be wiped out in a single day, undistinguished was a rather enviable obtainment. It was therefore left to my paternal grandmother, Constance Hulne, to expel my mother from her home without a reference in the autumn of 1918. The man who was to become my adopted father – and yet a truer parent to me than any biological relation – took my mother to the local market on the back of his pony cart and left her there with some few shillings in her purse and a recommendation to seek the help of other distressed ladies of the county. A cousin, Alistair, who shared a mere one eighth of my mother's genetic material but whose surplus of wealth more than made up for a deficit of familial connections, gave my mother work on the floor of his Edinburgh paper mill; however, as she grew larger and increasingly unable to carry out her duties, she was quietly moved on by a junior official some three rungs away from the responsible party. In desperation, she wrote to my biological father, but the note was intercepted by my shrewd grandmother, who destroyed it before he could read my mother's plea, and so, on New Year's Eve 1918, my mother spent her last few pennies on the slow train from Edinburgh Waverley to Newcastle and, some ten miles north of Berwick-upon-Tweed, went into labour.

A trade unionist by the name of Douglas Crannich and his wife, Prudence, were the only two people present at my birth, in the ladies' washroom of the station. I am told that the stationmaster stood outside the door to prevent any innocent women coming inside, his hands clasped behind his back and his cap, crowned with snow, pulled down over his eyes in a manner I have always imagined as being rather hooded and malign. There were no doctors at the infirmary at this late hour and on this festive day, and the

medic took over three hours to arrive. He came too late. The blood was already crystallising on the floor and Prudence Crannich was holding me in her arms at his arrival. My mother was dead. I have only the report of Douglas for the circumstances of her demise, but I believe she haemorrhaged out, and is buried in a grave marked “Lisa, d. 1 January 1919 – Angels Guide Her Into Light”. Mrs Crannich, when the undertaker asked her what should be on the stone, realised that she had never known my mother’s full name.

Some debate ensued about what to do with me, this suddenly orphaned child. I believe Mrs Crannich was sorely tempted to keep me for her own, but finances and practicality informed against this decision, as did Douglas Crannich’s firm and literal interpretation of the law and rather more personal understanding of propriety. The child had a father, he exclaimed, and the father had a right to the child. This matter would have been rather moot, were it not that my mother was carrying about her person the address of my soon-to-be adopted father, Patrick August, presumably with the intention of enlisting his help in seeing my biological father, Rory Hulne. Enquiries were made as to whether this man, Patrick, could be my father, which caused quite a stir in the village as Patrick had been long married, childlessly, to my adopted mother, Harriet August, and a barren marriage in a border village, where the notion of the condom was regarded as taboo well into the 1970s, was always a topic of furious debate. The matter was so shocking that it very quickly made its way to the manor house itself, Hulne Hall, wherein resided my grandmother Constance, my two aunts Victoria and Alexandra, my cousin Clement, and Lydia, the unhappy wife of my father. I believe my grandmother immediately suspected whose child I was and the circumstances of my situation, but refused to take responsibility for me. It was Alexandra, my younger aunt, who showed a presence of mind and a compassion that the rest of her kin lacked, and seeing that suspicion would fairly quickly turn to her family once the truth of my dead mother’s identity was revealed, approached Patrick and Harriet August with this offer – that if

they were to adopt the child, and raise it as their own, the papers formally signed and witnessed by the Hulne family itself to quiet all rumours of an illegitimate affair, for no one carried authority like the inhabitants of Hulne Hall – then she would personally see to it that they received a monthly amount of money for their pains and to support the child, and that on his growing up she would ensure that his prospects were suitable – not excessive, mind, but neither the sorry situation of a bastard.

Patrick and Harriet debated a while, then accepted. I was raised as their child, as Harry August, and it wasn't until my second life that I began to understand where I was from, and what I was.

Chapter 3

It is said that there are three stages of life for those of us who live our lives in circles. These are rejection, exploration and acceptance.

