

# **Guns and Guano**

**Epiphany Club, #1**

**by Andrew Knighton,**

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## **Acknowledgements**



## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my friend Simon Childs. I can think of no better person to go adventuring with, whether it's to face terrifying monsters, hunt assassins through the streets of Durham, or clamp the mystical island of Lantia. Mammoth!

## **Prologue**

### **Paris in the Spring.**

Dirk Dynamo sat outside a small café, watching the people of Paris go by. He smiled as a waitress appeared. Real coffee had been a rare treat during the Civil War and now he made the most of it whenever he could. Just because he still wore his old blue trousers didn't mean he had to live like a soldier.

"Thank you, ma'am." He leaned over the back of the chair into his leather jacket, pulling out a couple of coins. The waitress's eyes widened as she saw the revolver hanging there, a hefty custom-made Gravemaker. It was worth more than all Dirk's well worn clothes put together, and carried more menace than his bulging muscles.

"Can I get you anything else, monsieur?" She smiled at Dirk and tucked back her hair as he handed her the cash. Dirk knew enough to know that the smile was

for his rugged looks, not just the money. But he also knew it was rude to make a move on a waitress while she was working.

“No thank you, ma’am,” he said.

The gangling figure of Sir Timothy Blaze-Simms emerged from the crowd, clutching a briefcase to his chest. He peered around him through wire-rimmed spectacles, unruly blond curls threatening to block his view. Dirk leaned back a little, hand inching towards his holster.

“What ho, Dynamo!” Blaze-Simms exclaimed as he sank into a wrought-iron seat.

“Tim,” Dirk said with a nod. “You oversleep?”

“I’m afraid so,” Blaze-Simms replied in a crisp upper-English accent. “Am I terribly late?”

“You’re buttoned up wrong.”

The Englishman looked down. None of his tailcoat’s buttons were through the right holes.

“I say, Dirk, good spot.” He set about re-dressing himself. “Was I followed?”

Dirk nodded again, still watching the crowd. Four men had appeared discreetly around the street, all wearing grey suits so precisely nondescript as to become conspicuous in this most vibrant city.

“Are they still following me?”

“Have been all night.” Dirk recognised one from the lobby of the hotel, another from the restaurant where they’d eaten. They were almost certainly the shadowy figures he’d lost on the way back from the museum. And then there were the four he’d tracked back to their room this morning.

“So what now?” Blaze-Simms nibbled at the corner of a croissant, dropping flakes of pastry down himself.

“Now they pounce.”

“What makes you say that?”

“They change shifts every four hours. Right about now these folks are realising that the next lot ain’t coming.”

As if to punctuate the point, a shot rang out, raising dust from the ground by Dirk’s boot. The morning crowd scattered, revealing the four men now carrying revolvers.

“The Dane says hello,” one of the men called out. “And that you won’t be leaving Paris with those blueprints.”

“Oh bother.” Blaze-Simms put down his half-eaten croissant.

“You got the Gauss Generator?” Dirk murmured.

Blaze-Simms flung his case onto the table and flipped the lid. There was a high-pitched hum followed a split second later by the sharp retort of gunshots. Suddenly the table was surrounded by bullets, hanging motionless in a crackling halo of light. Dirk stared at them, impressed.

“Better act quickly,” Blaze-Simms said. “I don’t know how long it can-”

Dirk was already vaulting the table, kicking the first gunman with both feet. As they crashed to the ground he rolled and rose into the next guy, sending him flying with an uppercut.

A hail of cutlery flew as if by magic from the café, tinkling like a wind-chime factory in a hurricane. It halted abruptly as it hit the glowing web around Blaze-Simms, who gulped as smoke trickled from the case.

Dirk caught the second attacker's gun as it fell, and swept a third man's legs out with a low kick. Still turning, he flung the pistol into the face of the last gunman. There was a crunch and the man sank to the ground, blood spurting from the ruin of his nose.

A halo of metal hung in the air around the table, from butter knives to loose change to the thick disc of a manhole cover, all suspended in the glowing corona of the magnetic field. A steel bollard shook loose of its base and shot across the pavement trailing sparks. As it hit there was a flash, the aura disappeared and the case on the table burst into flames. There was a clatter of falling cutlery and the bollard hit the cobbles with a clang, making Blaze-Simms jump.

Dirk strolled back to the café, casually kicking one of the goons as he passed. He sat back down next to Blaze-Simms, who was beating out the fire with a copy of the Times.

"Mademoiselle?" Dirk said, waving over the nervous-looking waitress. There would be other agents watching, and he had the Epiphany Club's reputation to protect. "More coffee please, and some water for the fire."

## **Chapter 1**

### **A Night at the Club.**

Manchester was a place of industry, and of the debris that came with it. A pounding piston driving the British economy, to the untrained observer it might look like nothing more than a noisy mass of factories. But down one inconspicuous street, past the grey smog, the red-brick walls and the urchins fighting over a game of jacks, was a door to a very different institution. Clean, sturdy and unremarkable in colour or size, the door sat in a frame of smartly cut but unadorned stone. The boot scraper was worn and the bell pull forgettable. The whole thing was so successfully executed that only the finest architects would, after careful perusal, realise how deliberately mundane it was.

Dirk Dynamo hadn't worked this out for himself the first time he came to the club. But when Professor Barrow, the man responsible for maintaining that door, had explained it to him, Dirk stored the information carefully away among a mountain of hard-learned facts. And as he sat in a room beyond that door, in the most impressive and exciting library he'd ever encountered, he kept heaping facts upon the pile.

The library of the Epiphany Club was a long, narrow room with two layers of walkways accessing the higher shelves. Beneath them, piles of papers were scattered across desks, the Club's scholarly members having abandoned their research for tea. Little sunlight was allowed to touch the books, many of which

were already yellow with age. Some in the special section were unique, even their leather spines protected by thick felt drapes. That end of the room was veiled in darkness.

The end where Dirk sat, on the other hand, was warmly lit by a crackling fire built to cope with what passed for summer in northern England. Its glow played across a Persian rug and the gilded chair he sat in, his wide shadow dancing before him by the flickering of the flames. In one hand he held a book on Russian history, its pages lit by a wall-mounted gas-lamp. His other arm was rising and falling in a steady rhythm, weight-lifting a bust of Julius Caesar.

The door creaked open and Professor Barrow entered, beaming at Dirk from behind his half-moon glasses. The professor was pushing seventy but healthily rotund, remnants of grey hair fringing the shining dome of his head. He smiled the smile of a wise and well-travelled uncle, a smile that said he had seen many things but could think of none he would rather see than you.

Behind him came Timothy Blaze-Simms, his eyes never rising from a leather-bound notebook. He manoeuvred safely through the door, more by luck than any apparent design, still scribbling away with a well-chewed stub of pencil.

Dirk set aside the bust and book, and rose to his feet.

“Professor Barrow,” he said. “Good to see you, sir.”

“And you, Mr Dynamo.” The professor shook his hand. “It has been far too long.”

“Dirk!” Blaze-Simms exclaimed, looking up in surprise. “How marvellous!”

“Tim,” the American replied. “Ain’t seen you since Paris. How you doin’?”

“Remarkably well. Yesterday, I developed a machine that uses electrical resistance to fill canapés. And the day before that, I was working on a new explosive that I think...”

“Perhaps later?” Barrow said, resting a hand gently but firmly on Blaze-Simms’s shoulder. “For now we have business to attend to.”

The Professor looked around.

“Ah, Phillips,” he said as a figure in black tailcoat and white gloves emerged from the shadows. “Could you please fetch us some tea?”

“Very good, sir,” the butler replied, gliding out of the room.

Barrow lowered himself with a creak into a chair.

“Damn things must be getting old,” he said, glaring at the intricately carved furniture.

“You said something about business?” Dynamo picked up the bust and flexing his arm once more. Some folks considered it obsessive, but he’d take every chance he could to better himself.

“Mm?” Barrow blinked uncertainly over the top of his glasses. “Oh, yes, the mission. Well, it’s a treasure hunt, really. The committee decided to use you two again, after your success in Paris. If the Dane and his criminal minions had got hold of the Blensberg Blueprints, no safe in the continent would have been, well, safe. But thanks to you, our mysterious friend is empty-handed again.”

“We ain’t any closer to knowing who he is?” Dirk asked.

“I’m afraid not. He’s been playing his games for almost twenty years, stealing treasures and inventions from under our noses. But whether he’s a collector or just a career criminal, we still have nothing on him but a codename.”

The Professor sat scowling into the depths of the library, lost in his memories.

“So where are we off to this time?” Dirk asked at last.

“Mm?” Barrow wiggled a finger in his ear, then peered at Dirk across his glasses. “Sorry, something in the way. What were you saying, my boy?”

“I said, where are we going?”

“There’s no need to shout. I’m not deaf, you know. In fact, these keen senses saw me through a number of scrapes when I was your age. I remember this one time in Egypt...”

The professor began a rambling tale of desert adventure, filled with camels, pyramids and a woman named Heidi who seemed to have been more than an assistant. There were cursed artefacts, daring chases and on one occasion a ghost. If nothing else it was certainly varied.

Dirk had heard this sort of thing before. He admired the professor’s wisdom, trusted his judgement, but was worried about his memory. His recent tales sounded like a jumble of half-remembered youth and broken fragments of dime-store novels. If they weren’t then he’d kept quiet about some damn fine adventures for years, and was revealing more than he should now.

“Was that where you got the idea for your book?” Blaze-Simms said, interrupting a digression on the ever-expanding tombs of the pharaohs.

“That’s right.” Barrow leaned forward. “The one on pyramids as a sign of civilisation. You’ve read it?”

“Oh yes, but it made me wonder about something. If the pyramidal form is one of the signs of a true civilisation, then why do we not see them in Britain? Surely the most civilised of nations should have the greatest pyramids.”

The two academics leaned in closer, off on their excitable tangent. Dirk listened with interest even as he kept lifting the statue. He would have liked to get to the point of the mission, but he didn’t mind waiting if it gave him a chance to learn.

“We have gone beyond the simple, obvious pyramids, my boy,” Barrow said. “Now, the pyramid is manifested in the very structures of our society. The monument itself has not been needed on these shores in centuries.”

Phillips reappeared, emerging from the shadows of the doorway, a laden tea-tray balanced on one hand. He leant over and whispered in Barrow’s ear.

“Oh, excellent,” the professor said. “Bring her in.”

Phillips vanished once more.

“The last of our little party is here,” Barrow explained

The library door swung open, silhouetting a petite female figure.

The men rose carefully to their feet and Barrow approached the woman, drawing her into the room. She was elegantly dressed in deep blues, her dark curls gathered above the nape of her neck.

“Sir Timothy Blaze-Simms, Mr Dirk Dynamo, might I introduce Mrs Isabelle McNair.”

“Good to meet you, ma’am,” Dirk said.

“Mr Dynamo.” She returned Dirk’s firm handshake, brown eyes locked on his. “Surely that isn’t a real surname, even in America?”

Dirk stood for a moment with his mouth open, trying to work out what to say. Somewhere inside him, the kid who had laboured in a dark Kentucky mine longed

to have his story told. But it wasn't a story that came easy, or that Dirk often shared.

"I'm sorry." Even Isabelle McNair's frown was charming, without the stiff demeanour so many society ladies wore. "I was just teasing. I didn't mean to upset you."

"No need to apologise." Dirk realised that her hand was still in his and hurriedly let it go. "And no, it ain't a real name, but it's the one I go by."

Blaze-Simms lowered his head and raised her delicately gloved fingers gently to his lips.

"Enchanted," he murmured.

"And some say chivalry is dead." She smiled warmly. "Professor, so good of you to invite me here. This place is an absolute delight."

"Mm? Yes, well, do take a seat," Barrow lowered himself back into a chair. One finger tugged at his red silk cravat. "Where was I?"

"Egypt?" Dirk suggested, settling back down into a chair.

"Civilisation?" Blaze-Simms enquired, leading Mrs. McNair to the sofa.

"Sugar?" she asked, reaching forwards to pour the tea.

"What? No, no, that's not the point at all." Barrow pulled a notebook from his pocket, mumbling to himself as he flicked through. The cheap, wrinkled pages were a perfect match for his age-rumpled skin. "Ah, yes." He looked up and smiled. "A mission most suited to our present setting. Gentlemen, Mrs McNair, I want you to find the lost Library of Alexandria."

Dirk and Timothy exchanged glances, wondering who should bring the old man back to reality.

"That's an awful nice scheme, Professor," Dirk began, "but ain't there, well..."

"...practical difficulties," Timothy offered. "It has been lost for a terribly long time."

"And there might not be much to find, seein' as how it was burnt down."

"There might be some frightfully nice foundations, somewhere under the sand..."

They drifted into awkward silence, hiding behind their tea cups.

"Honestly, professor, you are awful." Mrs McNair helped herself to a macaroon. "Leaving these poor gentlemen dangling while you giggle to yourself. What would Mrs Barrow say?"

"She would say they shouldn't treat me as if I'm senile." The professor rose and approached one of the nearby shelves with slow, deliberate steps. He pulled down a small, leather-bound volume with a faded spine, returned to his seat and opened the book on the table by the tea-tray. The paper was dry and brittle, cracking at the edges, the print heavy and old-fashioned. The pages were too small for the cover in which they had been rebound, and which was itself now worn with age.

"Plutarch's 'Parallel Lives'," Barrow explained. "An alternative edition, lost until two years ago. Dicky Torrington-Smythe found it in the collection of a Scottish earl, while looking for old Shakespeare folios. He's determined to crack the bard's code before that Donnelly chap."

He turned a few pages, nodding and smiling to himself.

"The bard is always such a pleasure to read," he said. "Such verve, such poetry."

His smile widened as he scanned the ancient tome.

“You were sayin’ something about Plutarch?” Dirk asked, eager to get them back to the point.

“What? Oh, yes.” Professor Barrow looked up. “This volume contains an early edition of ‘Pericles’, but also some Plutarch. Most importantly for us, it contains his account of Caesar’s burning of Alexandria. There’s a section that isn’t in the common text.”

Dirk leaned forward. The print was archaic, the text certainly not English. He thought he could make out half the letters, but looking for familiar words mired him in confusion, a mass of lines dancing out of focus across the page. Timothy, nodding and making soft, appreciative noises next to him, just made his frustration worse.

“Someone gimme a clue here,” Dirk said. “What does any of it mean?”

“Short version,” Timothy said, “all the books thought lost in the fire were carted off into the desert, hidden away in case of future danger. The chap who did it was a scholar, and he didn’t trust the political types not to wreck everything again. So he kept the new location secret, only sharing it with other learned men. Men such as Plutarch.”

“This tells us where to find it?”

A thrill ran through Dirk. The Library of Alexandria, its contents untouched for centuries. The untapped knowledge of antiquity’s greatest minds, preserved somewhere beneath Egypt’s shifting sands, and he would be there when it was revealed. Even after all these years of studying and listening to men like the Professor, some folks still treated him like that ignorant kid fresh out of the mines. That would have to change if he learned things no-one else on earth knew.

“Um, not exactly.” Blaze-Simms took the book and flicked eagerly through. “Plutarch shared the scholar’s concerns, so didn’t write down the location. But there is a commentary at the back by an Arab scholar, ninth century I think. He claims that the location was encrypted on three stone tablets, in case it should be forgotten, but that...”

A hint of noise made Dirk look behind him, expecting to see Phillips approaching with fresh tea. No-one was there, but a movement caught his eye, a shifting of the darkness at the back of the room. He stared at the shadows. Was it a rat? Maybe a loose page falling from a shelf?

“...third tablet was found in the Seine, according to this thirteenth century report, and handed to the royal family...” The professor had more books open now and was expounding upon them with the energy of a man half his age.

Another movement, in the recesses around a ceiling beam. A flutter of black, maybe the wing of a bat that had flown in out of the city smog.

“...while a Venetian chronicle indicates the second was taken along the silk road...”

Dirk took a step away from the table, and another, watching the shadows that shifted with his viewpoint, watching more closely for those that didn’t.

“...which was where Mrs. McNair found it earlier this year...”

There. A deeper shadow, like a black stain. And another, on the opposite side of the room, drifting towards them. The shadow of a man.



Dirk opened his mouth, but before he could call out something flickered in the darkness. A bright, glittering point came hurtling towards him.

He flung himself clear, rolling forward and back to his feet. Three razor-edged disks embedded themselves in the armchair behind him.

Mrs McNair shouted in alarm as black-clad figures dropped soundlessly from the rafters, long straight blades extended. Dirk intercepted one, ducking beneath a sword and punching his opponent in the gut. He grabbed the man's sword even before he'd fallen to the floor, spinning and rising to block the next one's blow. Steel clanged against steel.

With hurried footsteps and cries for help, Mrs McNair and the professor ran out into the hallway. Three assailants followed on their heels, silent even while running.

Blaze-Simms was fending off another of the attackers with a bust of Shakespeare. He swung the bard's head with as much speed and grace as could be managed, but it gave him no reach with which to counter-attack.

Dirk parried two low blows and a third aimed for his head. His opponent was fast and agile, attacks coming so quickly he barely had time to think, let alone take the offensive. He backed towards the fire, pulling an armchair between them. But the attacker somersaulted over it, blade extended.

There was another flurry of blows, sparks flashing from the oil-darkened blades. Dirk knew he was out-matched. He could shoot pretty well and brawl with the best of them, but fencing wasn't his style.

In desperation he flung his sword at his opponent's face. Even as it was batted aside he leapt, slamming into the black-clad figure. They crashed to the ground, Dirk wrapping one arm around the guy while punching him repeatedly. Fists beat hard against Dirk's back, and he knew there'd be hell to pay. But after a moment his opponent fell limp, pounded into unconsciousness.

"I say!" Timothy exclaimed, slithers of marble bard flying from his assailant's blows.

Free of attackers, Dirk stood and went to his friend's aid. He tapped the black-clad figure on the shoulder and, as he turned, punched him with such force that he slumped straight to the ground.

"Jolly good show." Blaze-Simms dropped the remains of the statue and scooped up two of the abandoned blades. Passing one to Dirk, he nodded towards the door. "Shall we?"

Sounds of commotion echoed down the hall. Dirk and Timothy dashed towards them, past maps and murals, stags' heads and statues, the souvenirs of the club's long and adventurous history.

They burst through the games room door and straight into a shower of white sparks. In the centre of the room, the hilt of an oriental sword protruded from an automated billiards table, steam spewing and balls careening wildly as the table's broken workings ground against the embedded blade.

On the far side of the room, a black-clad attacker stood over the unconscious Professor Barrow. With his deadly blade, the invader held back the club members in the opposite doorway, while one of his colleagues fought bare-handed against Lord Roger Harcourt-Phipps. In a corner, Isabelle McNair was backing slowly away from the final assailant's raised blade.

"The stone," the attacker said. "Give to us."

Dirk dashed forwards and grabbed the hilt protruding from the table. He leapt, pivoting in a wide arc around the sword, kicking Harcourt-Phipps's opponent and hurtling into the man by the door. The club members cheered as the black-clad figure hit the ground, sword sliding away across polished floorboards. Dirk stamped on the man's back for good measure.

The final attacker now had Mrs McNair in his grasp, sword raised across her throat.

"No move." The voice from beneath the black cloth was soft and exotic as silk. Everybody froze.

"Drop swords."

"There's really no need," Mrs McNair said. "I have this under control."

"Drop swords!" the attacker said again.

They obeyed.

The figure moved towards the corridor, dragging a calm looking Mrs McNair with him.

"And how do you intend to get me out of here?" she asked. "I won't come quietly."

"Knock out." He raised his sword, pommel above her head.

Mrs McNair twisted from his grip and pushed him back into the corridor.

"Now!" she snapped.

There was a clang. The attacker staggered, but before the others could act he shook himself, turned, and raced away down the corridor.

Phillips stood in the doorway, gazing sadly at a head-shaped dent in his tea-tray.

"Thank you, Phillips." Mrs McNair smiled. "I knew I could count on you."

"I do apologise, sir," the butler said as Dirk stared down the empty corridor. "Household silverware is never as effective as a good cosh."

"Don't worry." Dirk grinned. "A cosh ain't flat enough to serve sandwiches. And we got most of..."

His mouth hung open as he looked back into the room. The black-clad bodies were gone, and with them any chance to question their attackers. Whoever it had been, whatever their reasons for attacking the club, they'd gotten away.

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The library was far brighter lit than before, the fire stoked high, gas lamps banishing every last shadow. A thorough search of the club had found no lingering intruders, but no-one was taking chances. Dirk sat with a fire iron in his lap, his gaze roaming the room for any lingering threats.

Professor Barrow clutched a cold, damp cloth to the back of his head.

"The Epiphany Club hasn't been infiltrated in over sixty years," he said. "I suppose it is to our credit that, when it happened, it was ninjas."

Seeing Dirk's blank face he continued. "Japanese assassins. Reputedly among the deadliest warriors on earth."

He took a sip of tea and looked at Blaze-Simms, who was squinting through a magnifying glass at a stone tablet. It was about a foot long and half that wide, covered in letters that Dirk already knew he'd never make sense of.

“What do make you of it, my boy?” Barrow asked.

“It’s part of a set of directions.” Blaze-Simms didn’t look up, but pulled a notebook from his pocket and started scribbling with a stub of pencil. “Early Arabic, which fits. Not a lot of sense in itself, but if we can find the others...”

“This is one of those stones to lead us to the library?” Dirk asked.

“That’s right.” Mrs McNair sipped her tea, a spark of excitement in her eyes. “Imagine it. All that knowledge, lost to humanity for centuries, and it could be hours. It’s enough to give one quite a thrill, isn’t it?”

“Where’d you get it from, Mrs McNair?” Dirk said.

“Please, we’ve fought ninjas together, you can call me Isabelle.” She set her cup aside. “My husband inherited the stone from another missionary. A chap named Davidson who had bought it from a Cairo junk dealer. Apparently it came there by way of the Orient, although more than that I don’t know. The Reverend Davidson was an enthusiastic antiquarian, but not always very thorough.”

