

Suits and Sewers

Epiphany Club, #2

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Published: 2015



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Chapter 1

What Makes the Man.

Bright summer sunshine blazed in through the tailor's front window. Dirk Dynamo sat with his feet up by the window, reading a book on sharks. Having nearly been eaten by one in the Hakon expedition, he wanted to know what he was facing next time. It was that or face the nonsense of fashion going on around him.

"Are you sure we can't do something for your friend, Sir Timothy?" Pietro Gellanti, the shop's owner, looked with disdain at Dirk's faded black trousers and frayed shirt. "These are production line clothes of the most monstrous sort. No shape to them at all, baggy in all the wrong places. And the repairs..."

He reached out toward Dirk's frequently repaired sleeve, but Dirk batted the hand away.

"You got a problem with my handiwork?" He glared at the tailor.

"Sewing is hardly the work of a gentleman." Gellanti waved his scissors. "And this is certainly not the work of a professional."

"These clothes have seen me through more scrapes than you've had pinpricks." Dirk turned back to his book. It was good that the guy took pride in his skills, but that didn't give him the right to mock another man's handiwork. "I ain't givin' up on 'em now."

The tailor tutted but turned away.

"And you, Sir Timothy." He shook his head. "What have you been doing to this jacket?"

Sir Timothy Blaze-Simms looked down, eyes wide behind his spectacles. Fitters—the sons in Gellanti and Sons—paused to look at him across oak tables scattered with lengths of cloth.

"But this one doesn't even have any holes." He brushed at the green cotton. "And hardly any stains."

"Does your father do such things to my clothes?" Gellanti sighed and extended his tape measure. "Does your brother?"

"I suppose not." Blaze-Simms shrugged. "It looks all right to me though."

"All right?" Pietro waved his chalk wildly and looked to one of his fitters for support. "All right, he says, in a coat that suffers a hundred creases. All right, with a frayed cuff and mis-matched trousers. And as for the cravat..."

"It was a gift from Mater." Blaze-Simms smiled. "I think she found it in Italy."

"In that case, we shall find something to match."

Gellanti grabbed a swatch book and began flicking through, glancing up to oversee his team as they launched themselves upon Blaze-Simms, waving tape measures and taking notes in a leather-bound ledger.

At least now they were making progress. Dirk hadn't wanted to take this break in London, not while they were still hunting the tablets that would lead them to the lost Great Library. With two out of three in their possession, and both a gang of ninjas and the Dane's criminal network racing them for the third, he hated to waste time shopping. But Isabelle McNair, owner of the first tablet, wanted to do research before they went after the French tablet. And there was no denying that Blaze-Simms went through clothes like most folks got through hot meals. Those were the hazards of having expensive tastes and a carefree nature.

Now that his initial resentment had passed, Dirk realised there was something in what Gellanti had said. Sure, Dirk had been repairing his own clothes his whole life, but he didn't have much skill at it. He put his book down and got ready to learn from these folks.

Most of the tables were piled high with pyramids of fabric. More filled the deep shelves towards the back of the long, low ceilinged room. The place would have been dark and dismal if not for the ornate dress mirrors that caught the light and scattered it back, picking out rolls of silk and satin, cotton and wool, in hundreds of colours and shades. The palette was that of a refined and genteel painter, rather than a draftsman of cheap, eye-catching spectacle. There were reds, blues, greens, even the odd yellow, but they were pastel pale or deep and rich, never bright.

The fitters tutted some more as they draped samples of cloth across Blaze-Simms's chest and he looked at his reflection in the mirrors.

"You should have brought Mrs McNair," Dirk said. "This kind of fuss seems more her than me."

"I thought you might learn something interesting." Blaze-Simms turned to the fitters. "That with the green, perhaps?"

"Like how to blow ten times a steer-hand's wage on one suit? No thanks."

"More like how to dress for society. Tailoring is a fine art, evolved from bare necessity into a thing of beauty. It marks out the civilised man, who takes some trouble over his appearance, from the burly savage of ancient times in his rough furs and sandals. It shows how far we've come."

"We've come four streets over from ragged kids begging in the gutter, while bankers walk by with their noses in the air. That the sort of refinement you're after?"

"Is it any different from spending money on art, opera or academia?" Blaze-Simms lifted his arms to let Gellanti measure his chest. "You value those, but are

they any deeper a part of our culture than clothing? At least suits are worn regularly."

Frowning, Dirk swung his legs around and sat up straight. He'd heard these arguments rehearsed enough times, but he'd never gotten into them with his friend. The Epiphany Club brought folks together for learning, not to debate politics.