As categories go, they are rather glib, and contain within them many different layers disguised behind these wider words. Rejection, for example, can be subdivided into various clichéd reactions, like so: suicide, despondency, madness, hysteria, isolation and self-destruction. I, like nearly all kalachakra, experienced most of these at some stage in my early lives, and their recollection lingers within me like a virus still twisted into my stomach wall.

For my part, the transition to acceptance was unremarkably difficult.

The first life I lived was undistinguished. Like all young men, I was called to fight in the Second World War, where I was a thoroughly undistinguished infantryman. Yet if my wartime contribution was meagre, my life after the conflict hardly added to a sense of significance. I returned to Hulne House after the war, to take over the position which had been held by Patrick, tending to the grounds around the estate. Like my adopted father, I had

been raised to love the land, the smell of it after rain and the sudden fizzing in the air when all the seeds of the gorse spilt at once into the sky, and if I felt in any way isolated from the rest of society, it was merely as the absence of a brother might be to an only child. an idea of loneliness without the relevant experience to make it real.

When Patrick died, my position was formalised, though by then, the Hulnes' wealth was almost entirely extinguished through squander and inertia. In 1964 the property was bought by the National Trust, and I with it, and I spent the latter part of my years directing ramblers through the overgrown moors that surrounded the house, watching as the walls of the manor itself slowly sank deeper into the wet black mud.

I died in 1989 as the Berlin Wall fell, alone in a hospital in Newcastle, a divorcee with no children and a state pension who, even on his deathbed, believed himself to be the son of the long-departed Patrick and Harriet August, and who died eventually from the disease that has been the bane of my lives – multiple myelomas which spread throughout the body until the body itself simply ceases to function.

Naturally my reaction to being born again precisely where I had begun – in the women's restroom of Berwick-upon-Tweed station, on New Year's Day 1919, with all the memories of my life that had gone before, induced its own rather clichéd madness in me. As the full powers of my adult consciousness returned to my child's body, I fell first into a confusion, then an agony, then a doubt, then a despair, than a screaming, then a shrieking, and finally, aged seven years old, I was committed to St Margot's Asylum for Unfortunates, where I frankly believed myself to belong, and within six months of my confinement succeeded in throwing myself out of a window on the third floor.

Retrospectively, I realise that three floors are frequently not high enough to guarantee the quick, relatively painless death that such circumstances warrant, and I might easily have snapped every bone in my lower body and yet retained my consciousness intact. Thankfully, I landed on my head, and that was that.

Chapter 4

There is a moment when the moor comes to life. I wish you could see it, but somehow whenever I have been with you on our walks through the countryside, we have missed those few precious hours of revelation. Instead, the skies have been the slate-grey of the stones beneath them, or drought turns the land to dust-brown thorns, or once it snowed so hard that the kitchen door was barred shut from the outside, and I had to climb out of the window to shovel us a path to freedom, and on one trip in 1949 it rained continually, I believe, for five days without end. You never saw it for those few hours after rain, when all is purple and yellow and smells of black, rich soil.

Your deduction, made early on in our friendship, that I was born in the north of England, for all of my pretensions and mannerisms acquired over many lives, was entirely correct, and my adopted father, Patrick August, never let me forget it. He was the sole groundsman on the Hulne estate, and had been so for as long as he had lived. So had his father before him, and his father before him, as far back as 1834, when the newly rich Hulne family bought the land to sculpt their ideal, upper-class dream. They planted trees, drove roads through the moor, built ridiculous

towers and arches – folly by name and folly by nature – which by the time of my birth had sunk into moss-crawled decline. Not for them the grubby scrubland that framed the estate, with its rock teeth and sticky gums of earthen flesh. Previous, energetic generations of the family had kept sheep, or perhaps it would be fairer to say that the sheep had kept themselves, on the wide places beneath the stone walls, but the twentieth century had not been kind to the fortunes of the Hulnes, and now the land, though still theirs, was left untended, wild – the perfect place for a boy to run free while his parents were about their chores. Curiously enough, living my childhood again I found myself far less adventurous. Holes and crags that I had climbed along and leaped in my first life, to my more conservative elder brain suddenly seemed places of danger, and I wore my child’s body as an old woman might wear a skinny bikini bought for her by a fragile friend.