“No hope of findin’ the other two in his collection, huh?”

“I’m afraid not. But I’ve been looking into this for the past year, and I have a lead on the next one. Supposedly lost in a shipwreck somewhere off an obscure African island, and lying at the bottom of the ocean. The island’s a British colony, but the Governor has a reputation for liking the quiet life, and has blocked archaeological expeditions in the past. That means I need help from a private organisation, one that can help me retrieve the stone quietly.”

“And quickly.” Barrow looked at them all with great seriousness. “If word has got out that something of such value is out there, then you can be sure that our friend the Dane will be looking to get his larcenous little hands on it.”

“What makes you think anyone else knows about this?” Blaze-Simms looked up from his scribblings.

“Because today is when we brought this stone to the Club.” Barrow frowned into his tea. “It can be no coincidence that today we were attacked, here in this very library. Knowledge is worth more than gold, and some people will kill for tin.”

Dirk grinned. Lost treasures, unknown enemies, forgotten islands, adventures across land and sea—now they were talking his language. And at the end of it all, intellectual wealth beyond imagining.

He reached out for a tea-cup and raised it in a toast. “Great Library, here we come.”

## **Chapter 2**

### **Welcome to Hakon.**

The pier was made of salvaged planks, bleached the colour of bones by the tropical sun. It creaked beneath Dirk’s feet as he stepped from the ST MARY’s gangplank, leaving behind the comfortable shade of the yacht. They seemed to have sailed into the ghost of an inlet, pale sand stretching back to white cliffs,

topped off by a lighthouse. The scrubby bushes at the base of the cliffs were the sickly yellow of old sheets.

A procession emerged out of this ethereal scene—half a dozen men dressed only in trousers and shoes, none shorter than six feet tall, their skin a rich brown. They prowled along the pier, sticks swinging loose and ready in their hands, muscular chests shining in the tropical heat.

Dirk turned to face them, his hand settling on the butt of his Gravemaker pistol. The only sounds were the caw of gulls and the pad of their footfalls. He tensed, ready to draw.

A dozen feet away the men stopped and split into two columns, standing solemnly at the sides of the pier. Another figure strode through the gap.

“I say, are you Mister Dynamo?”

The man was short and rotund, immaculately dressed in a linen suit and Panama hat. Pink cheeked and freckled, his ginger moustache wriggled into a welcoming smile.

“Reginald Cullen, Her Majesty’s Governor of Hakon.”

He switched his ivory handled stick to his left hand and reached out with the right, delivering a hearty handshake.

“Dirk Dynamo. Pleased to meet you.” Dirk turned to gesture at the figure now descending from the boat. “This is Timothy Blaze-Simms. Tim, this is Governor Cullen.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir.” Blaze-Simms set aside a box of instruments and shook hands.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Sir Timothy. Might I ask how your brother is doing?”

“Arthur? He’s very well. Just back from a posting in India.”

“We were in the second team at Eton together, don’t you know.”

“I say, how splendid! You’ll have to tell me the truth behind Arty’s tales of sporting glory.”

Dirk coughed and gestured again towards the plank.

“And this is—” he began.

“Mrs McNair!” Cullen exclaimed. “What an unexpected pleasure.”

“Reginald.” Isabelle smiled and offered her hand. “How sweet of you to meet us.”

She hooked one arm through that of the Governor and began strolling towards the shore, blue skirts swirling, chattering about shared friends and acquaintances. Blaze-Simms ambled behind, joining in with the gossip and laughter, leaving Dirk with the silent islanders.

“Guess I’d better get the bags.”

One of the men stepped forwards, shaking his head.

“No sir,” he said. “That’s our job.”

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A buggy was waiting at the shore, drawn by a pair of chalk-white horses. A young black woman wearing yellow robes and a frown cracked the reins and they shot off, over the beach and up a track running diagonally across the cliff-face. Gulls scattered as they passed, soaring and croaking to each, returning to their perches once the buggy had passed.

“The rocks themselves aren’t white, of course.” Cullen clutched his hat to his head as they sped round a tight corner. “It’s the gulls that do it. Here on Hakon the cliffs are steep so just enough sticks to create the colour. But Kerelm, the next island over, is absolutely thick in the stuff. Some of our chaps spend months over there, mining for British Guano Incorporated.”

“So you’re saying the whole island’s covered in...” Just in time, Dirk remembered there were ladies present.

“Absolutely. Wonderful stuff, it’s reviving the local economy. Where there’s muck there’s gold, as Braithwaite keeps saying.”

“There’s gold in the gull goo?”

“Not literally, old chap.” Cullen smiled the cosy smile of a man repeating an old joke. “But there’s a huge market for it as a fertiliser, and even in experimental explosives. They make a fortune selling it back home. Some say African stuff isn’t as good as the Chilean birds produce, but Braithwaite – he’s British Guano’s chap out here, you’ll meet him later – he says that’s poppycock. And isn’t it far more patriotic to use produce from the Empire?”

White coated rocks glared at them from all around. It seemed incredible to Dirk that something so common could really be worth so much.

“How do you know it works?” he asked.

“Because of this...”

They crested the rise and a blaze of greenery opened up before them. Groves of oranges and mangoes. Fields of beans and golden grain. Acre after acre of farmland carved from the thin soil of this rocky land. And beyond that, lush jungle, swaying up the side of the island’s mountain heart.

Dark faces looked up from the fields as the buggy rattled past. The labourers’ clothes were worn but not ragged, the mark of poor but careful people. A few smiled and waved at the travellers, and Blaze-Simms waved back with his top hat, grinning and glancing around.

Dirk shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Just like back home, slavery might be gone but racial divisions remained. He’d taken up arms against his own kin to make men free, but freedom in itself was never enough.

“What sort of crop rotations do you use?” Blaze-Simms asked excitedly.

“Rather outside my area of expertise, I’m afraid.” Cullen scratched his head. “Maybe you can ask one of the estate managers at the reception this evening.”

“There’s to be a party?” Isabelle smiled. “How splendid.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Gravel crunched beneath their feet as they stepped from the buggy onto the driveway of the governor’s mansion. The main building was three storeys of white-washed wood, with servants’ quarters and kitchens sprawling off the back. Framed by the jungle and a mountain beyond, it appeared as if a lone artefact of humanity amid nature’s vast expanse. Balconies and wide windows looked out through open storm shutters across flowering gardens and a croquet lawn whose restrained greenery was in marked contrast to the wild jungle canopy.

Dirk strode from the drive up steps that creaked slightly under his weight and onto a sheltered porch. A native servant in a tailcoat opened double doors, allowing them into an entrance hall that could have held a regiment. The space

was bright and airy, lit by wide windows and a glass ceiling high above. To the left of the door hung a painting in which bold oil strokes created the impression of a French country scene, trees and walkers fanning out along a still river. To the right stood a curious sculpture, a metal man twelve inches high perched on a pedestal, oblong face gazed disdainfully from beneath a wide hat, cold fingers clutching crude steel swords.

"I say, this is rather splendid." Timothy had stopped before the statue, head darting from side to side as he took in its every angle. "Dahomeyan?"

"That's right," Cullen said. "Many of the locals have ties with the kingdom, and I like to think that I've built a rather good working relationship. King Glele sent that piece as a gift last summer. Apparently it's some sort of war god. They built him to celebrate a victory over their neighbours."

"Aren't the Dahomey absolutely beastly to people they defeat?" There was a hint of shock in Isabelle's voice.

"I'm afraid they all are on the mainland." Cullen played thoughtfully with the tip of his moustache. "Dahomey, Oyo, Sokoto, all these little African kingdoms with their pot-bellied tyrants and their bloodthirsty goons. But I rather feel that, if we are to bring civilisation to these poor people, that can be done better with an open ear and a whispered word than by shouting at them every time they fight. The white man's burden is a heavy one, but we must bear it with grace."

The governor's words raised a fighting spirit within Dirk. Back home, good people had fought and died to set men free, but it was attitudes like Cullen's that had made the world such a bitterly broken place.

But he had to remember, these were old ways of thinking, habits it took men a long time to break. Passing judgement wouldn't help them get the governor's cooperation in their search for the tablet.

With a sudden hiss the statue turned, raising its arms. Steam erupted from beneath its hat as it leaped from the pedestal and started marching toward Isabelle. Quick as a flash, Dirk pulled off his jacket and scooped up the machine, leather protecting him from its short but sharp blades.

"Much as I appreciate the gesture," Isabelle said, "I really don't think I need rescuing from toy soldiers."

Heat rose in Dirk's cheeks.

"I just figured-" His mumbled words were cut short by a final spray of steam. The statue fell still.

"Dash it all." Cullen peered at the metal man. "That was meant to be a surprise for the party. You haven't bent the arms, have you?"

Dirk returned the statue to its pedestal, then followed as the governor led them towards the stairs, walking stick tapping on the pale wooden floor. Other works of art lined the hall, some European, some local. The perfectly polished floor reflected doorways as dark pools on its gleaming surface.

The room smelt of stale cigar smoke and expensive perfume, the scents of petty power. Dirk half-expected his feet to shoot out beneath him on the mirror-smooth boards. This building was a statement, not a home.

"I say," Blaze-Simms exclaimed as they were led up to their rooms. "Isn't this whole place marvellous?"

Dirk glanced back down the stairs at the native servants dragging their baggage into the hall.

“Yep,” he said, “it’s real special.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Night was falling when Dirk returned suited and booted to the hall, ready to face the evening reception. For such an isolated island, Hakon had a surprising number of foreign guests.

“Tis the guano that does it.” George Braithwaite, a tall Yorkshireman with a beard like a bramble, knocked his wine back before continuing. “All sorts of folks want in these days. We even sell to the French, if you’d credit such a thing.”

A tray appeared at Braithwaite’s shoulder, supported by a straight-laced servant in bowtie and tails. Being waited on like this was something Dirk had never got a liking for. It felt doubly awkward when the servants were the only black faces in the room.

“Ta.” The British Guano manager switched glasses and continued. “Yon fellow in the yellow jacket, he’s from some fancy French farming consortium. Those great musclebound fellows are meant to be his secretaries, but if they take minutes I’m the Queen of Sheba. That little fellow in the robes is Chinese. Don’t trust ’im myself, shifty eyes, but his missus is pretty as a picture. Then there’s Simpson...”

Dirk nodded and smiled as Braithwaite gave a verbal tour of the room, picking over the dregs of each guest’s habits and reputation. He seemed to have picked Dirk out as a kindred spirit, a good sort to keep company with.

While Braithwaite talked, Dirk took the time to absorb his surroundings. Upwards of seventy guests were milling around the hall, a half dozen native waiters drifting between them with placid assurance. The room was lit by scores of candles, fixed to brackets on the walls or reaching up from iron stands in the centre of the room. Sculptures threw long shadows across the floor, their edges blurring with the flicker of flames. Beside Dirk, the silhouette of the warrior statue stretched across the threshold, his blades guarding against intruders from the outer dark. The doors had been fastened wide, allowing fresh night air into the house. The scent of jungle flowers and the chirp of crickets flooded in, the African wild mingling with the bustle, chatter and clinking glasses of a very European evening’s entertainment.

Undercover work was always tense, and undercover work was what this boiled down to. Isabelle had insisted that they maintain the image of tourists, just curious about this out-of-the-way island. Blend in. Keep people happy. Look for any clues about where the wreck might be. Dirk had done his share of undercover work for the Pinkerton Agency both during and after the war. But that had mostly been on the streets and carrying a gun. A mansion and a champagne glass were a very different matter.

“Cracking canapes,” Blaze-Simms said, wandering up with Isabelle on his arm. He brushed absently at the crumbs on the lapel of his tailcoat, then reached out a hand to Braithwaite. “Timothy Blaze-Simms, at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m George Braithwaite.”

“And this is Mrs Isabelle McNair.”

“Think we’ve met,” Braithwaite said. “Some London do.”

“The African Importers’ Ball.” Isabelle beamed, and Braithwaite came as close to cheerful as he’d looked all evening. When faced with Isabelle in evening dress, draped with red velvet and a sparkling smile, it would be hard for any man to remain dour. “Perhaps we could find some champagne and you could finish telling me about puffin guano.”

She took his arm and sailed off into the crowd, nodding and smiling as he enthused about the merits of exotic bird waste.

Dirk breathed a sigh of relief. Braithwaite was probably better company than most of the folks here, but a man could only take so much gossip and guano talk.

“Come on,” Blaze-Simms said, snatching a glass of wine from a passing waiter. “I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

Dirk shifted uncomfortably in his dinner suit. He’d never enjoyed dressing up smart, not even when it was an army uniform. He didn’t own a black tie outfit, and wouldn’t have brought it if he did. The servants had found an old suit that just about fit him, but the shoes pinched his feet, and he didn’t dare breathe deep for fear of bursting buttons across the room.

Blaze-Simms, on the other hand, looked at home in both clothes and surroundings. His suit might be flecked with pastry but it fitted him like skin, and there were enough people in any conversation to hide his occasional mental absences.

“I’ll say this for Cullen,” the Englishman said, sipping his drink. “He knows how to host a party, and he doesn’t let some remote posting get in his way.”

Dirk nodded. He didn’t know much about parties, but this one seemed to be a success. A selection of wines and spirits were circulating the room in tall, elegant glasses, accompanied by small pastries in the French style. The waiters, all locals, wore immaculate black tie, not a bead of perspiration showing on their straight faces. They stepped anonymously through the room, taking orders and collecting glasses. The host also roamed the floor, making introductions, cracking jokes, finding the connections necessary to spark conversations. Ever present at his shoulder, striking in a yellow and blue dress of African design, was the woman who had driven the cart earlier, staring at the world with a sternness that would have taken the jollity out of any man but Cullen.

“Ain’t that a funny thing though?” Dirk said. “Such a sociable guy, working out here, miles from society.”

It was hard not to like the governor, however he looked down on his African neighbours. He was so cheerful, so eager to please. It made him seem all the more out of place on an isolated island with all the worst trappings of colonialism and the old feudal order. Or maybe, Dirk admitted to himself, he just didn’t like thinking that anyone could smilingly oppress his fellow man.

“Comes with the career.” Timothy waved a hand, absently sloshing white wine over his sleeve. “Chap does a year or two in some quaint backwater, shows he can take the responsibility, gets moved on to somewhere a bit more civilised.”

“Listen to Cullen talk.” Dirk noticed the unease lying behind his own words. “He’s been here more than a year or two.”

“Maybe he likes the place.”

“Maybe he likes the women.”

“I say, Dynamo, there’s no call for that sort of...”



“Relax. I’m messing with you.” Dirk turned and guided his colleague to one of the governor’s objets d’art, a painting of tangled pink and brown bodies against a background of swirling blue and grey. “I’ve been staring at this thing half the damn evening, trying to fathom it out. What do you make of it?”

“I suspect it is the work of a local artist.” Blaze-Simms peered at the painting. “Note the distinctive proportions of the figures and the formalised facial expressions. The abstracted scene indicates the influence of French impressionist work, an attempt to use foreign methods to depict native experiences, encapsulating the moment of exposure to the alien. Note the intertwining of African and European bodies, reflecting the coming together of the fates of two continents.”

“I note that the white guys are on top.”

“Oh yes, so they are.”

Blaze-Simms’s casual tone showed how little Dirk’s point had sunk in. But then, Blaze-Simms was one of those people so used to the top of the tree that they never thought about what lay amid the roots. That and he had no sense of irony.

“What do you make of that brown thing down the bottom?” Dirk asked.

“Very dynamic brushwork. Probably a burnt umber pigment.”

“What does it represent?” Dirk had once read a manual on teaching that said folks learnt more by drawing their own conclusions. Moments like this made him doubt it, but he soldiered on.

“Oh, well, it’s rather angular, lots of straight lines, so something man made. Brown could be soil or wood, probably the latter, and the background colours fit a maritime context, which combined with the curved lower lines implies a boat or ship. The lines become disjointed in the centre, as by some sort of rupture – clearly the ship is broken.”

“Which would make this a painting of...?”

“A shipwreck, of course.”

There was a pause, Blaze-Simms smiling indulgently. Then his jaw dropped and his eyebrows shot up.

“You think it’s the wreck the stone was lost in?”

“Well, it doesn’t have a label saying *1733* or *lost treasure here*, but how many wrecks do you reckon there have been around these parts?”

“Let’s find out.”

Cullen was talking with the Chinaman, the governor’s grand gestures and lively demeanour restrained to suit his guest. The governor’s amazon companion stood motionless opposite the Chinaman’s diminutive wife, their eyes locked, frozen glares filling the air between them. Dirk waited for Cullen to excuse himself, then waved him over.

“Gentlemen! I trust you’re enjoying our little soirée?” Cullen’s face was lit by a jovial grin.

“Splendid.”

“Mighty fine, thank you.”

“I don’t believe I made proper introductions earlier.” Cullen turned to his female companion. “Sir Timothy Blaze-Simms, Mr Dirk Dynamo, this is Bekoe-Kumi of the ahosi.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” Dirk said.

“Delighted,” Blaze-Simms added.

Bekoe-Kumi nodded silently. In a place like this, Dirk could understand anyone getting a little reserved.

“Tell me, is ahosi your tribe?” Timothy flashed his most winning smile, to no response. “I don’t believe I’ve heard the term before.”

“It means that I am a bride of the King of Dahomey,” Bekoe-Kumi replied.

“Gosh, royalty eh?” Blaze-Simms raised his eyebrows. “Does the king have many wives?”

“Enough to crush the Yoruba and send them whimpering like dogs.”

“Must make family parties terribly crowded.”

So much for Bekoe-Kumi’s signs of social discomfort. If she was royalty then she’d be as comfortable in high society as anyone else here. Her stiffness probably reflected a very different mindset, a disdain Dirk had seen far too often in his life.

“Governor Cullen,” he said before the conversation could go down an awkward path. “Could you tell me about this painting?”

“Of course, old chap.” Cullen turned with a smile toward the picture. “It was painted by Felipe, one of the local lads. Frightfully pleasant young man, his family are church-goers and the minister, when we had one, encouraged him to take an interest in culture. Turned out he was rather gifted. He’s even had some sales in the more excitable European galleries.”

“And the painting?” Dirk asked.

“Based on a local legend. A slave ship went down outside the bay, near Reinhart’s Spur, sometime in the 1730s I believe. All aboard were lost, terrible tragedy, but of course that whole period was pretty ghastly. Fellows dragged off in chains, worked to the bone in plantations in the Americas. Thank God even your lot have stopped that business now.”

“Every nation has its shame,” Dirk replied. Down memory’s long trail he saw soldiers in grey march toward him as he stood, hands bloody, in the thin blue line. He remembered a summer’s day on a small, round hill, the crackle of gunfire and wet thud of bayonets into flesh, the ache of his arms and the sudden flash of pain. He tilted his head to one side, felt damaged muscles twinge.

“Anyway, the locals have rather clung onto the story of this sinking,” Cullen continued. “They believe that the spirits of the slaves, still shackled to the ship as it went down, were unable to leave this world. They haunt the vessel, trapped in the suffering and fear that were their lot in life and death. So powerful is their loss that they draw others to them, the ghosts of drowned slaves from all over the Atlantic. Men, women and children, victims of that terrible trade. Those who died trying to escape. Others who drowned in wrecks or were thrown overboard for expediency’s sake. Now they supposedly gather at our wreck, a sort of alumni reunion for the departed, rattling their ethereal chains and talking about the bad old days.”

“I say,” Blaze-Simms said, “that sounds rather like-”

“Fine story, governor,” Dirk interjected. After the attack on the Epiphany Club, he was worried that other folks might be after the same stones as them and the trail to the lost library. No sense letting Blaze-Simms get carried away and talk about it in public. “I bet this island has plenty more like it.”

“Oh yes,” Cullen said. “They say it was first settled by a man named Nahweni, who arrived by accident after getting drunk on fermented mango juice and falling asleep on his raft. He woke up just down the coast from here, on the beach now known as Coconut Cove. Of course, he couldn’t settle the place alone...”

Cullen started into an excitable account of the island’s early history, prior to its days as a slave staging post. It was a rich mix of the deeply implausible and the all too likely, mingling tales of talking animals and angry hills with those of petty tyrants and unfaithful husbands. But before he reached the arrival of Europeans, Cullen was interrupted by a young man asking about the next day’s hunting. He was drawn off to one side, leaving Bekoe-Kumi with his guests.

“You bring much baggage,” she said sternly.

“Mostly scientific equipment,” Blaze-Simms explained. “I promised a chap at the Royal Society that I’d take some weather recordings and soil samples while I was here. And then there’s the diving clobber, that’s most of the heavy stuff.”

“You go diving?” Her stare was like her body, fierce and unwavering.

“Oh yes, of course.” Blaze-Simms smiled and sipped his wine, apparently oblivious to the force levelled at him.

“You stay away from the wreck.”

So much for secrecy. It looked like folks had worked out their aim here, and some of them didn’t like it.

“Oh, I’m not worried about ghost stories,” Blaze-Simms said, smiling. “This is the age of science, I consider myself very safe from the unprovable.”

Bekoe-Kumi stepped closer. “I am not asking. I am telling.”

“What?” Blaze-Simms blinked.

“The wreck is a special place. If you go there people will be angry.” She flexed the muscles of her well-formed arms. “I will be angry.”

Blaze-Simms tried to back away, ended up pressed against a wall. “Well, I’m sure we can...”

“You do not want me angry.”

They were so close now that their faces almost touched. She took the glass from his hand, squeezing it between finger and thumb. It frosted with cracks, then exploded, showering them both in flashing points of crystallised light. Other guests made a great show of not staring, even as their glances flicked toward the confrontation.

“No need for things to get unpleasant.” Dirk stepped forward, pushing Bekoe-Kumi back as he placed himself between her and his friend. “We ain’t here to make trouble for anyone, are we Tim?”

“On no,” Blaze-Simms said. “We just want to-”

“We just want to take in the sights,” Dirk said. “Then we’ll be on our way.”

He snatched an empty tray from a passing waiter, bent it casually in half and held up the twisted results in front of Bekoe-Kumi.