"Those things are about learning," he said. "About making yourself better."

"I'm told that clothes also make the man."

"No, the man makes himself. Clothes just show how privileged he is."

"Have you been talking with that chap from the British Museum again?"

"Hell yes. And let me tell you, when the proletariat start to listen to him, there ain't gonna be fancy tailors for some and ragged trousers for the rest."

There was an awkward silence, broken by the snip of Gellanti's scissors. Dust motes swirled through the air as the cutter flung precisely shaped pieces of cloth to the fitters, who in turn pinned them together around Blaze-Simms. Dirk opened his book and started reading again, closing his eyes from time to time to test what he had learned.

"I'm meeting up with Isabelle for tea after this," Blaze-Simms said at last. "It should be a jolly afternoon, if you'd like to join us."

"I dunno." In that moment, the thought of high tea with a couple of aristocrats felt like class treachery to Dirk. But the chance to see Isabelle McNair was appealing. "Jolly ain't what I had planned."

"Apparently she's found new evidence to where the last tablet is." Blaze-Simms obediently turned for the tailor. "Isn't that splendid?"

"As long as there are no ghosts this time."

Dirk looked down at the book in his hands, lent to him by Professor Barrow. It was interesting, and he was learning new things. But so were hundreds of other people, reading the other copies sold across the country, even the world. Hundreds more had already read it, Barrow included. The idea of finding the Great Library of Alexandria, of reading books no-one else had in a thousand years, that had a whole other level of appeal. Dirk knew he'd hate himself if he missed out on that.

"Alright," he said. "I'll come along for a bit. But you two start yappin' on about garden parties or fashion, and I'm headin' off to find my man at the museum, tablet or no tablet."

Blaze-Simms smiled at him in the mirror, then paused, his face overtaken by the distant expression that said inspiration had struck.

"You know, it's a funny thing about that tablet..." he said.

A shadow rushed across the window. Alarmed by the sudden movement, Dirk spun out of his seat, just as the glass shattered in a spray of sunlit shards. He raised his arms to protect his face.

A black shape slammed into him, hurling him back onto a pile of silk linings. The attacker rolled across Dirk, knocking the remaining breath from his body, then lifted him effortlessly into the air, flinging him against the far wall.

Concussed and out of breath, Dirk felt the world spin around him. He wanted to close his eyes and rest, but the black-clad figure was flying towards him again, blade outstretched. Just in time, he ducked left. Plaster dust sprayed from the wall, the blackness thudding home hard enough to send shockwaves into the

floorboards. Dirk lashed out, his fist just missing the attacker as they leapt over a pile of blue and green wool weaves.

Shaking the confusion from his head, he staggered to his feet. Half a dozen black-clad people were in the room, circling its occupants with the deadly grace of expert combatants. Not a single patch of skin showed through their sinister garb, even their eyes concealed behind shrouds of gauze. Two of them were closing in on Dirk, racing along a workbench in a running crouch. Near the window, three were trying to surround Blaze-Simms, who was wielding a measuring stick like a thick striped rapier. The last attacker had Gellanti pinned against the back wall, two of his fitters already unconscious at his feet and the last disappearing out of the back door.

"Ninjas." Dirk muttered the word like a curse. It was Hakon all over again—what the hell did these folks want?

The nearest one leapt from the workbench, leg outstretched. Sidestepping groggily, Dirk felt air brush his face as the ninja sailed past. A pair of shuriken hissed by his ear as he lunged.

Trying just hard enough to be convincing, Dirk grabbed with both hands at the black-clad body. The ninja ducked between his arms, straight into his rising foot. There was a crunch, the ninja's head snapped back, and he crashed against the nearby shelves, glass jars full of buttons smashing down around him.

More shuriken sailed over Dirk's bobbing head as he turned to face the second ninja. The man stood atop a worktable, arms spread wide, one leg raised like a ballerina. Leaping into the air he spiralled around in a high kick. Dirk ducked, only for the ninja to twist in midair and slam a knee into his back. Pain jolted through Dirk, distracting him long enough for the ninja to dart away.

Still reeling, Dirk dived for shelter beneath the table as he scrambled for some sort of weapon. His gun was concealed in the jacket draped across the window seat, past half a dozen black-clad assassins, and he cursed himself angrily for not keeping it with him. The only objects within reach were bundles of tweed and velvet. So as a loud footfall sounded on the tabletop above him, he used the only hard object to hand. With a grunt he rose to his feet, slamming the table upwards. There was a crunch of ninja against ceiling, and a black-clad body tumbled limply to the floor.