Having failed so spectacularly to end the cycle of my days by suicide, I resolved on my third life to instead pursue the answers that seemed so far away. It is some small mercy, I believe, that our memories return to us slowly as we progress through childhood, so that the recollection of having thrown myself to my death came, as it were, like a gently gathering cold, arriving with no sense of surprise, merely an acceptance that this thing was, and had achieved nothing.

My first life, for all it lacked any real direction, had about it a kind of happiness, if ignorance is innocence, and loneliness is a separation of care. But my new life, with its knowledge of all that had come before, could not be lived the same. It wasn’t merely awareness of events yet to come, but rather a new perception of the truths around me, which, being a child raised to them in my first life, I had not even considered to be lies. Now a boy again and temporarily at least in command of my full adult faculties, I perceived the truths which are so often acted out in front of a child’s sight in the belief that a child cannot comprehend them. I believe that my adopted father and mother came to love me – she far sooner than he – but for Patrick August I was never flesh of his flesh until my adopted mother died.

There is a medical study in this phenomenon, but my adopted mother never quite dies upon the same day in each life she lives. The cause – unless external factors intervene violently first – is always the same. Around my sixth birthday she begins to cough, and by my seventh her coughing is bloody. My parents cannot afford the doctor's fees, but my aunt Alexandra finally furnishes the coin for my mother to go to the hospital in Newcastle and receive a diagnosis of lung cancer. (I believe it to be non-small-cell carcinomas confined primarily to the left lung; frustratingly treatable some forty years after my mother's diagnosis but utterly beyond the realms of science at the time.) Tobacco and laudanum are prescribed, and death swiftly follows in 1927. At her death my father falls into a silence and walks upon the hills, sometimes not to be seen for many days. I tend to myself perfectly competently and now, in expectation of my mother's death, stockpile some food to see me through his long absences. On his return, he remains silent and unapproachable, and though he does not rise to any approaches from my infant self with anger, that is largely because he does not rise at all. In my first life I did not understand his grief nor how it manifested, for I myself was grieving with the blind wordlessness of a child who needed help, which he did not provide. In my second life my mother's death happened while I was still under the asylum roof and I was too concerned with my own madness to process it, but in my third it came as a slow-moving train towards a man tied to the tracks; inevitable, unstoppable, seen far off in the night and the imagination of the thing, for me, almost worse than the event. I knew what was to come, and somehow when it came, it was a relief, an ending of expectation, and so a lesser event.

In my third life my mother's impending death also gave me something of an occupation. The prevention of it, or at least the management of it, concerned me profoundly. As I had no explanation for my situation save that, perhaps, some Old Testament god was acting out a curse upon me, I genuinely felt that by performing acts of charity, or attempting to affect the major events of my life, I might break this cycle of death-birth-death that had

apparently come upon me. Having committed no crimes that I knew of which needed redeeming, and with no major events in my life to undo, I latched on to the welfare of Harriet as my first and most obvious crusade, and embarked on it with all the wit my five-year-old mind (pushing ninety-seven) could muster.

I used my ministrations as an excuse to avoid the tedium of school, and my father was too preoccupied to see what I did; instead I tended to her and learned as I had never learned before how my mother lived when my father was away. I suppose you could call it a chance to get to know, as an adult, a woman I had only briefly known as a child. It was in this capacity that I first began to suspect that I was not my father's son.

The Hulne family as a whole attended my adopted mother's funeral, when she finally died in that third life. My father said few words, and I stood by him, a seven-year-old boy dressed in borrowed black trousers and jacket from Clement Hulne, the cousin three years my senior who had tried in my previous life to bully me, when he remembered that I was there to bully. Constance Hulne, leaning heavily on a walking stick with an ivory handle carved in the shape of an elephant's head, spoke a few words about Harriet's loyalty, strength and the family she left behind. Alexandra Hulne told me that I must be brave; Victoria Hulne bent down and pinched my cheeks, inducing in me a strange childish urge to bite the black-gloved fingers that had violated my face. Rory Hulne said nothing and stared at me. He had stared once before, the first time I had stood here in borrowed clothes burying my mother, but I, consumed with grief that had no means of expression, hadn't comprehended the intensity of his gaze. Now I met his eyes and for the first time saw the mirror of my own, of what I would become.