“No need for trouble,” he said.

She fixed Dirk with a dark stare filled with the deepest of hatred. Then she turned on her heel and strode away.

“What a strange girl.” Blaze-Simms said. He frowned at the broken glass, then brightened, turning to Dirk with a grin. “Good thing it was such awful wine. Do you fancy a brandy?”

## Chapter 3

### Honoured Guests.

Fresh night air greeted Dirk as he slipped unseen onto the veranda. For all his bulk, he'd gotten good over the years at getting in and out of places unnoticed, making the most of distractions and darkened doorways. Plenty of villains had learned the hard way that Dirk Dynamo was more than just muscle for hire.

With a sense of relief, he strolled away from the light and chatter and meandered along the front of the house. He struck a match against the wall and lit a cigar, closing his eyes to relish the moment. He could hear the buzz of insects and the cry of a wounded beast in the jungle, but the only company close enough to impose its presence was the guests' horses, most still in harness to their carriages, stamping their feet and snorting to each other on the drive.

The horses, like their owners, had a party laid on for them, with water troughs and feed bags all around. They chomped and slurped and sniffed at each other while the drivers smoked and played cards.

Still relishing the rich taste of tobacco, Dirk stepped off the veranda and down onto the gravel, approaching the nearest horse with an outstretched hand. Her nostrils fluttered and she nuzzled up against his palm, whiskers tickling his hand as she sought a sugar lump that wasn't there.

"Sorry, ma'am." Dirk patted her head and stroked the rough hair of her mane. "Maybe next time."

After the bustle of the party, the horse was soothing company. The openness of an animal's motives made a nice change from people's schemes and subtleties, while the rise and fall of her warm flank beneath his hand brought back happy memories. He thought of the western plains at night, the same stars shining on them as looked down on him now. Nothing but a man and his mount, and a world of potential stretching to the horizon.

Dirk left his new friend and carried on around the side of the building, happily puffing away at his cigar. The shoes still pinched, but at least he could loosen his collar now and let the bow tie hang free. He started going over the things he'd been told about the governor's art, repeating everything three times, fixing facts to memory.

The drive swept around to the back of the mansion's main building. The pole star hung low over a wide dusty yard and beyond it a barn-like building connected to the residence by the servants' quarters. The bottom floor looked to be stables, dark and empty. Above that, light crept through the cracks in two floors of shuttered windows, narrow beams stabbing across rough timber walls. Faint rumbling and clacking sounds drifted into the night.

Glancing up, Dirk noticed that there were no lit windows on this side of the house. In fact, barely any windows at all. And why were the stables empty while the horses were kept out on the drive? Curiosity pulled powerfully at him.

Dropping his cigar, he ground the butt beneath his heel. Habit took hold as he started taking soft steps, reducing the crunch of his feet on gravel. Sticking to the deep shadows of the house he sidled around the yard, past the noise and smells spilling from the kitchen doorway, along the wall of the servants' quarters and up to a small door in the side of the barn.

He tried the latch but the door had been barred from the inside. The same with all the other doors of the barn, except those leading into the dead end of the stables. But a row of windows was open on the top floor, letting acrid smells and wafts of steam out into the night.

It seemed like someone wanted to hide what was going on here, and that just made him more curious.

Dirk glanced around. No-one was nearby. He took two sharp steps and sprang upwards, grasping the ledge of a window on the middle floor. Arms straining he hauled himself upwards, levering his elbows onto the narrow ledge. He shifted all his weight onto one arm, swaying pendulum-like, his feet scraping against the wall below. The other arm shot up, grabbing the top of the window frame. He swung up and, with a heave and a grunt, flung himself through the open gap of the window.

Dirk landed in a crouch and paused, gazing into the shadows that surrounded him. His eyes quickly adjusted to the deeper dark out of moonlight's reach, revealing a large room, hollow as a warehouse, filled with the angular shadows of crates and strange machines. Voices filtered through from the floor above, backed by a rumble of machinery. The room smelt dusty, but it was a sharp dust that burned at the senses.

Curiosity was turning into suspicion. This all seemed very industrial, more like a factory than a governor's mansion.

Hitching up the leg of his pants, Dirk pulled a sturdy knife from the sheath strapped to his ankle. It was a moment's work to slide the blade beneath the lid of one of the crates and crack it open. Dipping his hand inside he scooped up a heap of powder and held it close to his face. Not all explosives smelled the same, but he'd got a good sense over the years for odours that went into them. He wasn't going to try lighting a match around this stuff.

Replacing the lid, he hammered the nails back in with his knife. Then he put another, smaller crate on top and climbed up to peer through a hole in the floorboards above.

The view wasn't great, but there was enough light for Dirk to make out pistons hammering back and forth. He glimpsed a barrel as someone rolled it across the hole and heard people talking in a language he didn't know. With his hand against the boards, he could feel the machines shaking the floor.

There was a hell of a lot more going on in Hakon than just plantations and a shipwreck.

Taking care not to make much noise, Dirk climbed down and put the crates back where he'd found them. Splinters of light stabbed into the room from around a doorway at the far end. He crept forward and pressed his eye against the crack.

A short, round woman stood in a stairwell, lit by gas lamps that burned with a green corona. She wore a servant's dress of plain brown cotton a shade lighter than her skin, her hair bundled in a yellow scarf. She tapped impatiently against the wall with fingers stained chalky white.

There was a clatter of footsteps on the stairs and Cullen rose into view, ginger moustache twitching as he huffed and puffed.

“Sorry, Omalara, sorry,” he muttered, leaning forward to catch his breath. “Had trouble getting away. That McNair woman was following me all over the place. Can’t decide if she’s a charming conversationalist or just damned inquisitive.”

The woman folded her arms and fixed him with a stare.

“Omalara said no good would come of this,” she said. “But would you listen to her? No. You got to have your white man guests and your big party. Now the vats going wild with only Omalara and her daughter to fix them, ’cause you got her boys dressed up and serving drinks.”

“It is important that we keep up appearances.” Cullen’s expression was that of a naughty schoolboy, making excuses for talking in the back of class. “I know you don’t like it, but if something is wrong, if suspicions are roused, everything we’ve built could come tumbling down.”

“If something is wrong?” Her glare could have withered the strongest of men, and Cullen was no Hercules. “Like maybe you have a party like you never done before.”

“I’ve never had such prestigious guests at the mansion before. Blaze-Simms’s name alone is enough to open doors, and the Epiphany Club have a certain bohemian glamour among the adventurous sorts. Etiquette dictates...”

“Etiquette don’t dictate round here, boy. That English talk.”

“And this is an English colony. If word of what we are doing gets back to the Colonial Office then they’ll send soldiers to prove that the sharp way.”

Cullen stopped his rising voice, slapped a shocked hand over his mouth. Silence reigned for a long minute.

“You right,” Omalara said at last. “And it better to give your white men some distraction, so they don’t go poking where they shouldn’t. You keep them distracted, take them hunting, away from house and farms. Give me time to think.”

“Of course.” Cullen stooped and kissed the serving woman’s hand before retreating back down the stairs.

Omalara turned and, for a moment, her eyes seemed to pierce the door and fix on Dirk. He tensed, certain despite all evidence that he was found out. His body strained, ready to flee the intensity of her gaze.

Omalara stepped towards him, one hand stretched out. She grabbed the bannister and walked past, up the stairs to the right of the door. Footfalls padded up and away, leaving Dirk watching an empty stairwell, breathing a deep sigh of relief.

\* \* \* \* \*

He found Blaze-Simms in the trophy room, beneath the glassy gaze of a dozen stuffed animals. A cluster of party-goers were crowded around, watching as he constructed a steam engine from an oil lamp, half a bottle of claret and a napkin.

“But what is its purpose?” Cullen’s oriental guest was peering at the starched, folded cloth spinning above the open neck of the bottle.

“To power factories.” Blaze-Simms waved his hands around excitedly. “By connecting such a turbine to a drive shaft, one can more efficiently transform the

chemical energy of coal or wood into the kinetic energy required by modern industry.”

“You power your factories with napkins?” The guest looked even more confused.

“Gosh no, even the finest starch wouldn’t stop them flopping when enlarged to an efficient scale. One would use steel instead.”

With a flourish, Blaze-Simms set a differently folded napkin on top of the bottle, drawing applause as it spun faster and faster.

“Factories use this now, yes?” A French lilt inflected the question. A pale man in a yellow jacket peered up at Blaze-Simms whilst pointing at the improvised engine.

“The principles are the same, but a blade of this design would increase productivity by thirty to forty percent.” Blaze-Simms grabbed a bottle from a passing waiter, tipped its contents into the Frenchman’s glass and knocked the bottom out with a sharp tap on the table. “If I introduce an extra funnel, and a suitable source of smoke, you will be able to witness the critical difference in air flows...”

Oblivious to the broken glass now littering the table and the nervous looks of his audience, Blaze-Simms began rebuilding his device, constantly talking about its design. The Frenchman and Chinaman remained among the attentive crowd, while the former’s bodyguards and the latter’s wife stood quietly by, their faces the blank slates of the professionally patient. When the bodyguards looked around at all it was to watch Blaze-Simms’s antics, a hint of a sneer on their lips.

Sidling out of the trophy room and into the main hall, Dirk let his body drift through the buzz of laughter and perfume while his mind lingered on what he had seen in the out-building. Seeing an upper class Englishman like Cullen acting subservient should have been a pleasure, especially with someone so embodying the down-trodden masses—woman, African, servant. Intellectually, Dirk knew he should have been pleased at the turn-around. But in his gut he felt a deep sense of unease at the contradiction between what he’d seen there and what was happening out here in the party. He was a guest in a house of lies, surrounded by deception and distraction. There was no way this would end well.

He watched the household servants as they wandered the hall. They were all native men, dressed in jackets and bow ties. They followed the rules a servant should, formal in manner, silent until questioned, polite in speech and style. They acted promptly on every request, even arriving with new drinks before guests themselves spotted that their glasses were empty. It was a book perfect rendition of good service.

But not life perfect. Dirk knew servants. He had been in and seen the role countless times. Real servants, worn into instinct over the years, held themselves differently. They stood straight like these men, but it was a straightness of formality, where this was pride. And a servant’s eyes, an honest servant’s eyes, did not dart around as these did. A servant used the corners of his vision, catching every movement without shifting his gaze, and held only those details required by his role. These servants were scouring the room, watching guests when they weren’t looking, soaking up the events around them. They knew not to catch a guest’s gaze, but they didn’t know not to gaze at all.

Unease growing inside him, Dirk edged away from the servants, trying to watch without being watched. Was it his imagination or were more eyes on him? More gazes swiftly shifting when he looked their way?

Someone grabbed at his elbow. He spun around, twisting his arm free and gripping his assailant's wrist.

"Why, Mr Dynamo, I didn't know you cared." Isabelle smiled sweetly up at him. "But I'm afraid this hand is reserved for Mr McNair."

"Sorry, ma'am." Dirk released his grip. "You startled me, that's all."

"I quite understand. I must be a hideous sight, looming out of the darkness of a party."

"I didn't mean..."

"I'm teasing, Mr Dynamo. Are all Americans so literal-minded?"

"America's a big place, ma'am. I wouldn't care to speak for all my countrymen. But most folks I know back home are straight shooters, except for politicians and Pinkertons, and neither or them are trusted much."

"You don't dabble in politics yourself?"

"No, ma'am." Dirk hesitated. He knew some folks considered this a sensitive subject, and that his own opinions weren't exactly in line with those of the British upper class. "I read about it a bit, mostly your European thinkers like Mr Marx. But it's no business for a man of spirit."

"And being a Pinkerton is?" She smiled playfully.

"Well, that's another matter. I've done my share of spying and prying, some of it on my nation's dime, some not. But we all do things we ain't proud of from time to time."

"How very true." Isabelle was solemn for a moment. Then she seemed to remember herself, glancing around with a smile. "Of course an Englishman takes pride in everything he does, and occasionally the things he doesn't. When one defines civilisation, it is very easy to always be right."

They strolled through the throng, her arm now linked through his as she nodded and smiled to the people they passed. Dirk guided her away from the servants and found himself once more heading towards the open front door.

One of the servants was walking parallel to them along the side of the room, dispensing drinks from his heavily laden tray, replacing them with empty glasses. His face was familiar, one of the men who'd fetched their bags from the dock.

"Apparently his name is Gu," Isabelle said, leaning close to Dirk.

"Did he tell you that?"

"No, silly, Bekoe-Kumi did. She knows all about him."

"Close, are they?" Dirk found himself amazed that Isabelle had got so much out of the Dahomey woman.

"I suppose that would be one way to put it. She worships him."

Dirk raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Passionate girl," he said.

"It's in the nature of the ahosi."

"Not like English women, eh?"

"I think that's a little unfair. Most of us are as dedicated to our lord as the next nation of housewives, even if we only have the one god."

"God?"



“Gu deals with war, apparently. But then, so must any god of Englishmen.”

Dirk turned to look in confusion at Isabelle. He'd clearly missed something, leaving him feeling like a fool. She gazed at the statue by the door, its swords moving up and down to the entertainment of the guests.

“This is Gu?” he asked, pointing at the figure.

“Have you listened to a word I've said?”

Dirk glanced once more at the servant he'd thought they were discussing, now disappearing towards the back of the room.

“Seems not.” Dirk's shoes creaked as he shifted uncomfortably on the spot. “You noticed anything odd about this place?”

“Apart from the servants?”

“You noticed too, huh?”

“Never under-estimate a woman, Mr Dynamo.” Isabelle frowned at him. “Especially not where the running of a household is concerned. Of course I noticed the servants, but there are other things too. The library is at the rear of the house, facing north, meaning it gets less light than the guest rooms, which are all at the front. Hardly conducive to reading, or to sleep. Not that the library even has any windows to let in the light.”

“Could just be poor design.”

“I doubt it. Reginald's father was an architect, he would notice details like that.” She looked thoughtfully around the room. “Shall we have a little wander, see what else we might see?”

They strolled back through the party, Isabelle drifting between conversations while Dirk stood awkwardly at her side, a knight in dress tails on the arm of a picture-book princess. Most of the guests were British, and she knew them all by reputation at least. Conversation flowed around her like a spring breeze, leaves of laughter dancing on the wind. She brought out the best in those around her – fascinating anecdotes, rapier wit, gems of obscure and intriguing knowledge.

“What do you want from life?” she asked during one of their brief moments without other company.

“The usual stuff.” Dirk shrugged sheepishly.

“And what's the usual stuff?”

“To be better. To be smarter.”

“I'm really not sure that's the usual stuff.” She laughed, and Dirk felt his face redden.

“What about you?” he asked, looking for a distraction.

“What do I want?” She seemed surprised by the question.

“Uhuh.”

“I want to decide my own fate.” Her voice had gone quiet, and she looked the closest he'd seen her to timid. “I don't believe that's too much to ask.”

“Damn straight.” Dirk nodded. “Where I come from, it's every man's right to do that.”

“Well. Quite.” She raised an eyebrow and looked up at him, searching his face. Whatever she was after, she didn't seem to find it. Her usual tone returned, and she whisked him off once more into the crowds.

Even with Isabelle's civilising touch, the party was entering its final phase, a long drawn-out death by denial. The older guests were growing red-faced and

wobbly, fat merchants groping inappropriately for their long-suffering wives. The young had reached the drinking from bottles stage, casting aside the safest social convention in slender hopes of instigating a wild time. A tired and tipsy young woman was being whisked around the centre of the room by a dandy who danced to the music in his mind. And around the edges the other visitors stood uncertain, watching the English at their most uncharacteristically riotous.

“Don’t these folks ever give up?” Dirk stepped out of the waltzing couple’s path.

“Freeport doesn’t have much of a social scene,” Isabelle said. “They’re making hay while Cullen’s sun shines.”

“Freeport?” Dirk had heard the name mentioned, but that was as far as his knowledge went.

“The main town and harbour.” Isabelle smiled and nodded her head to a passer by. “It’s on the far side of the island from where we docked.”

“I wondered why we didn’t see more of these folks earlier.”

“It seemed wise to keep our boat away from the rest. It avoids people asking about Timothy’s diving devices or watching us trawling for treasure.”

Dirk nodded. “Makes sense. So now we’ve got a hint of the wreck, what’s our next move?”

“A quick one, if we can. First thing tomorrow lets-”

A sharp rapping came from behind them. Dirk turned to see Cullen standing on the stairs, knocking his walking stick against the banister.

“Your attention please!” he called to the crowd. A hush fell across the room, interspersed with drunken giggling. “It is my pleasure to announce a hunting party tomorrow, meeting here at ten for a jaunt into the jungle.”

Applause broke out, raucous and relieved. With something else to look forward to, the party could finally finish.

Cullen held up a hand for silence.

“It is my further pleasure to invite one of our honoured guests, a renowned master of tracking and trapping, to lead us in the chase. Mr Dynamo, would you be willing to lead the hunt?”

All eyes turned on Dirk. He looked to Isabelle, uncertain whether to accept. What would help them blend in best, saying yes or no? He didn’t want to draw attention if he didn’t have to.

She gave the faintest of nods.

“Sure thing, Mr Cullen.” Dirk grinned a predator’s grin. If he was going hunting he might as well enjoy it. “I’m always up for a little sport.”

He whispered to Isabelle as applause filled the hall. “First thing tomorrow, huh?”

She smiled up at him, a glint in her eyes. “What’s a day’s delay, compared with seeing a renowned master at work?”

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Hunt.**

Years of disciplined living had given Dirk habits that no fancy party could break. As dawn rose in glory over the jungle of Hakon, he was up and exercising on the governor's lawn, running laps and heaving rocks among the croquet hoops. On the veranda, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* waited for him to pause and catch breath.

The servants were up early too. A gang came around the side of the house, chattering and laughing, spades and picks over their shoulders. Young and old, they walked bare-chested and bare-foot in the fresh morning air, relishing the sun's rays and the gentle breeze blowing off the sea. As they noticed Dirk their stances stiffened and they walked past in silence, heads bowed.

"Morning," Dirk called out.

They nodded silent responses and disappeared down the gravel path.

"What ho!" Timothy Blaze-Simms wandered out of the house, bottle in one hand, glass in the other, bow-tie dangling free around his neck.

"Up already?" Dirk asked, pausing in his labours.

"Not so much *already* as *still*." Timothy blinked at the bright outdoor light, took a sip from his champagne.

"You remember there's a hunt this morning?" Dirk asked. His friend easily got distracted, and that occasionally made him unreliable as backup.

"Oh yes." Blaze-Simms flung himself down on a lawn-side bench, head at one end, feet sticking over the other. "Don't worry about me. I can go days without sleep, when the whim seizes me."

"Listen, there's something odd going on here." Dirk stepped closer to his friend, lowering his voice so as not to be overheard. "You notice the servants last night?"

A gentle snore was the only reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time the rest of the household had risen and breakfasted, the hunting party was beginning to assemble. Arriving in small groups or pairs, two dozen of the island's more prominent inhabitants galloped up the driveway, gravel crunching beneath their horses' hooves, calling out excitedly to each other. The British were kitted out in a strange mix of formal jackets and large guns, giving them the appearance of an emergency militia raised to defend the home counties. They were in festive spirits, even Braithwaite laughing and joking as he sipped sherry brought out by the servants. The whole tone was bewildering, like no kind of hunt Dirk had ever been part of—more carnival than expedition into the wilds.

The Frenchman, who Dirk had discovered was a businessman named Regis Marat, was trying to join in the jollity, but he responded blankly to the jokes and was clearly unimpressed with the sherry. His hulking "secretaries" seemed happy playing with their guns, though the looks they sometimes gave Dirk were downright hostile. He wondered if he'd done something to offend them, or if they just got riled when they weren't the toughest guys in town.

Isabelle emerged from the house and joined Dirk on the veranda. She was wearing jodhpurs and a jacket, and held a riding crop.

"Ready for that little sport you mentioned?" She smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Dirk paused before replying, grinding a cigarillo out beneath his boot.

“Pardon my French, but why are we even going on this damn hunt?” he asked. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Firstly, Mr Dynamo, French is a language of sophistication and elegance.” Isabelle tapped the riding crop against her empty palm, counting off points. “The idea that it epitomises the cruder side of communication reflects a level of ignorance and prejudice most unbecoming of a citizen of the land of the free.

“Secondly, our host has invited us on this hunt. Given that he has extended us such hospitality, it would be most impolite not to attend. Such niceties may have no value in New York or the mining outposts of the Black Hills, but in British territories manners are important. They are as oil to the social machine, ensuring its smooth and peaceful running.

“Thirdly, in case you have forgotten, you are leading the hunt. It can hardly happen without you.”

“Well that’s me told.” Dirk scowled.

“Please don’t mope.” Isabelle shook her head. “One would think your mother never had to tell you off.”

“She didn’t get much of a chance.” He’d barely been old enough to understand what was happening at the funeral, but some things left such a deep memory that they were never lost.

“I’m so sorry.” Isabelle hung her head. “I didn’t know, but that was still thoughtless of me.”

“It happens.” Dirk took a deep breath. “I should get ready to ride.”

“Of course.” Isabelle went to join Cullen and Bekoe-Kumi, who were examining horses brought round from behind the house. Dirk wondered where the animals lived, because they sure hadn’t been in the stables.

“Action time!” A breezy Blaze-Simms strode out onto the gravel, freshly groomed and sporting a clean jacket, a long paper-wrapped package over his shoulder and a small one in his hand.

“How are you even moving?” Dirk asked.

“Pluck of the English,” Timothy replied. “Besides, I couldn’t miss this. You know they hardly ever hunt around here? This is a real occasion.”

He sprang into the saddle of a nearby horse, settling the large package in front of him.

“What is that thing?” Dirk asked.