Two more ninjas were closing in on Dirk, stepping over the unconscious tailors. Shuriken flashed alarmingly through the air. Dirk blocked them with the table, razor-sharp steel burying itself in the oak with a thud.

Muscles straining, he heaved the trestle at his assailants. They dodged easily, leaping aside on legs like coiled springs, one bounding over the flying furniture and straight at Dirk's head. Rather than dodge, Dirk leapt into the blow, colliding with the ninja before he could bring his foot round for a kick. They crashed to the ground, the ninja scrabbling to get out from beneath Dirk, who grabbed a handful of loose black robe and swung him around into the descending blade of the other ninja. There was a wet hiss and Dirk found himself holding two halves of a black-clad body, guts pouring across his feet. He and the sword-wielding assassin stood staring at each other, and Dirk could see by the man's posture that he too was shocked. Before he had time to recover, Dirk raised his foot sharply into the man's groin, and he crumpled over with a sigh.

Silence descended upon the room. Pietro Gellanti and his assistants lay sprawled amid heaps of unfurled cloth and broken shelves, as did the ninjas Dirk had dealt with. The faces of curious passers-by peered in through the shattered remains of the window.

There was no sign of Timothy Blaze-Simms.

Chapter 2

London Rooftops.

Dirk stood on the sun-warmed pavement outside Gellanti and Sons, failing to calm old Pietro. The tailor kept bending to pick at the shards of glass glittering gem-like across the cobbles, frantically trying to do something with the shattered glory of his shop. One hand tugged at his hair, turning it from slicked-down elegance to a tangled briar-like mass.

None of it helped calm Dirk's own agitation. His heart was still racing from the fight, his back ached where he'd been hit, and his friend was missing, presumably kidnapped. He could have done without taking responsibility for these folks, but someone had to.

Inevitably the fuss had drawn a crowd, the usual London mix of gawpers, shouters and opportunistic pickpockets. A few had tried to approach the shop, but gave up when they found their way blocked by six feet of scowling American. After that they'd kept their distance, still shouting and pointing, just far enough away that Dirk would have to leave the shop unguarded if he wanted to go and make them shut up.

The injured fitters sat against the shop, legs splayed out in front of them, leaning on each other as they nursed their bruised heads. Playing to the crowd, they wailed about ruined silks and how people all in black obviously had no taste. Dirk shook his head. Anyone who cared this much about the look of cloth deserved a beat-down. It was almost enough to make him side with the ninjas.

A disturbance rippled through the centre of the crowd, stern voices and outraged jostling accompanying the movement. The babble of voices rose as the disturbance approached Dirk, then subsided as the missing fitter pushed his way into the open, jabbering away to the policemen who followed in his wake.

There were three bobbies, led by a short sergeant with a face like a prune. Striding up to Dirk, he fixed him with a gaze that fell just short of glaring.

"What have we here, then?" he asked, not pausing for an answer. "Care to explain what a ruffian in fixed-up hand-me-downs is doing in a gentleman's outfitters? Or should I save us both the trouble and slap you straight into irons?"

Reaching into his jacket, Dirk handed him a card. At the top his name was embossed copper-plate lettering. Beneath that was the seal and address of the Epiphany Club. He'd never liked introducing himself with these things. Far too fancy, and too much like employing status to get his way. But it had its uses.

The sergeant sighed as he read the card, breath rustling his neat moustache.

"I see, sir. One of those... gentlemen, are we?" He pocketed the card with exaggerated care. "Perhaps you'd like to explain what's going on here, sir. Because right now I can't shift the ignorant notion that there's been a brawl between a jumped-up explorer and a bunch of over-paid tailors."

"Bet you don't get many offers of promotion, huh?" Dirk grinned despite his weariness. In a country full of subservient bowing and scraping, it was nice to meet a man who didn't 'know his place'.

"No sir." The sergeant pulled a notepad from his pocket. "But despite my sunny and deferential disposition I've yet to be fired."

"I guess a competent policeman's a rare and valuable commodity."

"Almost as valuable as a useful American, in my experience." The sergeant opened the notebook and set pen to paper. "Now, about this fight...?"

"We were attacked by ninjas."

A look of incredulity crossed the sergeant's face. Spectators moved closer, whether drawn by Dirk's words or the expression on the sergeant's face.

"Ninjas, sir?" The sergeant wrote something in his book.

"Oriental assassins. Japanese guys in black robes."

"And did anyone outside the shop see them, sir?"

"Don't think so."

"And why is that, sir?"

"They're kinda sneaky."

"They burst into this shop, smashed the windows and assaulted the staff sneakily?" If the sergeant had raised his eyebrow any further it would have disappeared beneath his hairline.