You have not known me in all the stages of my life, so let me describe them here.

As a child I am born with almost red hair, which fades over time to what the charitable would describe as auburn, and which is more fairly carrot. The colour of my hair comes from my real mother's family, as does a genetic predisposition towards good

teeth and long-sightedness. I am a small child, a little shorter than average and skinny, though that is as much from a poor diet as any genetic inclination. My growth spurt begins when I turn eleven, and continues until the age of fifteen, when I can, thankfully, get away with pretending to be a boyish eighteen and thus skip three tedious years until manhood.

As a young man, I used to sport a rather ragged beard in the manner of my adopted father, Patrick; it doesn't suit and in its untended state I can often come to look like a set of sensory organs lost in a raspberry bush. Once this revelation was made I began to shave regularly, and in doing so revealed the face of my true father. We share the same pale grey eyes, the same small ears, lightly curling hair and a nose which, along with a tendency to bone disease in old age, is probably the least welcome genetic heritage of all. It is not that my nose is especially large – it is not; but it is undeniably upturned in a manner that would not be ill-suited to the pixie king, and where it should be angularly delineated from my face, rather it seems to blend into my skin like a thing moulded from clay, not bone. People are too polite to comment, but the merest sight of it has on several occasions reduced honest infants from neater genetic lines to tears. In old age my hair turns white, in what feels like an instantaneous flash; this event can be brought on by stress earlier than its norm, and cannot be prevented by any cure, medicinal or psychological. I require glasses for reading by the age of fifty-one; distressingly my fifties fall in the 1970s, a poor decade for fashion, but like nearly all I return to the fashions I was comfortable with as a youth and choose rather demure spectacles in an antique style. With these balanced across my too-close eyes I look every bit the ageing academic as I examine myself in the bathroom mirror; it is a face which, by the time we buried Harriet for the third time, I had had nearly a hundred years to become acquainted with. It was the face of Rory Edmond Hulne, staring at me from across the casket of the woman who could not have been my mother.

Chapter 5

I am of a good age to be enlisted at the outbreak of the Second World War, and yet for my first few lives managed somehow to avoid all the dramatic moments of conflict which I would later read about from the comfort of the 1980s. In my first life I enlisted of my own volition, genuinely believing the three great fallacies of the time – that the war would be brief, that the war would be patriotic and that the war would advance me in my skills. I missed being embarked for France by four days, and felt deeply disappointed in myself that I had not been evacuated from Dunkirk, which at the time seemed like a very triumphant defeat. Indeed, the first year of my war seemed to be spent on perpetual training exercises, first on the beaches as the nation – myself included – waited for an invasion that didn't come, then in the mountains of Scotland as the government began to toy with retribution. Indeed, I spent so much time training for an invasion of Norway that by the time it was finally decided that the exercise would be futile, I and my unit were accounted of such little use in desert warfare that we were held back from the initial embarkation to the Mediterranean theatre until we could be retrained or something else worked out useful for us to do. In this sense, I suppose I achieved

one of my ambitions, as with no one seeming to want us to fight, I found myself with nothing better to do than study and learn. A medic in our unit was an objector who had found his conscience in the works of Engels and the poetry of Wilfred Owen, and who all the men in the unit, myself included, considered a weak-chinned toff until the day he stood up to the sergeant, who had enjoyed his power too long and too much, and in front of all the men lambasted him as the slobbering perversion of a childhood bully that he was. The medic's name was Valkeith, and he received three days' confinement for his outburst and the respect of all. His learning, previously a source of much derision, now became something of an object of pride, and though he was still cursed as a weak-chinned toff, now he was *our* weak-chinned toff, and from his mind I began to learn some of the mysteries of science, philosophy and romantic poetry, none of which I would admit to at the time. He died three minutes and fifty seconds after we set foot on the beaches of Normandy, from a shrapnel wound which tore open his gut. He was the only one of our unit who died that day, for we were far from the action and the gun which fired the fatal shot was taken two minutes later.