“Wait and see,” Timothy said. “I think you’re going to like this one.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As the first hour of riding slid by, Dirk came to understand why the local residents didn’t hunt often. Hakon was the biggest of a cluster of guano islands, big enough to have a jungle and its own small mountain, but not to support the kind of big game for which Africa was famed. In its place, Cullen had developed something of a bastard sport, with a little fox-hunt-style chasing through fields and foliage and the odd bit of bird shooting. A pack of enthusiastic but ill-trained hounds scampered around the hunters, dashing off whenever they caught a scent. Sometimes they scared up parakeets, giving the party’s guns a target. More often

they came back carrying a snake or vole, or were found barking at the heels of a nervous field hand.

Blaze-Simms's smaller package contained a device he called the Automated Aerial Beater. He unwrapped it as they rode, revealing a brass box half a foot across with a sack hanging from the top. With a flourish he lit the gas emerging from a cannister in the middle and the sack inflated, turning the device into a miniature airship. It sailed up above the jungle, then began to shake as its mechanisms rattled, scaring birds up out of the trees.

Dirk applauded enthusiastically along with the rest of the hunting party. It was an ingenious device, and he could see that it might have uses beyond sport. But just as the hunters were readying their guns, flames sprang up the side of the inflated sack. There was a whoosh, a dull thud, and the balloon exploded.

The Automated Aerial Beater crashed onto the path, scattering gears and chunks of brass casing.

Many in the party found the whole thing hysterical, creating a pantomime atmosphere of inane banter and running jokes, to the evident bemusement of the oriental trader and his wife. They rode at the back of the group, whispering to each other and exchanging occasional comments with a disappointed-looking Blaze-Simms, who sat stroking his remaining paper package and gazing into the distance.

Dirk, stuck at the head of the hunt and determined to make use of the time, turned his attention away from the dogs and onto quizzing Cullen.

"So where do the rest of your guests live?" He gestured back at the hunting party. By now he'd heard a whole history of the island's uses and ownership, but nothing that threw light on what he had seen at the mansion.

"Mostly in Freeport." Cullen smiled and shifted his rifle across his lap. "It used to be the slave depot, when this place lived off the Atlantic trade. The cages and cells are gone, thank God, but the docks still work. There are offices for the guano companies, warehouses and suchlike, and a hotel for visitors.

"Nobody but me lives here full time. They stop by to check on operations for a month or two, then move on. Braithwaite's as close as I have to a permanent neighbour, and even he's never stayed more than a summer. In fact, you've come at the perfect time. Late spring and early summer are usually when we're busiest, and the nearest to a social season that we can scrape together. Leave it four weeks and you'll find me alone with the birds and the servants."

Cullen's tone cast a different light on the conversation Dirk had overheard the previous night. The governor was clearly excited at the thought of having a social season. His claim to have felt obliged to throw the party looked more like an excuse.

"I say, good shot!" Cullen exclaimed.

A brightly coloured bird tumbled out of the air, to wild applause and some bickering over who'd hit it. A servant followed the dogs to retrieve this rare prize. To Dirk, it just looked a bit pathetic, a death that wouldn't feed anyone or keep them safe. This wasn't his sort of hunt.

As they rode into the thicker parts of the jungle, the tone changed. Hushed by the lush beauty of their surroundings, even the English members of the party were reduced to whispers.

For such a small island, Hakon had an amazing abundance of wildlife. Spirals of bright red leaves hung next to bursts of blue and yellow flowers. The hunters pointed in wonder at a rainbow hued blossom, only to see it spread its wings and flap away. Tree-frogs swam in the rain-filled cups of upturned leaves while bees buzzed from bloom to bloom, to be caught in the snapping jaws of a Venus flytrap. Somewhere in the warm green depths, a stream babbled its Edenic tune. Every space seemed swollen to bursting with life, the plants larger and more luscious even than those Dirk had seen in the Amazon basin.

He paused to look at one of the carnivorous plants, letting the rest of the party drift past him. He was surprised to see Bekoe-Kumi and Braithwaite instinctively take the lead, not lost in the tourist's reverie but alert to their surroundings, their shifting gazes those of true hunters not the British horse and hounds set.

The oriental couple were at the back of the pack, riding with a stiff formality that accentuated their evident discomfort in the saddle. They reminded Dirk of folks he'd seen driving the railways out across the great west - both the Chinese labourers, strangely dignified under their sweat and dirt, and the white investors from back east who'd crop up once in a while, riding uneasily past half-laid tracks as they tried to fathom the works their wealth had encompassed.

They bowed slightly in the saddle as he approached, not much more than a nod of the head. Dirk nodded back and pointed out a few interesting plants he'd noticed, trying to engage the couple in conversation. The man responded, but briefly and with a stiffness that matched his posture. Like his wife he kept scanning the jungle, not frantically but persistently, constantly absorbing his surroundings.

Dirk was about to give up on the conversation when Isabelle joined them. Her bow was deeper than those of the orientals, and this seemed to please them. To Dirk she appeared to be talking about the same things he had, pointing out the same sights and sounds, making the same queries about the orientals themselves. And yet the tone was lighter, livelier. Where he had laboured to get a response, she drew them easily into quiet chatter about the jungle, the hunt, even themselves.

His name was Hasegawa Minoru, hers Miura Noriko. Dirk was surprised that, as what seemed to be a married couple, they didn't share a name or two, but he guessed that was an eastern thing. Like Braithwaite, Hasegawa Minoru had come to Hakon for the guano. He had some scheme about exporting it to places Dirk had never heard of, but all of which seemed to involve acquaintances of Isabelle. As business talk it sounded plausible, and though something made Dirk uneasy he figured it was just his own lack of grace. His contributions to the conversation were blunt and stumbling, while Isabelle responded with ease to the Orientals' enquiries and followed up with curiosity on the things that they said. Dirk made a mental note to ask her later about oriental customs, as she seemed to know what was needed to put these folks at ease.

There was a yapping up ahead and the lead horses jerked to a halt, whinnying and pawing the ground. Dirk excused himself and rode back to the head of the hunt. His own horse snorted as she neared the front, and he had to work the spurs to keep her moving. As he passed the others and broke into a clearing he saw why.

The area was like a butcher's board, strewn with entrails and spattered a raw, dripping red. Glistening strings of guts trembled beneath the paws of the dogs, who scampered around yipping gleefully for their masters. Dirk swung down from the saddle and approached one of the larger heaps. With the tip of his old Bowie knife he prodded carefully through the pieces, studying splintered bones and shredded skin. He'd only seen this sort of carnage on a battlefield, but here there were no sword strokes or bullet holes, only the smells of blood and ruptured bowels.

Blaze-Simms jumped from his horse and approached the bloody remains, Braithwaite and Bekoe-Kumi close behind him.

"Good heavens, what is it?" Blaze-Simms asked.

"Looks like it were a mule." Braithwaite peered at a piece of fur. "Locals sometimes let them graze free when they're not using them, so that they don't need so much feeding. A few of the older ones even live in the wild, just wandering around like they own the place."

"The poor blighter's been absolutely shredded." Timothy looked appalled. "Mostly by claws, by the looks of it, but there are teeth marks too."

"Whatever killed it weren't hungry." Braithwaite pointed at a long string of innards stretching towards the treeline. "There's nowt missing but a few shreds of the hide."

"What about the heart?" A glimmer of excitement appeared in Blaze-Simms's eyes. "Perhaps this was some sort of ritual."

"That's over there." Braithwaite pointed to a small, grisly heap. "Under the stomach."

"Oh yes."

Dirk followed the grisly trail out of the clearing. The guts reached their end not far into the treeline, but a set of bloody paw-prints continued west through the jungle.

Braithwaite came up behind Dirk, stroking his beard as he gazed at the tracks.

"Looks to me like 'twas a bear." The Yorkshireman knelt down, dabbed at one of the prints, his finger coming away sticky with half-dried blood. "Bout an hour ago."

"Many bears around here, Mr Braithwaite?" Dirk reckoned he could make a good guess for himself. This sort of jungle wasn't normally bear country.

"No lad." Braithwaite shook his head thoughtfully. "And bears don't attack mules, neither."

"That's what I figured."

A suspicion was settling over Dirk. He didn't have enough details to fit it all together yet, but this jungle seemed as stilted and exaggerated as life in the governor's mansion. Everything about it, every plant and animal, made sense as part of a jungle or a forest. Just not all together, and not with such success on such a tiny spot of land. If this was about guano, then it was mighty powerful guano.

They walked back to the clearing, where Blaze-Simms was excitedly unwrapping his paper parcel.

"What the hell is that?" Dirk asked.

Timothy was holding something almost like a hunting rifle. Unlike a rifle, the stock was a mass of brass tubes and funnels, and the barrel consisted of three spiralling lengths of pipe.

"It's a new gun I've been working on," he explained, pumping a handle on the side. "It's steam powered, but without the need for fire. You see, there's a radium chamber here, next to the water tank, and by a series of swift mechanical compressions one can squeeze enough power from the radium to evaporate a brief but intense burst of steam. This drives a set of magnetised pellets up the barrel, and their spin around each other helps retain accuracy. It has quite a punch, and can fire an incredible distance, in theory."

"In theory?" Dirk eyed the contraption warily. He remembered how, in theory, Blaze-Simms's automated server had brought a whole new era of swift service and perfect drinks for the Epiphany Club. In practice it had brought two fires, one explosion and the infamous Champagne Tsunami before they shut it down.

"This is the first chance I've had to fire it." Blaze-Simms beamed with pride. "I look forward to testing its range."

"Lad," Braithwaite interjected, "in this jungle, nothing's got a range of more than a hundred yards. On account of that's how far you can see."

"Oh." Blaze-Simms slumped, then brightened. "Maybe if we flush out more birds? No cover in the sky."

"We've got more to worry about than birds." Dirk vaulted into the saddle. "Come on, we've got a fresh trail. Let's do some proper hunting at last."

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that they had the bear's trail, following it was easy. With or without blood it left hefty prints as it passed, crushing the undergrowth in its wake.

The tone of the trip had changed. The horses had been spooked by the butchery in the clearing, and so had their riders. Many of the party were chattering about the prospect of a real kill, but it was a quieter chatter than before, all boisterousness drained away, and Cullen himself looked a little nervous despite Bekoe-Kumi's presence at his side. Monsieur Marat was talking with Timothy, who was taking a screw-driver to the barrel of his gun. Dirk still took the lead, but Braithwaite rode up front with him now, alert in the saddle.

"You seem to know a lot about animals and their insides, Mr Braithwaite," Dirk said.

"Aye, well, I've been quartermaster in some pretty queer corners of the Empire." Braithwaite grinned broadly beneath his beard. "When you might have to skin and butcher a camel on five minutes notice, you start taking an interest in what's inside. When I got home I joined one of them scientific clubs, learned some anatomy, zoology and such. Reckon I know my way round most of the animal kingdom by now."

"So how'd you reckon a bear ended up here?"

"Probably Cullen." Braithwaite glanced back at the ambassador. "He's pulled some funny stunts in his time. Shipping in strange plants and animals or bits of exotic machinery, whatever takes his fancy. There's at least three half-assembled breweries lurking round his place, and we had a wild lion 'til some poor bugger got his arm ripped off collecting its dung. Have you seen the ostrich pen? I like guano



as much as the next man, more than my wife thinks I should, but you wouldn't catch me keeping those buggers if their shit were made of gold."

"So he got a bear for the dung?"

"That or the hunting. You don't get much excitement round here if you don't make it yourself."

Dirk shook his head. Cullen seemed a pretty sane guy, as Englishmen went. Now he was starting to sound like a crazy old uncle or some inbred Prussian aristo, lurching from one obsession to the next. How did that fit with what he'd seen the other night? The whole of Hakon was crowded with oddities. Logic said there had to be a pattern, so what was it?

A distraction was what it was. Not the thing they'd come here for, and certainly not what he should think about now.

"Another thing." Braithwaite kept his voice low. "Have you seen the size of the plants around here?"

Something stirred in the bushes up ahead. Dirk pulled out the hunting rifle holstered at his horse's side. It was a fancy looking breach loader, with a long polished barrel and carved hard-wood stock, but unwieldy and without much stopping power. Against a bear in the jungle, Dirk wished he'd brought his Gravemaker. It might not have the range, but it'd brought down bison, a rhino and, one time, giant rats.

A branch swung up. There was a flash of brown fur. Dirk snapped the rifle up and fired.

The gunshot cracked like thunder through the jungle, waves of noise sending birds flying from their roosts. A pack of monkeys swung away in howling terror. For a moment Dirk saw a small body fall through the leaves, a half-eaten banana tumbling from its hand, and he felt a pang of sadness. Then there was a roar behind him.

He turned to see the bear burst out of the greenery behind Hasegawa Minoru, a bloodstained whirlwind of hungry muscle and razor edges. The Chinaman raised his hands as the beast leapt, claws bared, ready to deal out death.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Scars.**

It wasn't just a roar. It was the ancestor of all roars, hurtling out of the primal past, clawing ragged across the mind. Deep inside Dirk's unconscious a small, frightened fragment of his animal ancestry trembled and cowered away from the noise.

The bear charged towards the back of the party in heavy bounds, dirt flying as its paws tore the ground. Mouth gaping wide, blood drooling from its jaws, it leapt at Hasegawa Minoru.

Minoru ducked and twisted, rolling out of the saddle. One hand shot up, brushing against the bear as it hurtled over him. Minoru's horse, momentarily

frozen in panic, now bolted into the trees. The oriental, one hand grabbing at a stirrup, was dragged away through the leaf-mould, his wife galloping after him.

The rest of the horses whinnied and scattered, fleeing the stinking mass of fur and muscles that had appeared in their midst. Most of their riders went with them, hanging on for dear life.

The gun tumbled from Dirk's hand as he fought to keep his steed under control, while Timothy, already on the floor, fumbled for his experimental rifle.

The only ones who had control of their horses were Isabelle and Braithwaite.

Isabelle still held a rifle, and she fired it straight into the body of the onrushing bear. But the bullets didn't even slow the beast. As her horse reared up in panic the bear swung a massive paw, gutting the steed. Dropping the rifle, Isabelle leaped for an overhanging branch and scrambled into the safety of the treetops.

The sight of its stablemate being eviscerated was too much for Braithwaite's horse. Even as the Yorkshireman brought his gun around, the animal whinnied in terror and galloped off into the trees, taking him cursing and swearing with it.

Cullen had been flung from the saddle. He lay groaning at the base of a tree, blood seeping from a gash in his forehead. His eyes flickered on the edge of consciousness. The bear prowled towards him, eyes glittering, breathing the salt smell of the injured man. Its breath came in rasping growls.

Dirk leapt to the ground, reaching for his boot-knife even as he landed. The bear ignored him as he stalked towards it, accompanied by the "chuggachuggachugga" of Blaze-Simms furiously pumping a lever on his gun.

Bekoe-Kumi appeared in the space between Cullen and the bear, machete in her hand. She swung the blade around, batting the bear's claw aside but failing to draw blood. The bear roared and swung at her with both arms. She ducked one but the other caught her shoulder. With a dreadful crunch she was thrown to the floor, her arm twisted unnaturally beneath her.

The bear sniffed the air and turned back towards the bleeding Cullen, eyes gleaming with the madness of fixation. It paused for a moment over the injured governor, watching as he turned his head with broken, twitching movements. It snorted and raised a paw, sunlight glinting off claws as it prepared to strike.

Dirk leapt.

Fur filled his senses as he landed on the bear's back - the smell of it, the sight of it, the coarse strands of it between his fingers. He grabbed with one hand and pulled hard. Bellowing, the beast swung its head back, even as his knife hit its shoulder. He plunged the blade through layers of tough, writhing muscle, the edge scraping against bone. The bear howled as he pulled the blade free and drove it in again - once, twice, three times, blood flying in long red spatters.

Twisting its head around, the bear snapped at Dirk with jaws like a steel trap. Rattlesnake fast, he jerked his arm back to avoid having it ripped off and the knife, slippery with blood, slid from his grasp. The beast reared up on its hind legs, almost throwing him. In desperation he swung one arm around its neck, and then the other, gripping his own wrists and tugging hard against its throat. The creature wheezed and staggered back, one fore-leg hanging blood-soaked and useless, the other trying to swat the giant fly clinging to its back.

Triumph rose up within Dirk. But it was knocked from him, and his breath with it, as he was slammed against the trunk of a tree. The bear leaned back, crushing

him between its weight and the towering palm. Squeezing as hard as he could at the bear's neck, he tried to strangle it before it could suffocate him. Man and bear grunted in unison as they threw the last of their strength into the fight. But try as he might, Dirk couldn't breathe. Black spots danced across his vision. His ears filled with a roaring that wasn't all bear. Head spinning, he felt his grip loosening, his muscles falling limp as his eyelids drooped and he sank back into...

*Whump!*

Something spattered across his face, strangely comforting in its soft warmth. The pressure on his body lessened and then disappeared entirely as the bear slumped to the ground, and Dirk with it.

A glorious rush of air flooded his lungs. Though his head still ached, the black spots had vanished, and the roaring with them. Staggering to his feet, he looked down in bewilderment at the headless bear.

"Did you see!" Blaze-Simms appeared at his shoulder, a grin splitting his face. Green smoke drifted from the barrel of his rifle. "And look there!"

The tree against which Dirk had been pressed now featured a hole half an inch across, smoothly bored all the way through to the far side. It was spattered with brain.

Dirk ran a finger down his face. It came away unpleasantly sticky.

"You shot right by my head." He didn't like feeling angry. The loss of self-control could lead to bad places. But right now, the feeling was hard to resist.

"That's right!" Blaze-Simms waved his gun. "Splendidly accurate, isn't it?"

"You shot right by my head." Dirk fought to keep his voice calm. "Not knowing how accurate your gun would be. Or how destructive. Or a hell of a lot else about how it would work."

"And it worked out splendidly." A little of Blaze-Simms's good cheer seemed to seep away. "I say, is something the matter?"

"You could have blown my head off, you goddamn lunatic!" Dirk bellowed. He took a deep, panting breath. That hadn't been the right thing to do, but he felt a lot better.

"I'm so sorry." Blaze-Simms looked crestfallen. "I didn't think..."

"I know, Tim." Calmer now, and feeling a little guilty for the upset he'd caused, Dirk patted his friend on the shoulder. "You never do. But it worked out in the end."

"It did rather, didn't it?" Blaze-Simms's brow furrowed. "I really am sorry, old chap. Are you frightfully peeved?"

"I'll get over it." Dirk shook his head. It was hard to stay mad at someone like Timothy Blaze-Simms. There was too much of the charming, innocent child about the guy - not an ounce of ill intention, and every desire to do better, however hard he sometimes failed. "This critter seem odd to you?" He prodded at the bear with his riding boot.

Timothy scratched his head in thought, all signs of distress gone as curiosity took over. "It's a bear on a tropical island. That's odd. And it is unusually large, even for a bear..."

Dirk pointed at the spot where his knife had gone in. Exposed muscles still twitched and writhed, severed ends lashing out of the wound like blood-engorged worms. As one, both men knelt and touched the bear's back.

“Damn thing’s squirming like a sack full of snakes.” Dirk raised an eyebrow. “What do you reckon is causing that?”

Blaze-Simms shrugged. “A number of conjectures spring to mind, but I think dissection is the way to...”

Cullen groaned as Bekoe-Kumi tried to lift him with her good arm. Timothy continued talking, caught up in his thoughts about the bear. Not for the first time, Dirk decided to just leave him to it.

At Dirk’s approach Bekoe-Kumi reluctantly stepped aside, letting him pick up the injured governor.

“C’mon.” Dirk easily lifted Cullen, cradling him like a baby. “Lets go get some help. The scientist and the grizzly are gonna be a while.”

As he spoke, Isabelle landed gracefully on the ground beside him and picked up her rifle.

“Would you like some company?” She tucked back a loose strand of hair and checked the chamber of the gun. This was a side of her Dirk hadn’t seen before, and made him smile despite his injuries.

“You up to protecting him if anything else comes around?” He nodded toward Blaze-Simms.

“I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman.” Isabelle took an ammunition belt from the saddle of her dead horse and wrapped it around her waste. “But I have twenty-five rounds and a good eye for details. We will be fine.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The hunting party had scattered and the horses with them. Dirk couldn’t blame the beasts, or even their riders. That bear would have given a rhinoceros a heart attack, there was no good reason for innocent animals or their soft living owners to stick around and get themselves mauled. But that created a problem for those left behind. Miles from the mansion, without help or horses, and with a man badly in need of medical care, they were reduced to marching through the jungle, heading as quickly as they could toward the nearest settlement. Fortunately for Dirk, Bekoe-Kumi knew the island, and she knew the quickest route to help. Unfortunately, that meant an hour of dense undergrowth, boiling heat and swarming mosquitoes.

One good thing about the journey was that it let him walk off the last of his anger at Blaze-Simms. Leaving the Englishman behind left him free to mutter darkly about lunatic inventors, venting his frustration as he stamped through the undergrowth. The strange looks Bekoe-Kumi shot his way didn’t bother him, and she assured him that any threats would have been scared off by the bear’s roaring, leaving Blaze-Simms safe to play with the corpse. The thought of Isabelle and her gun was added reassurance.

At last they emerged from the jungle on a valley side, looking down across fields of vegetables to the small port below. A couple of locals, bare to the waist and sweating in the midday sun, were busy planting yams in soil grey with guano. Seeing Dirk’s burden, one of them ran ahead while the other led them down the track into town.

Freeport was a colonial settlement in the traditional style, not planned and built by design but laid down over years like silt in a river. A seafront hotel sat amid a

thick crust of warehouses. Behind them a drift of makeshift workshops and shanty cottages became increasingly ramshackle and dispersed as they receded into fields and jungle. The settlement didn't so much end as fade out, becoming one with the undergrowth somewhere up the valley side.

Cullen was a dead weight in Dirk's arms. The governor's breath was irregular, broken by coughing spasms. His eyes had rolled back in his head, white orbs showing beneath flickering eyelids. Arms and legs hung limp and useless as a new-born baby. His pants were damp as a baby's too, but at least they didn't smell so bad.

Dirk hated that the most. The moment when the scent of blood was overwhelmed by the stench of loosened bowels, and you tried not to show the guy you knew he was dying. He'd been through it on a cold night on the plains, while the footfalls of braves whispered out of the darkness, and three times in one day on that shot-blasted hillside north of Washington.