"They got a lot less sneaky once they were inside." Dirk ran a hand through his hair. This was starting to get awkward. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but with his head still fuzzy from the fight it was hard to get that across.

"Why did they do this, sir?"

"I don't know." Dirk pointed back into the shop, where he'd left at least one unconscious ninja. "Maybe you could ask them."

"There's no need to get agitated, sir."

"Enough with the 'sir's already. Can you just go in there and do some policing, leave me to catch my breath?"

"Leave a suspect unattended." The sergeant made another note. "That seems unlikely, s—"

"Mr Dynamo!" The crowd parted, willingly this time, and Isabelle McNair appeared, sheltered beneath a lace-trimmed parasol. She strolled up with a smile, for all the world like a guest at a garden party.

"I don't believe we've met." With her usual effortless grace, Isabelle held out a gloved hand to the sergeant. "I'm Isabelle McNair, and you would be Sergeant...?"

"Simpkins." The policeman paused a moment before shaking her hand. "Sergeant Simpkins."

"A pleasure to meet you, sergeant. I see you've arrived just in time." She twirled the parasol and turned towards the shop. "This must be your crime scene. Tell me what you've found so far."

Simpkins followed in her wake, drawn along by a combination of charm and polite insistence. He answered questions about the crime based on the evidence in

the shop, answers which came down to 'there was a fight', so far as Dirk could tell. He didn't get why Isabelle didn't just ask him. He could have given better answers, and saved her all the pointless side questions about the sergeant's job, family, and who cared what else.

But then, maybe those sorts of questions were why Isabelle was good with people, while Dirk just got by.

At least now the policeman was gone, and Dirk wasn't going to draw his attention again. He didn't want to explain to some stranger that he, Isabelle and Blaze-Simms were on the trail of the lost Library of Alexandria, not when other people were on the same trail. And without explaining that he could hardly explain his suspicion that the ninjas were after the Library too. Sometimes it was best to plead the fifth, or better yet avoid facing questions at all.

After setting the police to dispersing the crowd, Isabelle turned her attention to Pietro Gellanti. Taking the old man by the arm she led him back into the front of his shop and, brushing aside more broken glass, settled him down in an easy chair. A couple of stern words with the fitters got them up off the pavement and making tea for their stunned employer.

Finally, she returned to Dirk.

"Mr Dynamo, it really is lovely to see you." Isabelle smiled. "How have you been?"

"Not bad, ma'am." Dirk smiled back. How else could anyone respond to Isabelle McNair? "Reading books, fighting ninjas, that kinda thing."

Hearing his own words he cringed inside. He felt like a schoolboy, showing off to impress.

"How splendid." If Isabelle noticed that he was flustered then she didn't show it. "Is Sir Timothy on his way here? I was meant to meet him."

"You think I'd be here on my own?" Dirk jerked his head toward the fancy shop front. "Ninjas took him."

Isabelle's face tightened in vexation.

"Oh dear, how unfortunate."

She peered around the shop's interior, taking in the red stain and spilt guts that were all that remained of the ninjas. The fallen had disappeared before they could be taken captive, just as in the attack on the Epiphany Club.

"Where did they go?" she asked.

Dirk shrugged. "Same place they went when we met them in Manchester and Hakon. Far enough away to avoid us."

"We shall see about that."

A fruit stall was parked on the opposite side of the street. Isabelle strolled up to it, smiled, picked up some apples and began chatting with the stallholder. He bobbed his head excitedly and pointed in the direction of Holborn. After a few more minutes' conversation he patted Isabelle on the arm, smiling and refusing to take payment as she pulled out her purse. With a gracious bow of her head she turned and walked back to Dirk.

"He saw them moving across the rooftops," she explained. "His son used to be a chimney sweep, and so he is in the habit of looking upwards."

Dirk looked again, saw the way the guy's silvery head tipped back between serving customers, peering up at the pigeons and chimney pots. He hadn't noticed

that, might never have done. It seemed there were things he could learn from Isabelle.

"Guess we're goin' that way then," he said.

"Do you have your gun on you, Mr Dynamo?" Isabelle was peering into her bag.

"Right here, ma'am." Dirk proudly patted a bulge in his jacket.

"Marvellous. One of these days, I hope to see you use it."

Dirk knew how to track. He'd made a career or two of it, chasing different sorts of prey. From gators in the bayou to yetis in the Himalayas, from Indians on the great plains to runaway husbands in the windy streets of Chicago. Any trail, any time, he could turn his nose to it.

Yet still, faced with the sprawling, seething mass of London, he was mighty glad to have Isabelle McNair's help.

