

The Mirror Chronicles

THE BELL BETWEEN WORLDS



The Chime

An extract

Sylas slept, comforted by the weird lullaby of Gablety Row: the endless growl of traffic making the windows rattle and the trapdoor leap on its hinges; the ancient walls sighing and grumbling into the cool night air. Even the occasional yellow beams from passing headlights served only to brighten the depths of his dreams, dreams that now filled his mind with a new image. It was an image that warmed him, drew him close, consoled him. It was a delicate, female face, a face that he knew.

Then for a moment everything was silent. The sound of traffic stopped, the windowpanes rested in their frames, the floorboards ceased humming for the first time in decades. Even Sylas held his breath, the vapour from his lips hanging in the air.

As the dust began to settle on the windowsill, it began.

The room shuddered with a sound of such power that the dream was shattered in a moment. It tore through the walls, hammered on the ceiling, crashed through the floor. It shook the kites from their fittings, sent the Samarok skidding across the floorboards and threw the window wide open.

It entered Sylas through his chest and pounded his lungs until his heart missed a beat.

It was not a definable sound, but one so immense and terrifying that it swamped the ears and confused the mind. It was a moaning, aching howl that drowned everything and consumed all.

He threw himself upright in bed and found himself gasping for breath. The very air seemed to have rushed from the room. He pushed the eiderdown back and at once felt a piercing chill. He looked around desperately for the source of the noise, hoping that in some way he might silence it, but he realised that it was everywhere, in everything, and there was nowhere to hide.



Sylas hesitated for a moment, unsure what to do, then flung himself back on to the mattress, drawing the pillow over his head. Even that resonated with the deep, low moan and the mattress shook beneath him. He thought the world was coming to an end: that some great earthquake had struck the town or some gigantic volcano was at this very moment pouring rivers of lava into the streets and pelting the town with a downpour of rock.

“Stop! Please stop!” he shouted into the mattress, but he couldn’t even hear his own voice. For what seemed like a minute the noise was relentless, tearing at his eardrums. But then it seemed to ease slightly. And then a little more. The wail was definitely fading now – becoming more bearable. As it eased Sylas realised that it was not a horrifying sound, the sound of war cannons or buildings crashing down. Rather it was a solitary, immense, dolorous chime. Its voice was metallic and hollow and it rang rather than screamed. The more the noise faded and his ears recovered, the more it came to resemble the single dying note of an enormous bell.

He pushed his bedding away and sat upright again. As he tried to control his fear, he became sure that the noise was coming from outside, from the window. He stood up and edged slowly towards it, dragging his bare toes over the comforting, familiar roughness of the floorboards. The curtains were blowing wildly in the wind, flashing bright in the passing headlights, and he found himself wondering why the cars hadn’t stopped.

As he reached the sill, the sound of the phantom bell once again reached a deafening pitch. He closed his eyes, fearing what he was about to see. Gripping the base of the window frame in his cold hands, he swallowed hard, then drew himself forward.

Everything looked normal. The traffic still sent shafts of light into the sky and thick, acrid pollution into the air. The road bustled with cars: a jostling mass of white, red and blinking orange lights. Why had nothing stopped? Why was everything carrying on as normal? His eyes turned to the cars that flew past, the drivers apparently unaware of anything extraordinary; to the occasional person rushing along the street, huddling under an umbrella; to a tramp in dark, ragged clothes standing in a puddle. No one seemed to have heard the sound. It was as if the bell was ringing only for him.