Shifting Cullen in his arms, he tried to keep this sack of fragile humanity from slipping through his grasp. Normally he'd have had no problem, but normally he hadn't been wrestling a bear. His arms ached and his bruised chest sang with pain where the governor pressed against it.

They'd reached enough houses to be called a street when folks came rushing out to meet them. Four men in patched trousers, their flesh worn but their stance proud, slid Cullen onto a stretcher, stained canvas sinking beneath his weight, and left him to their shoulders. Relieved of his burden but still concerned for his unconscious host, Dirk followed them.

Now that he was in among the buildings, they reminded Dirk of towns on the western frontier, places with names like Hanging Rock, Deadwood and Tombstone. The closer they got to the heart of the place, to the space where outsiders might go, the grander the fronts of the buildings became, while what lay behind remained as cheap and shabby as ever. But the air stayed clear, even for a coastal town, without the sewage smell of civilisation. The care these folks took over their town seemed at odds with the cheap, rickety state of the buildings. Dirk figured care could only do so much.

The marketplace was bright with yellow ears of corn and the red-green skin of mangoes. Dirk stared at the crops, huge and healthy at the wrong time of year. No-one else seemed amazed at the sight, so he set the observation aside and moved on.

Around the edges of the market, old women sat on worn carpets selling battered tools, driftwood furniture and threadbare sheets, detritus lost or abandoned by passing ships, neighbouring islands and Hakon's white inhabitants. Too old to work the fields, they sifted through what others threw away, mended it and bartered it for enough food to see them through their final years.

Many of the market stalls were sheltered by awnings rigged out of sheets and canes. The stretcher bearers stopped in front of the sturdiest shelter, walled on three sides with thick blue wool that blocked out the sunlight, creating a pool of darkness amid the market's bright bustle. They lowered Cullen to the ground and stood back.

A hand reached out of the darkness, brown skin spotted white and purple with chemical stains. Bleached finger tips brushed Cullen's face and he murmured, turning unconsciously to the hand for comfort.

"Omalara told him be careful in the jungle, but he don't listen."

A face emerged, disembodied against the darkness, round features topped with a yellow headscarf. A face Dirk had seen once before, conspiring with Cullen in the back passages of the governor's mansion. Eyes of sparkling darkness passed over Bekoe-Kumi and locked onto Dirk. He felt a chill. Whatever was happening here, he was suddenly one step closer to the heart of it.

"What happened?" she asked, and as an afterthought, "Sir?"

Omalara's hands danced over Cullen's body as she listened to Dirk calmly describing the bear attack. He'd given dozens of reports on acts of violence in the past, whether on the battlefield or while investigating a crime. It wasn't hard to stay matter-of-fact.

She asked questions about the way Cullen fell, the angle he'd lain at, how long since the attack. Hands like leather raised a damp cloth to the governor's brow, mopping away sweat and blood with maternal tenderness. She pulled back a flickering eyelid to peer at the pupil beneath, prodded swiftly and expertly at his wounds, turned the angle of his shoulders so that he settled back and the rasping of his breath eased. Then she disappeared again into the darkness, emerging with pestle and mortar and a palm-frond basket of dried herbs.

"Omalara'll tend to Mister Governor's wounds," she said, dropping leaves and seeds into the bowl. A fresh, sweet scent rose as she pounded them. "Ubu Peter, he show you the town while you wait, sir. Make sure you not missing your tourist time."

One of the stretcher bearers stepped forward and nodded to Dirk. He was younger than the others, shaved bald on top, with a body like a Greek statue. Dirk could see there was nothing he could do for Cullen that the old woman couldn't do a hundred times better, so he let himself be led away between the market stalls.

They walked towards the docks, a small cloud of children flurrying like dust in their wake, pointing in open curiosity at the large, blood-stained white man.

"Stop your rudeness." Ubu Peter frowned at the children. "That any way to treat the governor's guest?"

They backed away but continued to giggle and stare from outside the range of Ubu Peter's attention.

"I'm sorry for their rudeness," he said to Dirk. "Not many white men come to our market, or to town on foot."

"Don't worry." Dirk was struck by Ubu Peter's educated way of talking, the clear tone of his voice. Ashamed as he was to make assumptions because a black man talked well, it seemed out of place here, all the more so compared with Omalara. Curiosity came to the fore once more - it was time to dig a little. "I ain't gonna get offended at a bunch of kids starin' at the stranger. It ain't like there's a whole lot else going on around here, right?"

Ubu Peter's eyes narrowed in a moment of suspicion, giving Dirk all the confirmation he needed. If this guy knew that his question was loaded then the island's secret went beyond the governor and the old lady.

"I grew up in a place like this." Dirk touched his injured shoulder. It hurt like hell, but the secrets around Omalara had put him off asking for her help. So he kept on walking, talking so as to stop himself gritting his teeth. "It's the sort of place folks in the States call a one horse town. 'Cept around here it's more of a one town island. Not much excitement for a youngster."

Ubu Peter's expression softened and he smiled in a way that, in any other context, Dirk would have taken as patronising. "We keep them busy. Hakon has its own excitements."

He pointed towards the near end of the docks, where a weathered heap of skulls stood - an aging, bleached pile like a morbid pyramid. As they came close, Dirk saw that they were all human, a hundred mementoes of the long dead, some fractured or pierced, those at the bottom of the heap spattered with lichen.

"That is how things used to be." Ubu Peter looked solemn. "The strong crushed the weak, the powerful the powerless. Traders at the top, beating the slaves, keeping them in place. Then the strong slaves below them, keeping the weak in line for their masters and themselves. On down through layers of pain, to the children snatched from the African coast and dragged through here for sale. At every level, 'examples' were made. Some were more guilty than others, but in a time like that, when all you have for power is fists and anger and sharp words, no-one stays innocent for long."

"And now?"

"What do you think, Mr Dynamo?"

Dirk hadn't given his name since he came to town. No matter what novelty he had for the children, Ubu Peter had known he was coming.

They strolled along the docks, his guide pointing out what passed for the sights of Freeport, mostly the warehouses and ships of guano companies. As they were walking, a barge drifted into the bay and bumped up against one of the ships, a cloud of grey dust rising from both. Men scrambled over the smaller vessel, cloths over their mouths, skin mottled white by their cargo. They filled buckets with guano, white men on the deck above hauling the precious waste into their hold for its journey to Europe.

"How are things for the black man in America?" Ubu Peter watched his countrymen shovel the same shit that smeared their skin.

"They ain't in chains any more." Dirk had played his own small part in that, but he wasn't sure he felt pride in it. The business had been so bloody, the price so high, that however righteous the result he could only feel regret.

"They are free, like us?" Ubu Peter asked.

"Damn straight they are." Something about the tone of the question put Dirk on edge, as if a doctor were prodding at a painful wound. "Plenty of good men died making sure it happened."

"So now, for you, slavery is fixed?"

"Unless I got two more scars and five less buddies for nothing, hell yes it's fixed."

Ubu Peter had that look on his face again, the soft, secret smile that unsettled and infuriated Dirk, making him want to shake the man and find out what the hell he was missing. But this was his host in a foreign town, not some stranger in a bar, so he kept his cool and kept walking, trying to fathom it in his mind.

Something about the island, its people, its history, maybe something about Dirk himself, it amused Ubu Peter. Did he think this place was somehow superior? Because Dirk didn't see much to be superior about. Maybe it was the sort of twisted superiority he'd seen in some Confederate officers at the end of the war, the inner victory of knowing you were right even when the world had gone so very wrong.

With slavery at the front of his mind, he looked again around the bay. With something to connect it together, a lever to shift his perceptions, he saw details he hadn't before. Rusted remnants of chains embedded in the hotel walls. The ghosts of signs showing through faded whitewash, advertising the strength and health of their wares.

"This place was pretty big in the trade, huh?" he said.

"It was a no-place." There was an eloquence beneath Ubu Peter's accent, and a deep sense of sorrow. "Not truly Africa, nor England, nor the promised hell of the Americas. A place where slavers and merchants could do business without needing to dirty their feet on a foreign land."

The ships, like the buildings, told part of the story. Dirk had seen their like off the coast of Florida and Louisiana, old hulks whose creaking timbers once carried poor wretches through a forced Atlantic crossing. And with that realisation he saw the port through Ubu Peter's eyes, still full of oppressed blacks, their fates tied to the tools of the slave trade, and to the white men who dictated to them from the faded grandeur of the hotel. Dirk's America might have moved on, but this place was still living its history.

"Didn't a slave ship sink somewhere round here?" He lit a cigarillo, offered another to his guide.

"No, thank you." Ubu Peter waved away the cigarillo, pointed past the southern headland. "Round the coast there are two tall rocks standing out of the sea. The captain was young, the pilot foolish. They tried to sail between them, showing off their skill. But there are other rocks too, hidden below the water."

"Any survivors?"

"The crew." There was bitterness in the words.

Their route was taking them away from the docks now, back towards the market. Every person they passed Dirk pictured in chains, trapped in a hold fast filling with water as their captors left them to die. The thought made him shudder, but at least now he knew where he needed to go.

"You know if anyone's ever been out to the wreck?" he asked.

"No!" Ubu Peter looked shocked. "It is a bad place, haunted by the spirits of the ones who died. Those waters are death."

Dirk wanted to challenge his guide's mystification of a simple wreck. Important as it was to respect his host, he didn't hold with talk of spirits or of God. The beatings he'd taken when he questioned religion as a kid had made him determined to leave it behind. He embraced the rational potential of the modern age, and hated to hear smart folks slip into irrational habits. But before he could assemble the argument in his head they reached Omalara's tent and the rising sound of Cullen's voice.

"...was meant to be in a cage for experiments, not roaming the jungle."

"You asked for hunt, we gave you hunt."



“With the greatest of respect, I wanted a couple of colourful... Oh, Dynamo, you’re back!”

Stooping to peer inside, Dirk nodded to Cullen and the two women tending on him - loyal Bekoe-Kumi, looking at the patient in concern, and elderly Omalara, whose voice he’d just heard. He wished he’d had the chance to hear more of their conversation, hinting as it did at yet more secrets behind the events of the hunt. If he hadn’t been with Ubu Peter he might have stayed out of sight and listened, but there was no point skulking when you’d already been spotted.

Ubu Peter watched him with a piercing gaze, while Dirk tried to act like he’d heard nothing of the argument.

“I hear I have you to thank for my still being alive.” Cullen shifted himself up on his elbows, against the protests of Omalara and Bekoe-Kumi. His shirt had been cut away, his head and chest swathed in bandages and sharp smelling poultices.

“Tim did his share too.” Dirk tried not to think about how close that bit could have come to killing him.

“And where is Sir Timothy now?” Cullen’s ingratiating smile gave way to a wince.

“Probably back at your mansion, playin’ with the kill.” Dirk could picture staff rushing from the grand house, intent on helping the injured from the hunting party, only to find Blaze-Simms digging around in a heap of guts. He hoped they’d have the sense to drag both the Englishman and the bear home. “We should head back too, let them know you’re OK.”

Cullen paused long enough for Omalara to give an almost imperceptible nod.

“You’re right,” he said. “After all, it’s nearly time for tea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The mirror above Dirk’s dresser had an ornate frame of gilt fruit and leaves. Like other decorations in the upper part of the house it looked like the handywork of someone who knew Europe second-hand through the extravagant trappings of her empires, and who was trying to imitate that culture without seeing what lay behind it. The leaves were a strange mix of oak and jungle fronds, the clustered fruits mangoes and blackberries. In its mismatched flora, it achieved an exoticism and travelled diversity that at once exceeded and undermined the world-spanning grandeur of its glittering antecedents.

In the centre of this magnificence Dirk saw himself, dirty and battered. He fumbled with worn fingers at the buttons of his stained shirt, revealing a chest so bruised it was more blue than pink, crushed the colour of ripe berries by the bear.

Wincing at every movement, he hung his shirt over the back of a chair next to his holstered Gravemaker. Tomorrow it was coming with him. It didn’t matter if they were shopping for coconuts, he wasn’t going anywhere without the pistol. Whatever crazy critter the island flung at him next, there’d be no messing around with knives and strangulation and Timothy’s new-fangled gun. The damned thing was getting a dose of honest to goodness lead.

Not that his plans for tomorrow involved much time on the island. He’d talked with Blaze-Simms and Mrs McNair since getting back to the house, and they’d settled on a plan. Timothy had been excited about the bear, its body distorted by some compound that stimulated constant muscle growth. He’d wanted to go

hunting again, see if he could find more critters like it. But he was easily excited, and when Dirk shared what he'd learned about the wreck Blaze-Simms's excitement turned that way instead. The inventor wanted to try out some new diving kit he'd made, and if that brought his attention back to what they'd come here for then Dirk was happy to help out.

Tomorrow was a day for treasure hunting.

Night drifted in through an open window, a medley of cricket song and bat cries. The warm scents of the day had faded from the air as jungle flowers closed up against the darkness, leaving the freshness of leaves and lawn and an inescapable acrid hint of ageing bird shit.

Dirk settled on the edge of the bed, carefully stitching up a tear in his shirt. He'd had a hell of a time getting needle and thread. The servants had fallen over themselves to fix the shirt for him, and he'd had to shout to get what he wanted. He'd been patching his same three shirts for years, he didn't need someone else doing it now.

The shouting had thrown him. Hearing his voice echoing back across the kitchen, like some lazy aristocrat screaming the servants into line. It was no way to treat anyone, never mind real workers. But he'd felt so frustrated. The feeling had been building for a while, at least since the bear. He'd just been so damned stupid, letting it trap him against the tree, grating him on the bark like a giant pink fruit. He should have jumped clear and grabbed a weapon, or scrambled up and gone for the eyes. Instead, Blaze-Simms had had to rescue him from his own screw-up. Next time, he'd know better. Next time he'd...

A scream pierced the stillness of night. Not pausing to think, Dirk rushed onto the landing, listening as another shriek tore the air. It was coming from Isabelle's room. He grabbed the handle but it was locked.

"Mrs McNair?" He hammered at the door. "Mrs McNair? You need help?"

The only answer was another drawn-out scream.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Runners Under Starlight.**

The door burst open beneath Dirk's shoulder, pain flaring from his injury as the door crashed back against the wall. Isabelle stood in her night-dress by a four-poster bed, pointing a purse-sized pistol at the floor-length window. Her mouth hung wide as she drew breath for another scream.

Dirk crossed to the window in four swift strides and gazed out into darkness.

"What happened?" he asked.

"There was a face." Isabelle steadied herself on one of the bedposts. She looked surprisingly calm for a woman disturbed in her bedroom. "It appeared out of nowhere, just staring at me through the window."

"What did he look like?" He couldn't see any sign of a face, or much of anything else out there in the dark.

“Black, with pale eyes.” There was something in Isabelle’s face that Dirk couldn’t quite read, like she was more intent on his reaction than on the intruder.

Blaze-Simms dashed through the door, tie hanging loose, walking stick raised ready for action. A box hung in his other hand, gears and levers protruding from a hole in its case, a lead running from it to the walking stick. He saw Dirk, stern and bare-chested, and stopped.

“I say, what’s going on?” A gear fell from the gadget, started rolling across the floor and then changed direction, heading straight toward the lowered walking stick.

“One of the servants, maybe?” Dirk ignored him, still focused on Isabelle.

“Not that sort of black.” She shook her head. “Pitch black, with pale eyes.”

Dirk pushed the window open, stepped through it onto a balcony. No-one was there. He peered over the edge, saw no-one on the ground below or clinging to the rails. Further balconies to left and right were equally empty. He stared out over the grounds. Was that movement at the lawn’s edge? Looked like a couple of figures heading into the jungle.

He spun around, ready to dash back through the house. But something above the window drew his eye.

Caught by the light shining out of Isabelle’s room, a shadow clung to the wall. A frozen pool of midnight black, staring down at him through a pale slit around a pair of twinkling eyes.

“Holy...” Dirk reached into the space beneath his left arm, found neither holster nor gun. “Damn.”

The black figure skittered across the wall, human in shape but spider-like in agility, then dropped into the darkness around the base of the mansion. Cursing again, Dirk vaulted over the rail. The veranda roof sagged as he landed on it with a thump. Feet sliding out beneath him, he tumbled over the edge and onto the gravel drive. A painful tingling told him he’d scraped his arm on the rough boards.

Leaping to his feet, Dirk glanced around. A deeper darkness, almost invisible under starlight, was rushing across the night-blackened lawn. He dashed after it, over the rough crunch of gravel and then the soft spring of well-manicured grass. His foot caught in a croquet hoop and he launched it forwards with a flick of his leg. The spinning metal clipped the edge of the running shadow but it kept moving, leading Dirk into the jungle.

The darkness was deeper beneath the trees, grey patches of starlit ground broken by tall palms. Dirk halted, peering through the foliage. Fronds swayed in the night wind, the lungs of the jungle lifting as it breathed. He crept forward, straining to hear anything other than the rasp of crickets. The snap of a twig made him jump, whirling around before he realised it had come from beneath his feet. Shifting deeper into the shadows, he skulked like a predator through the foliage, looking for any clue that his prey had passed.

Something hissed through the air. Dirk dived and a glistening disk buried itself in the tree behind him. He scrambled for cover, more razor-edged circles spinning into the ground where he had been.

“Dynamo!” Blaze-Simms’s crystal tone cut through the night. “I say, Dynamo, are you in there?”

The Englishman was silhouetted against a break in the tree-line, his experimental rifle pointing into the deeper darkness.

“Dynamo?” he called out again.

Dirk leapt, grappling Blaze-Simms to the ground as something hissed past their heads. The gun went off with a loud whump and a crack of bullets hitting tree-trunks. Then silence.

“What was that?” Blaze-Simms whispered.

“Shuriken,” Dirk replied.

“Any more to come?” Blaze-Simms was wriggling beneath him, trying to peer out. “I left my Nocturnal Visual Stimulator back in Manchester.”

“Your what?”

“Night vision monocle.”

“Oh.” Dirk shook his head. Blaze-Simms had brought his clockwork sheet straightener and a miniature steam turbine, but not a night vision monocle. They needed to have a talk later about packing for expeditions.

He grabbed a branch and waved it above his head. Nothing moved. A cricket, silenced by the sounds of violence, recommenced its rasping song.

“Reckon that’s it.” Dirk’s relief didn’t quite chase away the tension of their situation.

“Do you think I bagged the blighter?” There was an eagerness in Blaze-Simms’s voice.

“We’d have heard the body fall. Reckon he’s made his escape.”

“Shame.”

Dirk lay listening. Not the faintest footfall or rustle of foliage gave away the path of their assailant’s flight.

“Dirk, old chap?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you mind moving? The gun’s pressing somewhere rather delicate.”

Warily, Dirk rose to his feet, turning his head as he listened to the noises of the night. Their attacker walked as silent as a ghost, but that didn’t mean there weren’t any clues. The jungle was alive with nature, the rattling of insects, the shriek of bats, the rustle of leaves where other things stalked. But it was quieter in one direction than others, as if its inhabitants were hiding from an unfamiliar and menacing beast.

“This way,” Dirk whispered.

The jungle floor was soft beneath his bare feet, a mulch of moss and rotting leaves. Fronds brushed his skin, sensation heightened by the still darkness.

Creeping through the jungle with Blaze-Simms in tow was like going to a funeral with a small, well-intentioned child. He tried hard to blend in and not be heard, but he didn’t quite get it, and he couldn’t help but make some noise. If the tables had been turned, if they’d been the ones trying to evade the ninja’s pursuit, Dirk might as well have lain down on the ground and bared his neck for the blade. But a predator could afford to be less subtle than its prey.

Flanked by the slow sway of trees dancing in the warm Atlantic wind, they stalked a trail of silence. Insects chased each other through the night and Dirk felt the prickle of tiny legs against his bare chest. For all that he swatted away, more kept coming, colonising his skin with suckered feet and probing tongues.

Their path took them away from the house for an hour or more, until there was another change in the texture of the sound around them. Up ahead, the zone of silence they had been pursuing was replaced by a murmur of humanity, rising in volume as they approached. Fragments of amber light flickered between the trees, accompanied by voices arguing in the local dialect.

They crept closer to the noise, Dirk taking care to always keep tree trunks between them and the source of the light. At last they found themselves peering through a fat, rubber-leaved bush at the source of the noise.

A low bonfire of split logs cast a warm glow across a wide clearing. Dozens of locals sat cross-legged around it, listening to two of their number argue across the heart of the fire. Dirk recognised the statuesque form of Ubu Peter, his guide from earlier in the day, gesticulating wildly toward a younger, leaner man who was rubbing his head in exasperation as he spoke. At first they seemed wild and furious. But after a few minutes Dirk saw a rhythm to the back and forth, a pattern like an old familiar dance. One man offered a swift stab of query, the other a lengthy, audience-pleasing response, and then the roles reversed, the questioner now the questioned, his focus not on reasoning with his opponent but on swaying the crowd, who were clearly enjoying the spectacle, signalling approval or approbation with the movement of their heads. Every so often they pounded the ground in applause at a point well made.

“I say,” Timothy whispered, “I haven’t seen such a jolly debate since Eton.”

There were several familiar faces in the crowd, servants from the party, more relaxed now without tailcoats and bow ties.

Across the clearing, Dirk saw a shadow shift, the silhouette of a tree trunk blowing the opposite way from its neighbours. The ninja was also watching their hosts at play.

At length the discussion ended amid much applause. Ubu Peter bowed at his opponent, who raised his hands in acknowledgement of victory. They both received pats on the back and praise as they sat down. Then a third figure raised a withered arm, and silence fell.

“Friends, you all practised your good arguing.” Omalara was the first speaker to use English. She leaned on a younger woman for support. “Done your rhetoric like the lesson plan says, even though we out of the big house and practising in the night on account of our guests. And now’s time for English lesson. Ain’t in the plan, Omalara knows, but we got our public face here, and he don’t talk our tongue good as we talk his. So you listen to him first, then you show how well you learn.”