To Dirk, London was like an ant-hill, teeming with life at its most chaotic. Folks bustled this way and that, jostling past each other, shouting and glaring. Unlike ants, theirs was a motion of conflict, tempers fraying as one man's path blocked another or they fought for space at a crowded street stall. The English reputation for deference showed just how small and detached a group of Englishmen most foreigners met. Tracking in a London crowd was the urban equivalent of working through a cactus grove. Slow, frustrating and prickly.

Fortunately he had Isabelle. She could feel the rhythm of the city. The bustle and flow of horses, carts, pedestrians. The strolling gentlemen, shopkeepers selling their wares, whores and pickpockets lurking on corners. She could read these crowds like a penny dreadful. Leading him effortlessly through the milling masses, she always went with the flow because she always found a flow going the way she wanted. There was no need to scour the rooftops for tracks or ask half the crowd if they'd seen anything. At every junction, every alley mouth or choice of paths, she zeroed straight in on the right person, the one looking up and paying attention. She said things to make them like her, maybe even love her a little, and moved on with clear clues as to where the ninjas had gone.

They took a long, looping route out of the centre and into north London as their quarry, a good half hour ahead, tried to throw off any potential pursuit. They passed libraries and learned societies back to back with broken down tenements where ignorance was king. After all, this was the capital city of the world.

At last they found themselves in Camden, close to the bustling locks. Soot from the railway terminals lay like a shadow over the whole area. Isabelle returned from talking with a dock hand and nodded towards a warehouse, a square, almost featureless building of soot-stained wood.

"They went in there," Isabelle said. "Slipped in through a window near the roof."

Dirk looked at Isabelle in her fashionable dress and carefully coiffured hair, lace-fringed bag in one hand and parasol in the other.

"You wait here." He didn't want to risk her getting hurt, any more than he wanted a society lady slowing him down. "I won't be long."

"I have every faith in your abilities, Mr Dynamo." She pulled a small-calibre revolver from her bag. "But I think you might benefit from a little support."

Dirk raised an eyebrow at the sight of the tiny gun. "What you gonna do with that, tickle them to death?"

"You'd be surprised." She looked him straight in the eye, a challenge and a warning against further argument. "Timothy has made me some rather splendid special rounds."

"And when all three of them run out?" Dirk had never been much for warnings, or for backing down from challenges.

She flicked her wrist and the outside of the parasol fell away. Sunlight glittered off the blade of a foil.

Dirk blinked in surprise, glanced around as a couple of passing labourers pointed their way.

"Shall we?" A superior smile played across Isabelle's ruby lips.

Dirk hefted his revolver.

"Let's do it."

The warehouse door gave way to Dirk's boot, letting them into a space of towering shadows. Heaps of bales and boxes rose around them, a self-contained city built of goods from all over the British Empire. It smelt of sawdust, coffee and cinnamon. Light crept in through windows near the ceiling, illuminating the tops of the stacks, but only a faint greyness was able to penetrate the aisles in between.

They stepped forward into the gloom, guns raised, Dirk taking the lead. A distant murmur of noise filtered in from the street, so faint that the squeaking of mice could be heard rising through it, the patter of tiny paws as the rodents raided sacks of dried food. Somewhere above them a cat growled and pounced, only to screech in fury as its prey scampered away.

A muffled yell punctured the air. Dirk headed towards the noise as another yell bounced between the crates, and another—the sound of Blaze-Simms in pain.

Dirk pressed himself through the narrow gap between two heaps of wool. He found his way by touch, prodding ahead with his foot, testing for corners of stacks with his free hand. He could barely see his own arm, but ahead an orange glow pierced the gloom. He headed towards it, pausing as he reached the edge of the shadows to see what lay ahead.

There was an open space at the centre of the warehouse, too far from the windows for any natural light. Oil lamps had been set on the floor around its edges, illuminating a scene of cruelty.

Blaze-Simms sat in the centre of the space, tied to a sturdy wooden chair. His face was a mass of bruises, blood trickling from between his lips. His left sleeve had been torn away and a series of narrow slashes cut into his arm, blood oozing from the wounds and dripping onto the floor.

Around him stood three black-clad figures, oriental swords protruding from their belts. One of them was cleaning a knife on Blaze-Simms's missing shirt sleeve. A fourth was disappearing between the stacks, darting confidently into the darkness.

Blaze-Simms groaned and looked up at his captors.

"Water?" he asked, his voice wobbling with pain.

One of the ninjas picked up a jug and held it just out of reach, tipping its contents away in a steady stream.

"Find what we want, you go," another ninja said. "Get all water you want."

