



Chapter One

“Evening, sweetheart!” Mara looked up at the sound of a woman’s cheery voice. The woman, a volunteer, was pouring soup into cardboard cartons, her bright yellow City Homeless Outreach bib pulled tight over her thick, patterned cardigan. Mara shook her head at the soup, and the woman gave a friendly wink before setting the carton down and pouring another. As soon as the woman was distracted by the next person in the queue, Mara quickly swiped three bread rolls from the pile at the end of the table, squishing them into one of her deep pockets. There were already two hygiene kits in there, one for Mara and one for her dad, and there was space for plenty more contraband if Mara had the chance to grab it. This city was unfamiliar, but every queue like this was exactly the same. Mara knew

what to expect.

She glanced up at the volunteers at the next station. They were stacking tubs full of hot food on to the table in front of them – Mara didn't know, or care, what the food was. She moved up and waited her turn.

“You on your own, little one?” said a young woman, placing a tub along with plastic cutlery wrapped in a napkin into a thin bag. “You got a grown-up with you?” Mara glanced at her but said nothing. The volunteer wore a purple beanie over her long black locs, as well as a concerned expression.

As Mara took the bag, she saw the woman turn to speak to a colleague. She didn't give them a chance to ask her anything else. Dropping her gaze, she darted away, grabbing two more tubs of food from the far end of the table. She ignored the volunteer at the last station, who was handing out some sort of leaflet, and hurried out into the drizzle, stuffing the extra tubs into the bag.

“Hey!” came a voice. Mara didn't look round; she knew better than that. “Sweetheart! Please – stop!”

Mara pressed down her panic and focused. She didn't know this city, but she didn't need to. As her pace quickened, she opened her mind to a noise she'd been trying to block out ever since she'd neared the top of the queue: a noise like a distant electrical crackle, or a radio signal from a dying star. The gentle swish of buzzing filled her ears. There was

a soft place nearby and Mara let it draw her.

Taking a right at the next corner, Mara plunged into a dark side street. Alleys split off to the left and right. Straight ahead was an entrance to a multi-storey car park, locked up and shuttered. Ahead and to her left, a narrow alley opened out; nearby, a street light glowed, throwing down a cone of orange light into the alley that let her see the outline of a large wheelie bin. Anything past that was drowned in shadow. Inside her head, the crackling noise intensified.

“Little girl!” came a voice from behind. Mara jerked, instinctively facing the speaker. The woman with the patterned cardigan was there, squinting into the darkness, a brightly lit mobile phone in one hand. “Please, darling! I just want to help!”

For a moment Mara was frozen with indecision, out of sight in the shadows. Then the woman’s colleague came from behind her, a young man with round, owlish spectacles. “Is she here?” His voice was low. The woman put the phone to her ear and began to speak. “Hello? Is that Store Street police station? It’s Angela Addo, with the City Outreach. We’ve got a child endangerment issue here...”

Mara’s muscles finally kicked into action. She turned and ran, breaking her cover. Behind her, the adults shouted again, telling her to stop, but her father’s voice rang in her head. *You must avoid the police at all costs.*

The buzz from the soft place was like the whispering sea,

gently calling her forwards. It was a small one, and calm. It probably wouldn't last long. Mara ducked into the alley, feeling her teeth chatter with cold and fear, and then – she felt it. She *saw* it. Right behind the wheelie bin, a greyish-silver wrinkling in the air. She saw its edges, the extent of its spherical shape as it waited. Without hesitation she ran into the soft place and it folded around her.

Mara closed her eyes. The cold was gone and the fear along with it. She breathed, slow and deep, her pulse settling. In this soft place, it felt like she was floating – like something else was bearing her weight, setting her free, letting her rest. Sounds from outside reached her ears through the still-crackling static buzz but Mara couldn't properly hear anything. She knew that if she opened her eyes she might see the misty, indistinct outlines of the people searching fruitlessly for the child they'd seen running in here only moments before – but she didn't want to do that.

She wanted to wait until the soft place was ready to let her go.

Finally, like waking up from a deep sleep or a bubble making its way to the surface, she was back in the dark, cold alleyway – but she kept her senses on full alert. The adults from the Outreach were gone, but she could still hear their voices. She breathed slowly, letting the world settle back around her once again.

Mara didn't know what these soft places were. All she knew was they'd often saved her skin, giving her somewhere to hide if she needed it, or a place to just *be*, away from everyone. She couldn't remember when she'd first started noticing them, but she'd always known they were there.

She got to her feet. Her muscles ached with tiredness and she was cold through. There was a bad smell in the air too, not just the stink from the wheelie bin, but something more pungent. Something *rotten*, and it was close by. Mara had been around soft places long enough to know that sometimes, when you found one, you'd find something dead not far away, but she never let herself think too deeply about the connection. She put her sleeve over her nose and mouth to block the stench as a sudden, freezing splash landed on the back of her neck, almost making her yell in surprise; instead, she just turned, looking up. A drainpipe came to an end above her, its yawning mouth leading up into total darkness, and she quickly moved out of the way.

She walked to the end of the alley, looking both ways before she stuck her head out. The voices of the volunteers were gone now, but she had to be careful – they might not have gone far. Moments later she emerged on to the wide road she'd left behind as she'd run from the Outreach. She approached the corner and peeked round it. To her left she could see the brightness of the Outreach station, and parked in front was a police car, its lights flashing;

the woman with the cardigan was speaking through the window with the officers inside. Mara glanced up at the clock above the portico. It had only been eight minutes, and she frowned thoughtfully. It had felt like she'd spent much longer than that inside the soft place, hours and hours, but she knew enough about them now to know that was how they worked. When you were inside one, time didn't seem to run the way it normally did – what felt like forever would turn out to have been only a few minutes by the clock. She shrugged, pushing the thought away, and looked back at the police car.

An officer had opened her door and was standing beside the vehicle, taking a statement from the Outreach volunteers. Mara knew that was her cue to disappear. She pulled up her collar and was gone into the darkness, hoping she'd make it back to her dad before the food got much colder.

The Time Tider's Handbook, 1/B/ii: The tools of the Time Tider are three – the Stitch, the watch, and the hourglass. Most important is the hourglass, which must never be surrendered to another, even on pain of death...