Omalaria turned to her left and Governor Cullen stepped forward into the firelight, his usually smiling face crumpled in a frown. Bekoe-Kumi stood beside him, a muscular pillar of support, and Cullen leaned in towards her with an easy intimacy unusual in any Englishman. When he stumbled and leaned on her bandaged arm she showed no pain, but instead concern for him. They made a strange pair, a heavily bandaged white man publicly supported by an African woman. Their audience did not seem to mind, smiling warmly at them both.

“Friends.” Cullen’s voice sounded harsh after the smooth lilt of the Africans. “Honoured council. Thank you for taking the time to listen to your humble servant.

"We face a difficult decision. As you know, we currently have three guests staying at the mansion. It now appears that they are some sort of investigators. Whether they came to investigate our situation, the wreck off Reinhart's Spur, or something else entirely I don't know, but their suspicions about us have been roused. Through an act of foolishness earlier today, we have let them get hold of the body of the bear."

"Act of foolishness?" The young man who had been debating with Ubu Peter was on his feet. "You the one who took them hunting."

"Well you're the one who let that blasted experiment out, Felipe." Cullen's face crumpled in fury. "You could have picked any animal in the enclosures, but no, you had to pick the most malformed, over-developed specimen in the whole growth project."

"You just angry 'cause you was too slow to get outta the way." Felipe grinned with cruel amusement.

"Too slow? That thing's a monster!"

"Monster you helped make. Jus' like all th'other craziness."

"The difference being, I've kept our guests away from the other craziness." Cullen waved a finger at him, like a teacher telling off a rowdy pupil. "They have not been near the laboratory, the pens, even the palm groves. The closest they've been to a super-guano growth is a giant carrot the cooks chopped up extra small to put in their dinner. Then you go and let the bear out!"

"Hush now." Ubu Peter was on his feet, a placating presence between Felipe and Cullen. "Friend Felipe, friend Reginald, be calm. So they've seen the bear. What does it matter? What we have here is not about those things. We can explain them away, be rid of them if need be. We will still have what we are about. Our way of life is secure."

Astonished wonder brought a smile to Dirk's face. This island was no mere colony, with a governing elite oppressing the working masses. It was an experiment in equality, socialism secreted behind the veil of empire. Twenty years since Europe had last tried to throw off the shackles of its old elite, a century since his own country had set itself free, and yet this was the most radical movement he had ever seen. He wished he could share this moment with the small boy he'd once been, kept down by fists and tradition, longing for a fairer world.

Not just that, but these people had created the extraordinary jungle in which they thrived, were finding ways to make their world a better place. If he hadn't been worried at how they'd react to being spied on, Dirk would have leapt from the bushes and praised them all as humanity's best hope.

"It's not that simple." Cullen shook his head. "Blaze-Simms is a noted scientist. Dynamo's a private investigator. They won't stop with the bear, they'll want to know what's behind it. Whether they dig around now or just go home and tell their friends what they've seen, they'll draw attention to the island. We have enough trouble hiding our way of life from Braithwaite and his merchant pals. How do you think we'll cope with London's scientific establishment breathing down our necks? And how do you think they'll view all this? A crown possession taken over by native servants. The governor in league with local revolutionaries. An enclave of African socialists on British soil, growing strong on wild science and British commerce. This place will be overrun with redcoats before you can say Bonaparte."

We'll be lucky if we're only hanged, and then what happens to the great dream of self-rule? Where goes your new Africa then? We'll go from a seed of rebirth to a damp squib in the footnotes of history. All for the sake of that blasted bear."

There was a flutter of noise around the clearing as the more able English speakers translated Cullen's words for their neighbours. Hands were waving in agitation, some of them clutching knives and sticks.

Dirk tensed in the darkness, hand reaching once again for the gun that wasn't there. Scanning the jungle around him, he looked for any sign of perimeter guards or late-comers. He didn't want to be these people's enemy, but right now that was how they saw him. If someone stumbled across him and Blaze-Simms now they were as good as dead.

"Quiet." Ubu Peter raised his hands and the commotion died down. "What do you suggest, friend Reginald? You have been our cunning and cover before. How do we avoid this?"

Cullen looked around circle. Some of his audience eyed him with respect, others with wariness. What none of them showed was the deference of a native population to its colonial governor.

"Talk to them." His look was defiant. "Explain the situation. They might be sympathetic. Dynamo's a socialist, the others seem reasonable, we might—"

His words were lost amid a rising wave of outrage. If anyone agreed with him they were keeping their views well hidden. Dirk suffered the terrible sinking feeling of watching an opportunity slip out of his grasp. These folks didn't want his praise. Half of them wanted his head.

Omalara raised a withered hand and silence fell again across the clearing.

"This island is governed by reason, not braying jackals." She glared around her. "You listen to Omalara, and you listen to friend Reginald. Then you want to disagree, you do it like civilised men.

"So, who gonna be a civilised man?"

Felipe stepped forward and was acknowledged by the elder.

"Those people get back to England, who knows what they do." His expression was one of deadly calm. "Maybe they keep quiet and we keep safe. Or maybe they run tell the government and soldiers come put us in our place. Or maybe they go tell the guano men, and they come steal what we been learning. Or maybe a hundred other things, none them good.

"But it is not just about that. They came for the wreck. You think they go home without seeing that? These are white men. They will not listen when we say no."

There were murmurs of outrage around the circle now, the audience's faces creasing into angry frowns. This was how mobs started, and Dirk knew all too well how little three adventurers could do against a whole mob.

"We could at least try," Cullen said. "Ask them not to disturb the wreck. Explain our situation to them. They might not just keep quiet. They might be of help. Imagine how useful it would be to have friends in the outside world."

For a moment hope rose in Dirk, but then he saw Felipe's face, and that hope vanished like sparks rising from the fire into the night.

"We got friends in th'outside world." Felipe pointed at Bekoe-Kumi, who stiffened but stood silent. "You forget you own friends from Dahomey? You don't mean friends of th'island, you mean friends in Europe."

“Well, yes, alright,” Cullen blustered. “And is that bad?”

“Is Europe bad?” Felipe held up his hands, wrists together as if bound in manacles. “Remember the chains of our ancestors! Remember why the wreck is sacred!”

“That’s not what I...” Cullen clutched his head. “I just mean that...”

“We know what you mean. You mean it different now you people in danger.”

“I don’t...” Even by the warm glow of the fire, Cullen looked pale and worn. He shook his head as if trying to fend off a cloud of invisible flies. An end of bandage came loose, trailing down his face.

“We understand.” Ubu Peter again stepped forward, hands spread wide, gesturing for calm. “It would be sad to hurt these people who have done us no harm. They do not seem cruel or wicked. One of them saved your life. But Felipe is right. They are not likely to listen to us. They will go to the wreck and disturb the spirits of the lost. If they go home they will tell the English what they have seen here. For the good of the island, they cannot leave.”

“How are you going to stop them?” From somewhere inside, Cullen found one last burst of strength, trembling with pain and passion as he spoke. “Steal their boat? They’ll get passage on a guano ship. Persuade them that they’d like to spend the rest of their lives in Hakon? These people have jobs, families, friends, they won’t want to stay on this god-forsaken cluster of rocks. Lock them up in the cellar? I don’t believe for a minute that you can bear to see other people in chains.”

“For your sake we will talk to them first, governor.” There was an edge to the way Ubu Peter said that final word, a deliberate reminder of Cullen’s status. “But if that does not work, you know what we must do.”

He turned solemnly to speak to the whole gathered group.

“For all our sakes, these people will die.”

## **Chapter 7**

### **The World Turns.**

“Mr Dynamo,” Isabelle exclaimed as Dirk burst through her door for the second time that night. “While your appearance is not without a rugged appeal, it would be polite to knock.”

Dirk opened the curtains and peered out onto the balcony, checking for any sign of intruders, ninja or otherwise. Intruders other than himself, he thought after a moment. He saw nothing but his own ghostly reflection and the swaying jungle.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” he said, “but something’s come up.”

He closed the curtains and turned to face Isabelle. She sat up in bed, a lamp burning at her bedside, a French novel open on her lap. Her night-dress revealed pale, slender arms. She raised one eyebrow, fingers drumming on the cover of the book. No doubting it, Mrs McNair was damned pleasing on the eye, even dressed



in bedsheets and disapproval. In fact, a guilty corner of Dirk's brain figured that school-ma'am sternness was probably part of the appeal.

That and the revolver sticking out from under the book.

"What sort of something could possibly excuse intruding on a lady at this time of night?" Her voice was tinged with indignation. "Especially when you yourself are in such a state of undress?"

Dirk looked down and remembered, for the first time since the clearing, that he was naked from the waist up. Not that he wasn't happy with his chest, or willing to share it with a willing lady, but Isabelle's gaze filled him with a strange mixture of pride and awkwardness. Imminent danger was briefly forgotten as he stood, mouth flapping like a guppy, trying to recall what he'd meant to say.

Then Timothy stumbled through the door, panting for breath, and reality rushed in with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"But what about the ninja?" Isabelle snapped the lid of her travel case shut. She was dressed now, having disappeared behind a screen while Dirk and Blaze-Simms gave their explanation. Knowing she might be naked behind there had put more of a crimp in Dirk's story-telling skills than in those of the Englishman. To Dirk, class meant status and struggle. To his friend it was about poise under social pressure, even with a naked lady just out of view.

"Don't suppose you've got anythin' in dark grey?" Dirk asked. "Blends in better."

"Mr Dynamo, I am a noble daughter of England, not a footpad." Clad in black from hairpins to boot-heels, Mrs McNair was as well dressed for night-time escapades as any lady of leisure could be. True, she was no ninja, but then none of them were. "There are certain places to which fashion will not go, and dark grey, apparently like the Americas, is one of them."

"Just askin'." Dirk didn't usually much care for patriotism, any more than he did for fashion. Yet her comment had clawed him somehow, made him feel put down.

"As was I, so please tell me about the ninja."

"Lost track of him while we were watching the debate." Dirk peered once more out through the window. "Reckon he'll catch up with us later. Right now, I'm more worried about our hosts."

All was quiet in the front grounds of the governor's mansion. Of course it would be. Everything that mattered here happened around back or in the jungle, out of sight to keep it out of mind.

"How long d'you need to pack, Tim?" Dynamo asked.

"Gosh, I'm not really sure," Blaze-Simms replied. "There are usually servants for that sort of thing. Twenty minutes, perhaps?"

"You've got five."

Timothy scurried away down the corridor.

"Someone's comin'." Dirk dimmed the light and, sheltered in the shadow of the curtains, pointed out across the lawn. Two horses were approaching, shadow creatures silhouetted against the pale, starlit drive. On one a rider sat tall in the saddle, steady with pride and expert horsemanship. Reins trailed back to the other

horse, whose rider might as well have been a sack of guano, hunched limp and useless across the beast's neck.

"Who is it?" Isabelle stood beside him, gazing out through the window.

"Reckon the front one's that Dahomeyan gal," Dirk said. "Other could be Omalara or Cullen, or just a bunch of blankets for all I can tell."

She leaned forward to peer past a partition in the window panes.

"It's Reginald," she said. "Look, that's the shoulders of a man in a suit."

Dirk nodded. There was a sharpness to the edges of the shadow, the distinct lines that cut off a well-dressed European from God's world of curves and broken, irregular shapes.

Isabelle was close now. He could smell her body beneath her lavender scent. Getting up close with ladies of her class wasn't something he was used to, and it was on the distracting side. Her eyes were wide in the soft glow of the lowered lamp.

"What about you, Mr Dynamo?" she asked. "Don't you need to pack?"

"I'm always ready to go." He felt foolish for the pride he took in the words, but why not be proud of the things you were good at? "Comes from livin' so long on the road."

"You're going like this?" Her hand hovered over his chest. He could feel the air curling around her fingertips.

"How long d'you think it takes me to throw clothes on and off?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say."

Her breath brushed his skin, sending a shiver through him despite the tropical heat. The sort of thoughts it stirred weren't ones he was comfortable thinking about a married woman, but those same thoughts kept him from backing away.

"Shouldn't you be going?" Her words were no more than a whisper. "You only gave Timothy five minutes."

"That's five Blaze-Simms minutes." Dirk shook his head. "He doesn't grasp time too well. If he gets distracted with whatever's on his mind, it'll be dawn before he knows time's up."

"So we're..."

Whatever Isabelle was about to say, she didn't. Talk of Blaze-Simms was enough to snap Dirk's attention back to what mattered.

"I'll grab my boots." He took a step back. "Be ready to go."

Two minutes later, Dirk was on the landing - booted, shirted and dragging Blaze-Simms from his room. A pile of bags weighed down the Englishman, with clothes, papers and esoteric equipment protruding in every direction. His experimental gun stuck up behind him like an ornate flagpole.

"What state's the boat in?" Dirk grabbed the largest of the cases. His own luggage consisted of a single carpet bag and the pistol which was, at last, back in its space beneath his arm. He'd experienced Blaze-Simms's heavy travelling style before, weighed down by everything from callipers and microscopes to silk hankies and spare cravats, and exasperating as it was, there was no point arguing about it. If push really came to shove, if they were down to fight or flight, he trusted Blaze-Simms to cut to what was vital. It wasn't like he couldn't afford new luggage.

"The old girl's ready to go whenever we are." Blaze-Simms wriggled a kitbag up onto his shoulder, freeing up a hand for his walking stick. "The supplies should

still be fresh, and enough to last us to the next port. My dodecahedral evaporator can desalinate enough sea water for three. And there was never a chance to use the charts and diving kit, so they're still in place."

Cases almost scraping the floor, Isabelle emerged from her room. Dirk had been ready to do the chivalrous thing and take the burden, but she seemed to be coping fine. Certainly better than Blaze-Simms.

"We grab a buggy and horses and head straight for the boat." Dirk shifted his bags, getting a better balance. "Dawn can't be far off. We get round to Reinhart's Spur, do the dive, and get out onto the ocean before we're spotted by revolutionaries or ninjas or crazy mutant bears."

The others nodded.

"But before we do that," he said, "I want a word with Cullen."

A door creaked open in the hallway below. Without a word, all three of them placed their bags on the floor and reached for their weapons.

By sliding along the wall, Dirk stayed cloaked in shadows until he reached the balcony overlooking the hall. Candles fluttered, making the silhouette of the Dahomeyan statue dance against the wall, its sword rising and falling above the open front door.

Bekoe-Kumi stepped across the threshold, unbending beneath the weight of Cullen held in her arms. She strode through the room, casually kicking the door shut behind her, and disappeared beneath the stairs. Another door slammed and Dirk relaxed. He turned to Timothy.

"You fetch the buggy and get her loaded up. Mrs McNair, you're with me."

\* \* \* \* \*

The corridor towards the back of the house smelt of work. The smoke and spices of the kitchen. The damp sheets and detergent of the laundry. The polish, flour and sawdust of the storeroom. It smelt like diligence and round-the-clock labour.

But at three in the morning it was silent. No clatter of pans. No sloshing of buckets. No thump and thud of boxes and sacks. Just tidy rooms off a long, empty passage, Dirk and Isabelle's footfalls no more than whispers across the floor.

One room was different. Near the end of the corridor a door hung open. Light fell in a bright block across the darkened corridor, and the crackle of a fire crept out beneath a murmur of conversation - one voice weak, another whispering.

Dirk rounded the doorway and looked into the servants' dining room. Unlike the other rooms at the back of the house this one had windows, though they were shuttered against the night. A fire was lit in the grate, casting a rich glow across the room as it heated a pan of water.

A table ran down the centre of the room, the communal ground of the household's servants, a space of rest for those who kept the governor's house running. A place for them to share their food and thoughts in the time given to them to be themselves, those moments between serving dinner and clearing the plates, between washing the sheets and warming the beds, between the long hard stretches of living for others.

Cullen slouched at the table, looking very comfortable for a man down among the help. Not that the help were there. Most of them, Dirk was sure, were out in the jungle, continuing the council on which he and Blaze-Simms had spied. Only

regal Bekoe-Kumi was there, bathing the governor's wounds. She lingered about the task, the fingers of her free hand entwined with Cullen's own, heedless of the bandage in which her own shoulder was wrapped. It was a moment of such unexpected tenderness that Dirk was loath to break it.

Cullen saved him from the dilemma.

"What can I do for you, Mr Dynamo?" The governor's voice was weary and he seemed unable to look Dirk in the eye.

Bekoe-Kumi rose, her face hardening, her body tightening. She pulled a poker from the fire and stood between the two men, a guardian angel with a sword of red hot iron.

"You can give me some straight answers." Dirk took a step forward into the room.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, old chap." Cullen had more spirit than Dirk had realised. Even injured and exhausted he put on a good front.

"Don't be a fool, Reginald." Isabelle's skirts brushed against Dirk as she walked past him into the room. "We've seen your supposed servants. We've seen your monstrously overgrown bear. We've seen the way you carry yourself when you think there are no other Europeans around. We've only been here two days and already your charade is falling apart. You can't keep up the pretence any longer."

"Oh can't I?" Cullen laughed. "How is Mr McNair? Will we be seeing him soon? Will anyone?"

"You're right, this is about me." Isabelle rolled her eyes. "Not your African lover and her alchemist friends."

"You think you're better than me?" Bekoe-Kumi leaned forwards, her stare like a drill boring into Isabelle's brain. "Of course you do. You are white."

The look Isabelle returned was softer but just as strong. It was not a look that pierced, but one that over-whelmed, swallowing the recipient into its depths.

"I don't think that I'm better." She stood steady as the stones beneath their feet. "We are both women. We have both found strength despite the injustices brought by men." An intensity took hold of her voice. "But I have struggled all my life to get to where I am now. I have never let a man stand in my way once my course is set, and I am damned if I will let you."

The air was taut with tension, like a palm tree straining in a hurricane, a fraction of pressure away from snapping.

"I am of the ahosi," Bekoe-Kumi said. "The brides of the King of Dahomey. Do you know what that means?"

"Means the king's a pretty liberal guy." Dirk stepped between the two women. He was too world-weary to enjoy a cat-fight, even if he'd fancied Isabelle's chances. "And you're well trained in crown wearing and whatever else kings like."

Bekoe-Kumi narrowed her eyes. There was a squeal of brutalised metal as she pressed the poker point-first against the floor, its whole length buckling under her strength.

"It's not that sort of marriage," Isabelle said. "The ahosi are the king's fighting elite, married to him ceremonially rather than biblically. I met King Glele once, and he said that to be ahosi means to be more than a woman, more even than a warrior. It means to march without rest, to fight without mercy, to stand when around you is nothing but fire, and then to carry the injured men home."

Suddenly it all made sense. Bekoe-Kumi's muscled arms, her peerless fighting stance, the perfect indifference with which she watched them, ready to batter Dirk down like a hundred insolent men before. He listened to the half hoop of metal that had once been the poker, rocking back and forth on the cracked granite floor.

"That's a mighty fine thing," he said. "It's always an honour to meet someone who's made themselves best at what they do. And I've been battered so senseless these past few days, there ain't a part of me left that doesn't hurt, even before we've started fighting. But I'm an American, and you know what it means to be an American? It means not to give a crap about any of that."

"You come to our land and tell us you will do whatever you want, that you don't care what it means to us?" Bekoe-Kumi glared at him. "Felipe is right. There is only one way to stop the white man."

She snatched a knife from the table. It glistened in the firelight, a deadly point of steel driven by perfectly toned muscles.

Twisting on the spot, Dirk let the strike slide past him. He brought his fist down where she should have been, hitting only empty space. There was a hiss of severed air and he ducked, just avoiding a deadly swipe from behind. Rolling forward, he grabbed the pot from the fire, turned and came to his feet. Pan and knife clanged against each other. Boiling water steamed across the stones.

"Stop!" Cullen dragged himself to his feet, hunched over the table like a man twice his age. "If we stoop to their level what does that make us?"

His eyes sparkled with unshed tears as he pleaded with Bekoe-Kumi.

"I will not listen to the orders of a white man," she snarled.

"Then listen to the plea of a man who loves you." Cullen's voice cracked, and tears ran down his cheeks. "After everything I've lost, I can't stand to see you hurt too."

The fierce lines of Bekoe-Kumi's face soften and she hesitated. At last she stepped back, lowered the knife onto the table and went to stand behind Cullen, helping him back into his seat. But her eyes never left Dirk. Her expression was that of a prize fighter, ready to spring into action at the ringing of the bell.

Silhouetted against the firelight, Cullen waved Dirk and Isabelle into a pair of rough seats. He pulled cigars from his pocket and passed one to Dirk, setting the seal on their truce. Their faces were briefly lit by the phosphorescent flare of a match.

Both men breathed deep lungfuls of rich smoke. There was something strangely relaxing about the moment, the four of them sat companionably around a roaring fire, while the water spilled in the fight steamed away around them. Dirk was reminded of a time he'd shared a peace pipe with Indian braves out on the plains. Tobacco, it seemed, was the great healer.

"I was sent here as a punishment." Cullen took a drag on his cigar, gazing up into the blue skies of memory. "You might not think it to look at me, but I've always been something of a rebel. My father was stationed in Paris in the forties, and I was there during the revolution of forty-eight. The atmosphere that year was electrifying. All the way from Brazil to Poland, people were rising up to change the world. I was young and naive, caught up in the romance of revolutions. Even as so many were thwarted, I still believed."

“I kept believing, even as I went through Eton and Oxford, then took up a place in the diplomatic service. But my superiors eventually realised that my views were out of step. They didn’t want to make a fuss - no-one ever does, and father was well respected. So instead of firing me they sent me to the most obscure posting they could find. After all, what harm could a socialist do in Hakon?”

He chuckled, then took another drag on his cigar.

“It took me a while, after I got here, to realise anything was odd.” The far away look returned to Cullen’s eyes. “When I arrived, there hadn’t been a governor for a good five years. They hadn’t given me a secretary or an estate manager, and there was a lot to get into order. Relationships with the guano companies, visits to our neighbours, even getting myself used to the climate. I didn’t bother about the background stuff - the farmers, the dock crews, the household staff. I didn’t have to. There were no problems.”