Rage boiled Dirk's blood. He had seen more than enough. Gun raised, he emerged from the stacks, Isabelle with him. The ninjas turned in surprise, reaching by reflex for their blades.

Dirk didn't give them a chance. His Gravemaker roared, spitting hot lead at the nearest ninja. The man was thrown back against the bales, leaving a bloody smear as he sagged to the ground.

Isabelle snapped off two quick shots. The small bullets barely gave her target pause as he lunged towards her. Then there was a thud and his wounds burst open, showering Isabelle in gore and leaving him in pieces on the floor.

Dirk fired again. The remaining ninja staggered backwards, clutching at his wounded shoulder. A lantern skittered away, knocked by his flailing foot, leaving a trail of oil across the floor. Silent despite his injury, he dashed off between the crates.

Dirk hitched up the leg of his pants and pulled a bowie knife from its sheath. With one tug he sliced through the ropes binding Blaze-Simms.

"Frightfully good of you, old chap," Timothy said through gritted teeth as Dirk knelt to cut the bonds around his legs.

A soft sound emerged from nearby, like falling sheets.

"Gentlemen..." Isabelle was looking over Blaze-Simms's shoulder. A sheet of flame had sprung up between the packing crates, barring the way they had come. Adjacent boxes were smouldering and smoking.

"What the...?" Dirk looked around in alarm.

"The oil." Isabelle pointed to the broken lamp.

"We'd better get moving, then." Blaze-Simms wobbled to his feet, then slumped back into the chair. "Oh dear, it seems my legs have gone to sleep."

He leaned over, frantically trying to rub some life into his numb limbs, as a shadowy figure appeared behind him.

"Thought we'd got rid of you boys." Dirk raised his pistol at the approaching ninja, aimed and pulled the trigger. With a click, the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

The ninja leapt. A gleaming blade hurtled through the air, followed by a hiss of steel on silk. With a thud, the black-clad figure collapsed on the floor, Isabelle's sword protruding from his chest.

"Damn," Dirk whispered, impressed. "That's some fancy sword-work."

Blaze-Simms just stared, slack-jawed.

"No time to dawdle, Timothy." Isabelle placed a foot on the black-clad body and wrenched her blade free.

Rising more steadily this time, Blaze-Simms looked around at the encroaching flames.

"Which way?" he asked, glancing at the fire now blocking the exit.

"Guess we'll have to go around." Dirk strode into the narrow passages between heaped wares, heading to the wall and then turned south, towards where they had come in. But within moments their way was once more blocked, this time by a dead end of heavy pine crates.

Smoke billowed upwards as they rushed towards the rear of the warehouse, hunting for another exit. It swirled around them in growing clouds, scouring Dirk's throat, making his breath rasp and his lungs heave.

The whole place was burning now, rafters creaking as the roof pressed down on weakened supports. One gave way, crashing into a mound of crates. Dirk dived out of the way as a flaming roof-beam smashed into the floor where he had stood. Blaze-Simms wasn't so fast. Another beam slammed against the side of his head and he crumpled to the ground, the smouldering timber landing on him.

Isabelle rushed over and grabbed one end of the beam lying across his chest.

"Ready?" she asked.

Dirk nodded, grabbing the other end.

"Now."

They heaved, Dirk taking most of the strain, and flung the beam aside.

"He's still breathing." Isabelle leaned over and shook Blaze-Simms. His head flopped back and forth like a rag doll but he didn't stir. Alarm gripped Dirk. His friend had never been all that tough. This didn't look good.

Closing in from every direction, the flames danced across crates and packing bales, scorching the floor and warping the ceiling. Soot swirled in the restless air. Sweat seeped from Dirk's pores and in a moment was gone. He coughed as smoke smothered his senses and clawed at his throat.

"C'mon," he said, "let's get out of here."

There wasn't much of Blaze-Simms to weigh anyone down, not by the standards of a grown man, so it was no effort for Dirk to sling him over his shoulder. There was no door in sight, but to the left, between close piles of burning cloth, was a window. Breaking into a sprint, he dashed toward it, heat scorching the hairs from his arms. He dodged a burning barrel as it fell, leaped over another and stepped up onto a third, flames lapping round his shins as he launched himself at the window.

The glass gave way with a crash and a shock of cool air. Glittering points flew in every direction as he slammed into the pavement, just managing to retain his balance. He put Blaze-Simms down and turned in time to catch Isabelle as she hurtled head-first through the shattered window. She looked dazedly up at him and, reaching out, plucked a shard of glass from his cheek. Blood dripped from its tip.

Dirk shrugged, barely even feeling the wound. "Could have been worse."