In my first life I killed three men. They were all together, all of them at once, in a tank retreating in a village in northern France. We'd been told that the village was already liberated, that there would be no resistance, but there it was, sat between the bakery and the church like a horsefly on a slice of melon. We'd been so relaxed we didn't even notice it until the barrel swung round towards us like the eye of a muddy crocodile and its jaws released the shell that killed two of us outright and young Tommy Kenah three days later in his hospital bed. I remember my actions with the same clarity with which I recall all else, and they were these: to drop my rifle, to unsling my bag and to run, never ceasing in my shout, down the middle of the street, still screaming at the tank that had killed my friends. I hadn't done the strap up on my helmet and it fell off my head some ten yards from the front of the tank. I could hear men moving around inside that beast as I approached, see faces darting through the slits in the armour as

they tried to swing the gun round towards me or get on to the machine guns, but I was already there. The main gun was hot – even from a foot away I could feel its warmth on my face. I dropped a grenade through the open front hatch. I could hear them shouting, scrambling around inside, trying to get it, but in that confined space they only made it worse. I remember my actions, but not my thoughts. Later the captain said that the tank must have got lost: their friends had turned left, and they'd turned right, and that was why they'd killed three of us and been killed in return. I was given a medal, which I sold in 1961 when I needed to pay for a new boiler, and I felt a great relief once it was gone.

That was my first war. I did not volunteer for my second. I knew it likely that I would soon be conscripted so chose to rely on skills learned in my first life to keep myself alive. In my third life I joined the RAF as a ground mechanic and ran for the shelter faster than any other man in my squad when the sirens went, until finally Hitler began to bomb London and I knew I could begin to relax. It was a good place to be for the first few years. The men who died nearly all died in the air, out of sight and out of mind. The pilots did not really interact with us grease men, and I found it all too easy to consider the plane my only care, and the man who flew it merely another mechanical part to be ignored and overcome. Then the Americans came, and we began bombing Germany, and many more men died in the air, where I only needed to lament the loss of their machines, but more began coming back, shot through with shrapnel, their blood on the floor just thick enough to retain the shape of the footprints that had scrambled through it. I wondered what I could do differently, with my knowledge of what was to come, and concluded that it was nothing. I knew that the Allies would win, but had never studied the Second World War in any academic detail; my knowledge was entirely personal, a thing lived rather than information to be shared. The most I could do was warn a man in Scotland by the name of Valkeith to stay in the boat two minutes longer on the beach of Normandy, or whisper to Private Kenah that there would

be a tank in the village of Gennimont which had turned right instead of left and was waiting between the bakery and the church to end his days. But I had no strategic information to impart, no learning or knowledge other than a declaration that Citroën would make elegant unreliable cars and one day people would look back at the division of Europe and wonder why.

Having reasoned myself so eloquently into this position, I continued once again to have a thoroughly unremarkable war. I oiled the landing gear of the planes which would destroy Dresden; I heard rumours of boffins attempting to design a jet engine and how the engineers derided the notion; I listened for the moment that the engines of the V1s stopped, and for a brief period for the silence of a V2 that had already fallen, and when VE day came I got horrendously drunk on brandy, which I don't particularly like, with a Canadian and two Welshmen who I'd met only two days before and who I never saw again.

And I learned. This time I learned. I learned of engines and machines, of men and strategies, of the RAF and the Luftwaffe. I studied bomb patterns, observed where the missiles had fallen so that next time – for I felt 60 per cent confident that there would be a next time, all this again – I would have something more useful to serve myself with, and potentially others, than a few personal recollections about the quality of tinned ham in France.

As it was, the same knowledge which protected me from the world was in later times also to put me in great danger and, by this route, indirectly introduce me to the Cronus Club, and the Cronus Club to me.