He faltered, touching his bandaged head with a grimace. Bekoe-Kumi reached out a hand. As their fingers met, his confidence returned.

“Everything worked so damned smoothly.” His eyes followed the smoke trailing from his cigar. “I never thought about what kept it all ticking. Then one day I got up, and I did all the things one does of a morning—get dressed, eat breakfast, take a little stroll round the grounds. Everything looked well, the chaps were at their work, the house and gardens were in order.

“Then I noticed this little old lady, watching me as I took my walk. I was filled with the queerest sensation of *deja vu* and my imagination ran wild, wondering if she was a witch casting her hex on me. Finally I realised the truth of it, that I had simply been doing the same thing, day after day, for three months. Clothes laid out the same, breakfast on schedule, same chaps in the grounds on my walk, and her there, every day, watching me. That was when I knew that something wasn’t right. The estate was running like clockwork, and I wasn’t lifting a finger to make it happen. Someone was in control, and that someone wasn’t me.

“The next day I woke up early, my guts churning with tension. I was going to confront them, whoever they were. I’d be out on the lawn when that creepy old lady arrived and I’d demand some answers. I got all dressed up and wound up in my most official suit, imagining the look of shock on her face when she turned up for her spying and found that I’d got there first. I strode down the stairs, puffed up with my own smartness. But the moment I saw the hallway I deflated. There she was, waiting for me.

“That day I heard the truth.”

The words poured from Cullen like a confession. The more he talked the more he sat up straight, as if a weight had been lifted from him.

He talked about the real life of the island, as shown to him by Omalara. A commune of natives, working together to educate and advance themselves, to create a society hidden in plain sight. In the decades since the death of the Atlantic slave trade, they had fostered their own form of government, taking ideas from the Dahomeyan Great Council and creating a council for all the islanders. A government so radical it was beyond even what the young Cullen had dreamed. A council that remained free from the white man’s influence in the only way it could be - by being invisible to him.

While the European traders and administrators were around they acted like good little locals, bowing and scraping, working the land, keeping talkative children away from visitors. The white man's indifference to native Africans became an asset, visiting merchants happy to pay them no attention as long as the guano flowed. But out of sight, hidden in their homes or meeting in the depths of the jungle, they were their own masters—literate, democratic, self-supporting, independent of the white man and his reluctantly dispersed wealth. Theirs was a soft revolution, unknown and unopposed.

Suddenly, Cullen was faced with a chance to see his ideals succeed. His posting to Hakon was a dead-end promotion. Curious Cullen with his radical views had been put out to pasture before he was far past thirty. But his containment had become an opportunity. He could support these people. He could help change this small corner of the world.

So an alliance was born. Cullen became the public face of the island society, fending off awkward questions and providing access to the profits of the guano trade. He stopped talking publicly about socialism and started playing the traditional diplomat. He opened up the governor's mansion as a secret schoolhouse and home to many of the natives. He bought in books on science and engineering, the latest agricultural tools, all manner of modern machinery. Soon the island wasn't just a social experiment, it was a scientific one too. In laboratories above the stables, the best and brightest, people like Omalara, Felipe and Ubu Peter, found ways to refine and convert the guano. Their ancestors had made dozens of different preparations from the guano, and now they took that further. They created super-fertilisers and growth serums, compounds that would allow them to grow enough crops to become self-sufficient. They experimented with new chemicals, making gunpowder in case they had to defend themselves, and fuel for machines like the warrior statue. The independence and progress they had achieved only made them hungry for more.

"Is that what happened to the bear?" Dirk asked. "One of those compounds?"

Cullen nodded. "I imported animals to experiment on, to see the full effects of the chemicals. Some results were amazing, some horrifying, most short-lived. None were meant to get loose."

"Might I ask where you fit in?" Isabelle was looking at Bekoe-Kumi, who had remained silent.

"Dahomey trades with Hakon," Bekoe-Kumi said. "The king knows something of the truth. There is... unity of purpose, if not of ways. I was sent as an emissary. Perhaps that is still my place. Perhaps not."

She looked at Cullen, then down at her hands, folded in her lap.

A long silence followed. The tension that came from holding in a secret had drained out of Cullen and he sat crumpled in his seat, Bekoe-Kumi waiting patiently on his next words. The others were lost in their own thoughts, trying to process what they'd heard.

Dirk was awash with admiration. These people's purpose was so pure. To throw off their shackles not through the common approaches of protest and violence, but through learning and progress, it was a magnificent dream and an amazing reality. He wished he could stay and join their struggle, to better himself while

bettering the world around him. But there was something more at stake, something that could bring greater learning for all.

“There ain’t no reason why we’ve got to tell anyone,” Dirk said at last. “We’re here to fetch something from the wreck. You folks let us do that, we can leave you in peace, pretend all we saw was sand and sea.”

To his relief, Isabelle was nodding agreement.

But Cullen wasn’t.

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy.” The governor’s face was filled with sadness. “The wreck is very important. It’s a symbol of what this island was, of what it has become. And it’s a graveyard, filled with the victims of a most abhorrent trade, where lost spirits are supposed to roam. Even if I thought you should be allowed to go there, the others wouldn’t let you. No-one is allowed there, not even Omalara. Please, before you come to any more harm, please just go home.”

“I’m sure we can win your friends around.” Isabelle rose from her seat. “Mr Dynamo, we have a tablet to find. Shall we?”

As they stepped through the door Dirk looked back one last time. Bekoe-Kumi was holding Reginald Cullen close, cradling him against a world of pain and disappointment. She held him gently, stroking his hair and whispering soft words of comfort. But the gaze she fixed on Dirk was one of hate.

\* \* \* \* \*

With a tug on the horse’s reins, Blaze-Simms brought the buggy to a halt by the weathered pier. Dirk dropped their bags onto the sand and leapt down after them, turning to offer Isabelle a hand.

Dawn was approaching, the sky a washed-out grey, pale with excitement at the glory to come. The pier was a black path across a darkly rippling sea, their boat a vague silhouette in the pre-dawn light. Dirk listened to the lapping of waves, the thud of the yacht against its moorings, the creak of something shifting on the boards.

There were other noises too. Small, subtle noises like people made when they were trying not to be seen.

“We ain’t the first ones here.” He stepped onto the dock and the others followed him, leaving the bags where they lay.

“Hello?” Isabelle called out. “Who’s there?”

A match flared, then another, and another, lighting tar-cloth torches down the length of the pier. Beneath them stood a dozen men, Ubu Peter and Felipe among them, all carrying muskets. At Ubu Peter’s feet stood the statue that had guarded the entrance to the governor’s mansion. Its blades twitched and steam trickled from its head.

“Where are you going at this time of night?” Ubu Peter asked.

“Where d’you think?” Dirk kept his hands lowered, trying to stay calm, trying not to provoke. They’d reasoned with Cullen, maybe they could reason with these folks too.

“Tell me.” Ubu Peter’s face was still as a mask.

“The wreck.” These were good people. Dirk didn’t want to fight them, but if they were going to negotiate then it needed to be on honest terms.



“No.” Ubu Peter hefted a pick. “It is the only peace those slave’s spirits will ever have, and it is staying that way.”

“But it’s terribly important,” Blaze-Simms blurted out. “There’s a clue to the Great Library. No-one’s been there in centuries. We’ll find learning that was thought lost forever. This is your chance to be part of..”

“We will not let you near the ship.” Ubu Peter trembled with barely-contained emotion.

“I know you’re an intelligent man,” Isabelle said. “Think about the bigger picture.”

“What picture is that?” He was snarling now, unable to hold back his anger. “The picture where white devils come out of Europe, tell men what to do, drag them half way around the world to die in sweat and chains? Where they make colonies and laws, so that the land is not their own? That picture is big enough. Maybe too big.”

“We can share the knowledge we gather with you.” She held her hands wide, the very image of a peace-maker. “Imagine what your people can achieve with learning that has been lost for centuries.”

“We have enough of your learning. We do not need to sacrifice our independence to have more.”

“But your whole society is based on our learning!” Blaze-Simms was red in the face, clearly frustrated that anyone would stand in the way of learning. “Reading, writing, masonry, crop rotations, the laboratory in the barn, would you have any of that without us?”

“You think we are such savages that we would be homeless, hungry and illiterate without you?” Ubu Peter clenched his fists. “You think only a white man could learn to use bird shit? Yes, we have learned from you. Now we are finding ways to learn for ourselves.”

Blaze-Simms spluttered, dumbfounded.

“We can all learn from each other.” Isabelle’s tone was honeyed. “Surely you and Cullen have shown that. Why waste the opportunity?”

Ubu Peter stood silent a long moment. His companions shifted impatiently, twisting guns in their hands.

“Even if I agreed with you,” he said, “even if I thought your reasons were good, even if I thought that this was something more than hollow words, set to turn us from our path, still I could not let you go on.

“This is not about learning. It is not about the advancement of civilisation. It is about power. It is about white men who come into our world and think they can do as they please. That their view is more important.

“To you maybe learning is most important. Maybe what lies in that wreck is the most precious thing in the world, against which all else pales into insignificance. But to us the wreck is something else. It is a grave. It is a shrine. It is a home to hundreds, thousands, millions who have been lost to us and will never return to the light of day. You may not believe that, but we do not believe in the sanctity of your learning.

“Those who were lost shared a different view from those who took them. To the white slavers, they were not even animals. They were machines, to be worked until they broke beyond repair and then cast into the dirt. To their nations, their

villages, their families, they were people to be loved or hated, cherished or ignored, but never to be bought and sold. Did the white man's view triumph because of reason, because it was right? No. It won because of power.

"Now too, someone's view must be followed. You assume because you are white, it will be yours. I tell you now, we can not let this happen. If we do, we let your power win. We let the white man continue to hold sway in the land that is ours, land for which we have sweated and bled. This one tiny fragment of hope, where the white devil does not hold sway, will have been lost. We will not have decided our own fate. All we have worked for falls from that single point. Our faith, our power, our hope. That is too precious to be broken for your learning.

"On such moments the world turns. You will not touch the wreck."

## **Chapter 8**

### **To the Sea.**

It wasn't the first time Dirk had faced a firing line. Given the circumstances, he had a horrible feeling it might be the last. And though he didn't fear death, the thought that he might have brought it upon his friends filled him with regret. The familiar sound of Blaze-Simms shaking one of his contraptions only added to the melancholy.

"Sorry for getting you into this." Dirk looked at Isabelle, who glared back at him.

"Do you know how patronising you sound?" She shook her head. "I brought that first tablet halfway around the world, got your club involved, made sure we would come to this island. If I'm about to die, I will do so knowing that my fate was made by me and not some man."

"I just meant—"

There was a click of guns being cocked.

"Well, I'm still sorry," Dirk said.

"No need for that yet." As Blaze-Simms spoke there was a whirring sound.

Turning, Dirk saw a shimmering in the air. It expanded out from the Englishman's walking stick, forming a halo around them.

"Go on, fire!" Blaze-Simms exclaimed.

The natives looked at each other in confusion, except for Felipe. His eyes narrowed, there was a roar, and smoke belched from his gun.

The air rippled and a bullet clicked against the walking stick. More guns fired, and a moment later a dozen bullets were attached to Blaze-Simms's device.

"Mark Two Gauss Generator!" He grinned. "Far more portable than the one that burned out in Paris, but only diverts light missiles."

"Looks good to me." Dirk stretched his aching arms and tilted his head in a loose circle, warming muscles ready for a fight. One hand instinctively went for his pistol before he realised that the generator made that useless too.

The locals had abandoned their guns, picking up shovels and picks from a pile on the pier.

The statue, released from whatever order had held it in place, rushed forward. It was a foot-tall embodiment of the spirit of war, a figure of cold steel and slashing blades, charging straight at Dirk.

He pulled his leg back and kicked with all his might, hitting the body of the statue. The pain almost made him scream, booted toes slamming against the weight of metal, but it was worth it. The statue went flying, dropping into the sea with a splash and a hiss.

“Listen.” Dirk limped toward the locals. “I hear why the wreck’s important to you, but the world moves on. You can’t keep us here forever, so let us onto our boat.”

Face twisted with rage, Felipe stepped out to meet him. He yelled something Dirk couldn’t understand and lunged forward.

Years of training kicking in, Dirk ducked as a shovel swung over his head. Reaching out, he grabbed the handle, tugged his assailant forwards and onto his upraised knee. Felipe grunted and curled in upon himself. Without pausing, Dirk shoved him back into one of his comrades and turned the shovel on them, hitting both men with one swipe. One slumped to the deck while the other, reeling and clutching his face, stumbled off the pier with a splash.

As Dirk turned, Ubu Peter came towards him, pick in hand.

“We could have worked together.” Dirk hefted the shovel.

“I have seen what most white men mean by working together,” Ubu Peter said. “It is not good enough.”

Moonlight sparkled on the tip of the pick as he swung it up and over, metal spike scything toward Dirk’s head. Dirk swung the shovel up, parrying the blow and sweeping both tools around and down. They hit the ground with a crack, the pick head burying itself in the pier. Before Ubu Peter could tug it free, Dirk darted forward, both fists swinging.

Abandoning the weapon to raise his arms in defence, Ubu Peter backed off. Dodged and diving, he blocked Dirk’s blows while trying to get his own through, aiming high then low, forcing Dirk to slow his assault.

They swayed on their feet, eyeing each other like rival lions, ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness. Dirk feinted left then jumped right, reaching for the abandoned shovel. But Ubu Peter saw it coming. His foot lashed out, striking Dirk in the forearm, stunning his nerves and sending the shovel spinning into the water.

Numbness seized Dirk’s injured arm, the fingers frozen in place. Ubu Peter kicked out again, and Dirk managed to move clear just in time, feeling the breeze of the blow’s passage. His opponent was gaining momentum, shifting nimbly on his feet, pressing Dirk back with a series of swift strikes. He wobbled as his heel reached the edge of the pier. Nowhere left to go.

Taking a deep breath, Dirk leapt forward. He ignored the pain of blows battering his head and shoulders, focused on slamming his whole body against his opponent. They grabbed each other as they fell, rolling across the planks, both trying to end up on top. After a few dizzying turns Dirk found himself pinned, left arm trapped beneath him as Ubu Peter punched him repeatedly in the face.

Focusing all his will on his right shoulder, Dirk heaved his numb arm up and around, smashing it wildly against the side of his opponent’s head. Ubu Peter

sagged, his gaze became unfocused, and Dirk seized his moment. With a grunt he hurled Ubu Peter to the floor, hauled himself onto his knees and, with his good arm, delivered a knock-out blow.

Staggering to his feet, Dirk looked around. Several of their attackers were down but three remained, their backs towards him as they pressed Isabelle and Blaze-Simms back toward land. Blaze-Simms had his fists up Queensberry style and was fending off most of the attacks, but half his face was red and blood trickled from one hand. Isabelle, her skirts torn, waved a broken spade handle with exaggerated menace.

Life was returning to Dirk's his right arm. Stalking forwards, he grabbed an opponent with each hand and slammed their heads together with a resounding thud. The third man turned with a start, only for Isabelle to smash the splintered handle against the back of his head. His eyes rolled and he slumped down next to his allies.

"I see you're handy with a cudgel as well as a gun," Dirk said. "Good to know there's more to an English education than manners."

One of his teeth felt loose. He turned and spat, trying to get the taste of blood out of his mouth.

"Mr Dynamo." Isabelle frowned at the sight. "Being assailed by ruffians is no excuse for behaving like one." She flung her improvised weapon into the water and nodded toward the boat. "Shall we?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn cast a rosy glow across the taut sails as they scudded out of the harbour. Dirk watched the water peel away in miniature waves as the boat cut a course through calm blue waters. He listened to the whisper of their passage as Blaze-Simms fussed around him, tightening straps and testing seals on the diving suit in which he had Dirk trapped. It was a strange, bulbous thing, made of curved metal plates edged with rubber. The shoulders didn't fit quite right, causing the helmet to slip back and press against Dirk's face. His view was restricted to what he could see through a pair of lenses of thick, curved glass, and his own breath echoed eerily around him.

"Don't you Brits know anything about comfort?" Dirk's voice sounded hollow, trapped in the echo chamber of the helmet.

"Actually, a lot of the features are American." Timothy's muffled voice somehow made it through the suit. "Your Commodore Maury left some notes with the Club while he was in England. Loose ideas for what would help with oceanographic exploration. I've made them real."

Blaze-Simms waved a belt in front of the helmet's distorting window.

"A couple of extras, just in case." He held up a series of sheathed objects, explaining each one as he attached it to the belt. "Collapsing spade, in case the tablet's buried.

"Miniature harpoon gun, radium powered like my rifle so that it will work underwater. Should be handy if you meet sharks.

"Bowie knife, in case the harpoon fails.

"Underwater flares, magnesium and phosphorus compound with a jet funnel base. Pull the tab and release. They'll self-propel to the surface as they burn.

“Hatchet, for cutting into the wreck.

“Emergency air. Twist the tube and two compounds combine, reacting to provide oxygen through this hole for about three minutes. I have to admit, I’m rather pleased with that one. Took me hours to get the mix right.”

Blaze-Simms reached around Dirk, clipping the belt into place. Last of all he attached an empty oil-skin bag.

“For the tablet.”

Dirk clumped to the back of the yacht. Behind him there was a clatter of chains as Blaze-Simms readied the winch.

The harness tightened beneath him, lifting him from his feet and swinging him out over the water. He was overcome by a sense of unreality, hanging in mid-air, isolated from the world around him. Seagulls soared by but he couldn’t hear their shrieks or feel the wind that filled their wings. He was the epitome of humanity, cut off from nature by the products of progress. Man, perfected and alone.

He caught a glimpse of Isabelle waving and wishing him good luck. He smiled back, then remembered that she couldn’t see his face, closed in by this cage of glass and brass. He raised a hand in salute, the chain rattled and he dropped into the ocean’s embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

It didn’t feel like any kind of diving Dirk had done before. It was strange enough that he had air piped down to him, flowing over his face with each heave of his lungs, instead of having to hold his breath. But on top of that the sense of movement was completely different. Instead of propelling himself horizontally through the water, arms and legs scything through the currents, he was lowered vertically on a chain, his weight carrying him down to the ocean’s floor. He could push himself forward a little but it was hard work, his arms thick and ungainly, padded with layers of air and rubberised suit. His legs hung useless beneath him, weighed down by sturdy boots. And the sea, whose tight embrace supported and smothered a diver as he explored her depths, was now held away, close by and yet cut off.

Dirk shifted his shoulders, straining to move the helmet forward enough to get a proper view of what lay below. Sunlight, warped by the waves above, created a glowing web on the sea floor, a net through which fish happily swam. It fell across low ridges of sand, lines of hills an inch tall, shifting as the waves built them up and cast them back down.

As he settled on the bottom, sand spurted up beneath his feet, a brief murky cloud that scattered nearby fish and then fell away, the water fading once more to clear blue. Sand receded for fifty yards ahead of him before the world faded into a blue-green mass, the sea swallowing everything from view.

Dirk trudged forwards, his legs slowed by the water and the weight of the suit. One step, two, three, gaining as much momentum as he could, sand rising again behind him then settling to fill the memory of his footfalls. He leaned forwards, instinctively shifting towards a diver’s stance. But the weight of the helmet almost tipped him over and he had to stand back upright or risk falling face down on the sea floor.

Ahead, the silvery bodies of fish shimmered in the broken light as they fed on tumbling green balls of weed, darting away at Dirk's approach. They would dash out of reach, pause to watch him, then dash off again. They moved as they lived, brief and fast, rushing from one moment to another then waiting on the tide. Larger shoals swirled above and around, their many individual movements becoming a single shimmering pattern, an undersea dance whose meaning and purpose eluded Dirk.

For all the life and movement, Dirk found himself enclosed in eerie silence, the only sound his own breath making hollow circuits of the helmet.

A shape loomed out of the green gloom. Three long, straight fingers reaching towards the bright surface and sky. Beneath them two dark mounds, separated by a jagged line of sea. The wreck.

Dirk's spirits soared as he strode towards the wreck. Soon he'd hold the second piece of the puzzle in his hands, two thirds of the way to unlocking the lost secrets of Alexandria. He thrilled at the thought of what they might find. Forgotten philosophical insights of Plato and Socrates. Histories of nations now lost to memory. Designs of devices that had sat for centuries waiting to be built. The wisdom of the ancients, ready to shed light on the modern world. And he would be one of the first to read it. His head would cradle knowledge absent from the lofty spires of Oxford and Paris. He would show them that anyone could bring insight to the world, even a grubby kid from a Kentucky mining town.

No wobbly tooth could bring down his spirits now.

A shoal of fish swimming ahead of him suddenly froze. Their unity shattered as they turned and darted away from the wreck, dragging other fish in their wake. Dirk found himself alone, the only movement a few strands of weed swaying in the current.

A shadow shifted in the darkness of the wreck.

Dirk reached for the harpoon gun. It looked like Blaze-Simms had been right about the sharks.

Another shape moved at the far end of the wreck. And another. And another. Easing out of the shelter of the ruined ship, they slid across the sand - dark, indistinct forms growing in number as more appeared out of the vessel's ports and over its top deck. A shoal of shadows, ragged at their edges as the current tried to snatch them away. They seemed to glide forward without fins or limbs, but as they grew closer Dirk made out glittering eyes and pale mouths, drawn back in expressions of anguish. Faces not of fishes or sharks but of human beings. Men, women, children, all with African features, all dangling with ghostly chains.

Voices reached him now, angry hisses growing to a discordant wail as the spirits closed in, and then to a fearsome shrieking chorus that rang round his helmet and sent his head spinning.

He raised the gun, aimed it at the nearest shadow and fired. His arm jolted back as a stream of bubbles exploded into the water. The harpoon shot forwards through the shadow without even slowing. The creature expanded, flowing into the others, until they became a mass of swirling chains and blurred faces, a whirl of pure embodied rage that closed over Dirk, blocking his vision and plunging him into icy darkness.