With a crash like August thunder, the warehouse fell into blazing ruin.

Lowering Isabelle to the ground, Dirk took a deep breath of clean, smoke-free air and tried not to think about how close they'd come to death. A crowd was gathering around the warehouse, some of them rushing back and forth with buckets of water, trying to stop the fire spreading to neighbouring buildings. Others pointed and stared, either at the conflagration itself or at Dirk and his companions. An elderly lady had crouched down next to Blaze-Simms and was wafting smelling salts under his nose. His eyelids fluttered and then shot open.

"Dynamo!" He sat bolt upright. "The ninjas!"

"It's alright." Dirk helped him to his feet. "We got 'em. You're safe now."

"No, you don't understand." Blaze-Simms glanced around in agitation, one eye bloodshot and the other disappearing into bruised, swollen flesh. "They only wanted me for information, and I've never been terribly good with torture. They know exactly where they're going, and we have to stop them."

"Where are they going?" Dirk reached inside his jacket, feeling for bullets with which to reload his gun.

"To get the stone from Hakon."

"We've got it somewhere safe, right?" After all the trouble he'd gone through for the second clue to the Great Library, Dirk assumed it was locked up tight in a safe.

"I've been working on the inscriptions." Blaze-Simms looked down at his feet. "It's out in the open, at my flat."

Chapter 3

Chinese Tea.

When Dirk had first met Blaze-Simms, the Englishman had a valet, the sort of live-in servant as essential to the British upper classes as teacups and country estates. But that poor valet had been the last one to serve Sir Timothy. After Jackson was nearly killed by an exploding hatbox, the fourth manservant in a row to suffer injuries around the experiment-littered apartment, good help became hard to come by. Careful negotiation between Blaze-Simms's father and a service agency resulted in regular visits from a tolerant cook, as well as the capital's most highly paid and most nervous looking cleaner. But for most of the day, the apartment was empty, and normally that was for the best.

Cautiously, Dirk nudged the door open with the tip of his boot, gun raised before him. When nothing moved, he stepped inside.

Blaze-Simms's home was furnished in the orderly style favoured by army officers and English public schools. The walls were crowded with shelves, drawers and cupboards, many of them labelled and all of them full. Half a dozen identical chairs and a dining table all matched the nearby sideboard. It would have been a picture of smart living, if not for the mess.

The apartment looked like it had been hit by a hurricane or an over-enthusiastic burglar. Books and papers were thrown wildly across the floor, chemical equipment scattered in pieces beneath the window. Chairs were toppled, ornaments discarded, drawers and cupboards hanging open, their contents spilling out.

"I'm so sorry, Timothy." Isabelle followed Dirk inside and drew aside the half-open curtain, letting more light fall across the disorder. "What a mess they've made. Is there anything we can do to help?"

"What?" Blaze-Simms looked up from a pile of papers. "Oh, you could check if the ninjas have been here. The tablet was on a shelf in the bathroom."

"Check if they've..." Isabelle raised an eyebrow.

"Not been to the lair of the genius before, huh?" Dirk grinned. "Lady comes in to clean up once a week, courtesy of Ma and Pa Blaze-Simms. Two days later, it's always the same. This mess just means he's been inventing a steam powered Punch and Judy show."

"Actually, it was a chemical formula for super-refined coal." Blaze-Simms waved his papers like a defence lawyer wielding exhibit A. "But I'm starting to think it won't work."

He pulled a pencil from his pocket and began scribbling.

"Not now, Timothy." Isabelle laid a hand on his arm. "The tablet?"

"Bathroom." Blaze-Simms waved distractedly toward a doorway at the far side of the room.

"Why?" Exasperation seeped through the word.

"To read in the bath, of course."

Dirk stepped carefully around a stack of old periodicals and a bowl that had clearly been bubbling over for hours. Beneath it, a paraffin burner attached to a system of rubber pipes was merrily blazing away. The carpet near the bowl was sticky under foot and the contents smelt like they could melt steel. Beyond it, the bathroom door lay ajar.

The bathroom was small but extremely modern, with a plumbed bath and white tiled walls. It contained the usual tools of cleanliness—soap, towels, razor. But there were other touches that were distinctly Blaze-Simms. A shaving brush on a mechanical arm with a pipe to squirt foam between the bristles. A thermometer on the side of the bath connected through gears and fan-belts to the taps. Wax pencils scattered around the floor and equations idly scrawled across the walls in moments of inspiration.

Next to the mirror were two shelves. One was loaded with bottles, jars and spare gears. The other was empty.