## Chapter 9

### Dangers of the Deep.

Dirk's heart was the world, and the world was void—icy dark and without hope.

There was nothing but that sense of oblivion, nothing but the heart, a funereal beat slowing towards its end. What else could there ever be?

Dirk sank through the void, his mind tracing faces against the black. Terrible faces, sharing with him their agony and grief. Faces shrouded in chains and pain, swallowed by the dreadful deep. They were his only companions and he followed them down.

The beat grew slower, his mind duller, his whole body accepting inevitable death. What was there to struggle for? There were only the faces, his company in pain. The lost ones. The ones Ubu Peter had tried to save him from, or tried to save from him.

Ubu Peter.

The name became a face in his memory.

Became a body.

Became a moment of action, bodies grappling on the docks.

Became a whole scene, a tangle of motive and emotion, of protecting his friends and seeking something beyond himself, beyond the swirling faces, beyond the icy reach of death.

Purpose flooded back into Dirk's mind. He was not the darkness that surrounded him. He would not be ruled by it.

But still the gloom pressed against him, a swirl of shapes so black that they blurred into one, blotting out everything beyond them. Dirk took a step forward, and another, and another, but still they surrounded him, following him along the ocean floor, keeping him constantly surrounded. He tried to brush them away but the ghostly shapes flowed through his fingers with the current. They weren't going anywhere.

Feeling was returning to his mind, but not his body. His legs and arms grew numb as the spirits sucked the warmth from him. He couldn't feel his feet, could barely move his fingers. Stumbling over something, he fell with terrible slowness to the ocean floor. If only there was some damn light.

He fumbled at his belt, trying to work out what he could use. The harpoon gun was no good and he couldn't slice ghosts up with a knife or a hatchet. So many blades and nothing to stick them into. Nothing more solid than darkness.

He touched something cylindrical with a funnel base.

Nothing more solid than darkness, huh?

Numb fingers fumbled to unhook the tube from his belt. He fought back the terror whose icy tendrils were snaking into his mind. His left hand would barely obey his commands. He couldn't feel his legs.

Finally unhooking the tube, he rolled onto his back. Focused all his will into the fingers of his distant left hand. Slowly, achingly, they closed around a metal tab and pulled.

The flare burst into life, spraying Dirk with bright white light. The ghosts screeched and scattered, fading as they fled, their shadow bodies dissolving in the harsh magnesium glare.

Feeling flooded back into Dirk's hands. The feeling was pain. Seeing the suit's gauntlets begin to glow he let the flare go, trailing pearlescent bubbles as it raced like a shooting star towards the surface of the sea.

The warm ocean currents flowed around Dirk, thawing his body and soothing his hands. He twisted around, rising on one knee. Sand rose in a cloud round his legs as he dragged himself up on the ocean floor and set off once more towards the wreck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the wreck, jagged shadows split the sand, the broken planks of the deck above casting tiger stripes. Dirk approached them warily, watching for any sign of movement, any hint that these were anything more than ordinary darkness. Any sign that the spirits remained.

A century and more of drifting currents had buried the base of the ship and speckled her sides with sea-life. Clumps of weed hung between patches of barnacles. Brightly coloured fish flitted through the weeds, anemones stretching for prey just out of reach. A crab scuttled out of the shattered stern, tapped an experimental claw against Dirk's boot and thought better of it, disappearing back into its man-made and rock-broken shelter.

Dirk walked towards the back of the ship, each step a study in slow motion. He pushed harder, trying to force the pace against the overwhelming weight of water. It wasn't that he minded slow so much, some goals needed a little patience. But enforced slowness was frustrating.

The ocean changed for no man. For all his straining he moved no quicker, and trying to just made him more frustrated. The helmet didn't help. He wanted to glance around, to scan the wreckage for any sign of the tablet, to look out for any returning shadows. But his view was constricted to the glass panel at the front, and he had to turn his whole body to look around. It was like being a toddler, unable to move faster than a waddle or see anything above his own height.

He turned left as fast as he could, then back to the right, the side of his face pressing on the glass as he struggled against the suit. All he could see were splintered planks and seaweed. He didn't even know what he was looking for. Would the tablet be in a chest? Lying loose? Buried five feet beneath the drifting sand? It could be anywhere in this wreck, or nowhere.

Stopping for a moment he took a deep breath, reining in his emotions. The air was thick with sweat and the unsettling scent of rubber seals, but a pipe to the surface kept it breathable. He closed his eyes and let the staleness pass over him. He focused on the rhythm of his breath, the sensation of it moving in and out of his body, a technique he'd learned on an all too brief visit to Tibet. Just using it reminded him of the Brothers of Sleeplessness, their saffron robes and wrinkled



smiles. He let that memory go too, let all memory and mindfulness leave him, until there was only his breath.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

He opened his eyes and waited, still in body and mind, taking in every detail of what he could see. Then slowly, so slowly even the water saw no need to resist, he turned on the spot. This time, instead of frantically hunting out details he gazed ahead, letting the details wash over him. The drifting sand, the rippling weeds, the intricate pattern of interlaced timbers. And as he accepted the patterns of the world around him, other details stood out. The scuttle of a crab. The shimmer of a fish. The sharp angles of an iron-bound box, protruding from the sand.

Of all the things he'd seen, the box looked the most likely to hold something of value. It seemed a good place to start.

There was a handle on the end of the box, as rusted as the other fittings but still solid enough to grip. Dirk took hold of it and heaved, a cloud of sand rising around him as he drew the box from its resting place.

As the cloud settled he knelt down next to the box. It was a foot across and deep, by two wide. Knocking on the top and the front he felt no give - the wood was still solid. There was an iron clasp on the front, its padlock rusted into place. Dirk took the knife from his belt, slid the tip between the clasp and the wood. Pressing against the pommel, he managed to get the blade beneath half the clasp, then pressed his foot against the box and heaved. For a long moment he thought it wouldn't give, that time and rust had embedded the nails so firmly into the wood that they wouldn't part. Then something shifted, the knife slid sharply down the wood, and the whole rusted lump of the clasp fell to the sea floor.

Dirk lifted the lid and laughed. The front of the chest had been so solid, it never occurred to him to check all the way around. But the back was completely gone, probably smashed out during the wreck. The box itself was empty.

The sand where the box had been buried was still loose. Dirk stabbed at it with the knife, probing the soft ground. On the fourth go he met resistance. Setting the knife aside he dug with his hands, the sand sliding back almost as fast as he could shovel it out of the way.

A nearby shoal of fish scattered and darted away.

Down in the hole, his fingers brushed against something solid. Something hard and square edged. He wormed them around in the sand until he had a grip on the end of the object, then pulled it clear.

The cloudy water swirled at the edge of his restricted vision. He ignored it, focusing on the task in hand.

The sand settled, revealing a lump of stone. A tablet, just like the one he'd seen at the Epiphany Club. The next step on the road to the Great Library.

This time his laughter was joyful, not self-mocking, as he slid the stone into the bag on his belt. It wouldn't be fun, walking with that banging at his thigh, but once he was clear of the wreck all he needed was to tug on the chain and Blaze-Simms's machine would haul him back to the surface.

He turned to face the open sea.

Two feet away, staring right at him, was a shark.

Dirk grabbed his harpoon gun, raised it and pulled the trigger.

The radium chamber glowed and shot a string of bubbles from the empty barrel. He hadn't reloaded since the ghosts.

The shark lunged, a mass of razor teeth and hunger. It slammed into Dirk, throwing him against the wall of the wreck.

Dirk fumbled at his belt where the knife should have been. Nothing. He cursed his own stupidity. He'd got so damned excited digging up the box that he'd left the knife on the floor.

The shark lunged again. Dirk dodged as best he could, twisting right and down, away from the attack. Teeth snagged at his leg, not reaching the flesh but snagging on one of the metal plates, tearing the rubber seal that joined it to the suit. Water poured in.

With one hand Dirk grabbed the torn seal, trying to stem the leak. If he couldn't stop it, the suit would flood and he'd be drowning in moments. His other hand grabbed the hatchet from his belt. Not ideal, and it would be hard to swing hunched over his leaking leg, but better than nothing.

The shark flashed towards him again. Dirk waited until the moment before it struck, water rising past his thigh and down the other leg, then lashed out with the hatchet. The timing was perfect. The flat of the axe slammed against the creature's nose, turning it from its attack. Before it had time to recover he swung again, burying the blade in the flesh behind its right eye. Blood turned the water red.

The shark jerked, wrenching the axe from Dirk's hand. It turned, one fin twitching, blood streaming from its head as it lined up for another attack.

The water was up to his waist now inside the suit. There'd be no more dodging.

Flicking its tail, the shark opened its mouth wide, its movements growing sluggish but its teeth still deadly points.

Dirk clenched his fist. If that was all he had then that was what he would use.

The shark gave one last twitch and fell still, blood still streaming into the water.

Dirk breathed a sigh of relief, almost choked on the water rising past his neck. Saved from being shark-food only to drown. Perfect.

Then he remembered the other piece of equipment Blaze-Simms had given him.

He grabbed the tube from his belt, realised he couldn't get it to his face. The damn suit was in the way.

Who the hell came up with emergency oxygen but no way to use it?

He fumbled at the fastenings around the helmet, but they were too small to work with his hands enclosed in the suit.

He dragged himself forwards, each step a greater struggle with a suit full of water and no air. How long without breath now? Half a minute? A minute?

He stumbled down by the box, grabbed the Bowie knife and slid the blade between the plates enclosing his chest. With a great wrench he prised them apart, the rubber seal splitting from the point of the knife. He tore one clear, then the other.

He could feel the lack of air, a blurriness of thinking, a strain in his chest.

He freed his right arm from the suit, let the metal limb drop to the ground. He was dizzy now, the knife trembling in his hands, dangerously close to his own flesh.

The blade stopped, stuck in the other shoulder seal. He wrenched at it once, twice, the knife still stuck, the plates not parting.

He punched at the knife handle, an act of desperation in a world growing dark. The knife spiralled away, becoming lost in a stand of seaweed.

Behind it, the shoulder plate popped free and the left arm fell from the suit.

With the last of his strength, Dirk lifted the helmet from his head. He grabbed the emergency breathing cylinder, twisted the tube, and pressed the opening to his lips. Sweet, merciful air rushed into his lungs.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ocean parted and Dirk burst into the open air. He took a long breath, and another, filling his lungs with the joy of fresh oxygen. Grateful as he'd been for the emergency air, it tasted of chalk and iron. It had been enough to get him to the surface, just, but it couldn't compare to the real thing. He wasn't sure he'd ever appreciated how wonderful fresh air could be, but he'd never take it for granted again.

Lying back, he floated on the surface of the sea, letting his aching muscles rest. He relished the breeze brushing his skin, the sun warming his body, the waves lapping against him.

But the weight of the tablet was dragging him back down and he knew he couldn't lie there forever. Regretfully he looked around, spying the yacht a few hundred yards away. He rolled onto his front and swam towards it.

A rope ladder hung from the back of the boat, trailing down into the water. Dirk grabbed the rungs and climbed. At last he grasped the edge of the deck and hauled himself up, flopping down on the warm wood. He sprawled there, eyes closed, letting the exhaustion of two long days drip away with the salt water.

But rest was for the weak when there were better things to do. Dirk grabbed the bag at his side, rolled over and looked up.

Straight into the barrel of a gun.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Two Down.**

A fist like a cured ham clutched the revolver, the grip dwarfed by sausage fingers.

"Up." The man's pale skin was reddened by the sun and peeling at the tips of his ears. Sunlight flashed off the tip of the barrel as he gestured for Dirk to rise.

Blaze-Simms lay on the far side of the deck, a bruise on his forehead. Isabelle nestled his head on her knee. She managed a smile for Dirk, then went back to frowning at the second thug leaning by the wheel.

Dirk stood, water dribbling from his saturated clothes. Aside from the one pointed at him there was another gun on the boat, held by the second brutish figure in his badly cut suit. Even with an extra day's sunburn, the "secretaries" of

Cullen's French guests were easily recognisable. They looked like they'd been carved out of beef and left to stew in the sun. Guns suited them like a bow tie suited a chimp.

"Drop it." The man gestured at Dirk's sack. From him, even a French accent sounded inelegant.

The guy was standing too close for his own good. From here Dirk could swing the bag around, smack the gun clear and be on him before he even took a shot. Even tired, wet and aching, it'd be easy.

The problem was the other guy, out of reach and aiming for Isabelle and Blaze-Simms. Dirk could guard himself with the first thug's body, but that wouldn't help his friends. There'd be a messy few seconds, and it would be over for these sweating slabs of useless meat. But it might not just be over for them.

Dirk dropped the bag.

"Kick it to me." The thug eyed the bag eagerly.

"It's a lump of stone." Dirk had dealt with some stupid people in his time, but this one was real special. "That ain't gonna work."

The thugs exchanged words in French, the brief sentences of slow men debating obvious issues.

Now that he had time to look around, Dirk saw a rowboat tied against the yacht, knocking on the side as waves pulled it away and back again. It was easy to see how they'd gotten aboard without Blaze-Simms noticing. He would have been so caught up in testing out his diving gear, the world around him would have just disappeared. But Isabelle...

The thug in front of Dirk stepped aside and gestured him towards the other captives.

"How are you doing?" Dirk asked, settling down beside Isabelle.

"Better than poor Timothy."

Blaze-Simms's eyes were closed, his breathing shallow. Dirk felt his pulse.

"He's been worse." Dirk could remember at least three times that fit the bill, and only one had been Blaze-Simms's own doing.

"I'm sure that's meant to be reassuring." Isabelle frowned.

"It's meant to be true."

The thugs stood together as one of them pulled the tablet from the bag. He peered at it, made a comment in French, and jabbed it at his companion. They both laughed.

"Reckon they've cracked the code already," Dirk said. "Or maybe it was a fart joke. Hard to tell."

"Really, Mr Dynamo." Isabelle raised an eyebrow. "If you can't say anything polite, you can at least say something useful."

"Alright. How long do you reckon it would take to get from that pier we used to the wharfs at Freeport, and to row out from there to here?"

"That would depend on whether you had horses. Why?"

"Cause I think I just heard oars."

Their captors turned back towards them. Dirk found himself now staring down the barrel of not one but two pistols. They were ugly devices, the product of some cut-rate Prussian workshop, barely functional and utterly charmless.

“It is almost over, Monsieur Dynamo,” one of the men said. “For you and for your little friend.”

He slowly thumbed back the hammer of his gun, letting it click out one notch at a time.

Behind him, hands appeared on the ship’s railing, hauled themselves upwards into arms, and then bruised, muscular bodies.

“Why are you here?” Dirk asked, playing for time. He didn’t think the natives meant him and his companions much good, but creeping up on the the Frenchmen meant they weren’t feeling too friendly about them either. They were probably out to get anyone who looked like they might meddle with the wreck.

“Why do you think?” The English speaker waved the tablet. “You think you are the only ones looking for this?”

Ubu Peter and Felipe slid over the rail, knives gripped between their teeth like picture-book pirates, pistols holstered at their sides. Sunlight gleamed off wicked blades and angry eyes.

“But who sent you?” Dirk asked

“The Dane, of course!” The thug’s expression was one of pig-faced malice. “Who else ever stands in your-”

The deck creaked beneath Ubu Peter just as he was reaching for his gun. The Frenchman turned in alarm, gun raised.

Not pausing to draw his own pistol, Felipe leapt onto the other Frenchman’s back. Clamping one arm around his opponent’s throat, he swung a knife at his chest. The Frenchman blocked the blow with his arm, cloth ripping as his sleeve caught on the blade. With his other arm he flailed above his shoulder, trying to point his gun in Felipe’s face.

His companion bellowed as Ubu Peter ducked beneath his gun and lunged into his side. The African’s knife sank six inches through fat and muscle, but the Frenchman snarled and batted him aside.

Dirk sprang from the deck, body uncoiling behind him, channelling all his strength down a line of motion that ended in his fist. The stabbed Frenchman got in a punch that floored Ubu Peter, only to stagger back as Dirk hit him in the face.

A gun roared, its single shot like a thunderclap echoing across the still sea. The other two combatants stumbled apart, the Frenchman clutching his powder-burned ear, Felipe clutching his blood-streaked face.

All five of them stood for a moment, staring at each other in confusion.

Then someone moved to attack, someone moved to intercept, and they all got tangled together in a muddled melee that rolled back and forth, fists flying, feet flailing, guns drawn just long enough to be knocked out of hands. The boat rocking to the rhythm of violence.

Dirk took an elbow to the guts and a face full of fingers, while his own foot hit something that gave way with a satisfying crunch. He slid on a patch of blood, turned the movement into a lunge and sent one of the Frenchmen spinning towards the bow. Before the man could regain his balance Dirk rushed after him, slamming into his chest and launching him over the rail. The man had less than a second to cry out before he hit the ocean and disappeared with a splash.

Turning, Dirk saw Felipe darting toward him, knife outstretched. He twisted clear of the lunge, then ducked as Felipe swung the blade at neck height. The point glistened menacingly in the sunlight.

Rising behind the strike, Dirk grabbed Felipe's arm and flung him over his shoulder. With a splash, Felipe followed the Frenchman into the sea.

Something hit Dirk's head like a steam train. Black spots danced across his vision, obscuring his view of the remaining Frenchman's fist. Pain roared through his face as another punch knocked his head back on his shoulders. And another. And another. He tried to duck the fourth, took it on the side of the head. His attacker's idiot grin, like a pig rammed hard against a wall, filled his vision. The world tasted of blood and sounded like all the bells in New York ringing just for him.

This time the darkness was warm and inviting as it crept in from the corners of his mind, as he struggled to keep consciousness from slipping away, while that flat, bestial face blotted out the sky.

The Frenchman raised his fist, roaring with laughter. Then suddenly he slumped, face falling, grip loosening, body sliding to the floor.

Dirk blinked back darkness and pushed himself to his feet, though he needed the rail for support. Ubu Peter faced him, looking nearly as bad as Dirk felt. He clutched an oar, its broken end lying beneath the Frenchman's head.

"Guess I owe you," Dirk mumbled through fat lips, wobbling as he raised his hands in defence.

"You desecrated the wreck." Rage blazed in Ubu Peter's eyes. "You stole from the graves of our fallen. Felipe is right. There is only one way to stop you."

He hefted the oar ready to swing. Dirk wondered how long he could stay afloat in his present condition. Assuming he was even conscious when he hit the water.

They were interrupted by the small, sharp click of a gun being cocked.

"Enough." Isabelle stood in the middle of the deck, clutching one of the Frenchmen's ugly guns. It looked absurdly large in her hands, like she was a farmgirl playing with her Pa's tools. But her stance made clear that she knew what she was doing.

Ubu Peter dropped the oar and squared his shoulders, standing proud despite the resignation showing through his blood and bruises.

"Are you going to drop me in the water, too?" he asked. "Maybe knock me out first, to make sure I sink like the others before me?"

Dirk shook his head.

"Take your boat." He nudged the fallen Frenchman with his foot. "Hell, take theirs if you want. We've got no use for either."

"We came to stop you leaving." Ubu Peter looked at each of them in turn. "To kill you if we could. Why let me go?"

"I understand your anger." Dirk took a deep breath. He ached all over, and was too damn tired for a long debate. "I know what it's like for your life to be in the hands of folks who don't give a damn. I know what it's like to lose good people, and to see their memory dishonoured. But to me, the dead are just bones, and what matters here is what we can learn for the living."

"I don't agree with what you wanted, but that doesn't mean I don't understand. Now we've done what we came for, and soon we'll be too far away for you to do us any harm. The least we can do is not cause any more grief."

"You will tell others what you've seen here." Ubu Peter's tone was one of resignation, matching the slump of his shoulders.

"Me?" Dirk shrugged. "Probably not. Him..." He gestured towards Blaze-Simms. "Discretion ain't his strong suit. But attention ain't either, so who knows."

"I..." Ubu Peter paused at the rail, one foot over the side.

"Just go. I'm too damn tired to care, whatever it is."

The African nodded and disappeared over the side. Moments later, oars splashed in the water, then were joined by voices as Ubu Peter helped Felipe into the boat. The sound of oars faded as they sculled back towards the island. Overhead, gulls soared on the wind coming in off the ocean, hundreds of them flocking above the cliffs, their remains ensuring the island's wealth.

Dirk leaned against the rail and closed his eyes, sensing all the aches and pains that riddled his body. There was a salt taste on his tongue and a distant ringing in one ear. It was years since he'd been so tired and battered, and he'd been having more fun that time around.

Cold and heavy, the tablet lay abandoned in the middle of the deck. He picked it up and peered at it. One face was inscribed with elaborate lettering, its edges smoothed by decades of ocean currents but the letters still legible. Meaningless to him, just a jumble of foreign characters, but someone at the Club would be able to translate it or crack whatever code it was in. There was usually a code.

After all this, it had better be worth the reading.

Isabelle eased the hammer back down on the gun as she came to his side, peering intently at the tablet.

"Two down..." she said.

"You couldn't have stepped in sooner there?" Dirk asked. He spat out a mouthful of blood.

Isabelle frowned.

"I'm sorry, not my finest moment." She looked over at Blaze-Simms, still stretched out unconscious on the deck. "We should get moving, before anybody else comes our way. Can you stay upright to take the helm while I see to Mr Blaze-Simms?"

"Guess I'm gonna have to."

Dirk grabbed the unconscious Frenchman and dumped him into a rowboat bobbing at their side. He cast it off, not wishing the guy a particularly safe voyage, and set to raising the anchor. Beautiful as Hakon was, inspiring as its people's soft revolution might be, he felt glad to be getting out of there. Ninjas, bears, gangsters, locals—there were only so many random attacks one man could take. He needed time to rest, and to work out who was behind some of them.

A few minutes later he was at the wheel, sun beating down on his back, breeze brushing his wounds as it filled the sail and drove them north - away from the island of Hakon, leaving behind the ghosts of a cruel trade and the scars it left in its wake. Back to England, and the search for the next tablet.

The sun was shining. They had what they'd come for. At last, Dirk smiled. It was turning into a mighty fine day.

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