Dirk knew Blaze-Simms's mind well enough to know what that meant. If something fascinated him, as this stone tablet rightly did, then he'd keep it somewhere easily to hand. Still, Dirk rummaged through the rest of the bathroom, just in case the priceless artefact was hidden beneath an old towel.

"No good," he said as he returned to the dining room. "They beat us to it."

Isabelle had somehow found a clean cloth and bowl of water and was trying to tend to Blaze-Simms's wounds, not an easy task when he was darting back and forth, amending a sprawl of notes across the table cloth. His face looked less swollen than it had done, and his hair was only lightly singed.

"So what now?" she asked, gently pushing Blaze-Simms back into a seat. "We can't let them get away with this."

Dirk scratched his chin, fingers rasping over stubble. They could try finding the ninjas the same way they'd done before, asking folks in the street, trailing them from one sighting to the next. But the ninjas had more of a lead than before, and Blaze-Simms's street was pretty much just apartments. No tradesmen or stallholders lingered around here to provide easy witnesses.

Maybe they could follow the trail the old-fashioned way, looking for tracks in the dirt. Except that these streets would be full of footprints, burying the ones they were after. And even in London, with its clouds of soot and choking smogs, there wasn't much on the rooftops to leave footprints in.

If there was no trail to follow, then they'd have to start from scratch. For all its cosmopolitan nature, London wasn't exactly crawling with deadly, black-clad orientals. They should stand out, wherever they were. Poke the right pool of

shadow and they'd come scuttling out. The problem was working out where to prod.

"Remember the Skelmersdale theft?" Dirk asked.

"Of course!" Blaze-Simms brushed aside Isabelle's ministrations, grabbing a walking stick as he headed for the door. Dirk followed after him.

"Wait!" Isabelle hurried after them. "Where are you going?"

"Chap we met on an old case," Blaze-Simms called back over his shoulder.

They hurried down the stairs and through the lobby, Blaze-Simms tipping his hat to an elderly neighbour who stared in concern at his battered face.

"If you tried hard you could be less specific." Isabelle's voice was sharp with annoyance. "What chap?"

"Chinese guy," Dirk said. "Called himself the Manchurian. Knows most of the oriental folks in London, and has his sticky fingers in half their business."

"You'll like him," Blaze-Simms said. "He's a people person."

Chinatown was a piece of a foreign land flung down in the middle of London. Its inhabitants had adopted the narrow, crowded streets so beloved of urban landlords, and the frantic, noisy lifestyle that made Londoners who they were. But theirs was still an alien presence, from the wide hats and loose tunics to the strange languages and sharp cooking smells. It was like entering another world.

Dirk knew just enough to know that these folks weren't all Chinese. This was a medley of a dozen different lands, the mixed races of the Orient flung together, indistinguishable to your average Englishman or American. Haughty Japanese, stooped Szechuanese, Hong Kong con-men, even the odd Korean sailor looking lost in the crowd. This was the Orient seen through a European lens—dirty, crowded, muddled, everything and everyone united in their primitive lifestyles.

The shop that fronted the Manchurian's operation was down a narrow back alley, hidden from the street noise. Dirk pushed aside a bead curtain and stepped inside, followed by Isabelle and Blaze-Simms.

The room was crowded with old things. Jars of shrivelled leaves and pickled roots for exotic medicines. Dusty statues of fat, laughing men. Brass bowls and faded parchments. In the middle of it all sat a wrinkled shopkeeper with a long moustache and elaborate but frayed robes.

The old man looked up at the rattle of the curtain. He bowed his head and shuffled around from behind the counter. The movement stirred the incense smoke that rose from burners around the room, wafting over a sweet, smoky scent.

"Welcome to humble shop." He steeped his fingers and lowered his head in a bow. "You looking for gift, yes?"

"No," Dirk said. "I'm looking for the Manchurian."

"Finger bowl is Manchurian." The old man pointed to a shelf of earthenware. "Some statues."

"Not Manchurian decorations, *the* Manchurian." Dirk folded his arms. It had been a long day already, and he wasn't up for games. "Well connected guy, works out back of your shop."

"Sorry, not know what you mean."

"Don't give me that." Dirk bristled with indignation. "I've been here before. Met you before. Been into your back room before and done a deal with your boss."

He pointed at another bead curtained doorway leading out of the back of the shop.

"Sorry, not know what you mean." The old man held his long nailed hands wide, pulling a face of exaggerated bemusement. "I am own boss. Only tea set in back room."

"Oh, for goodness sake," Blaze-Simms said. "It was only a year ago. You must remember us."

"Year long time. Many shoppers buy fine products, very reasonable price. I still own boss."

"Now listen here." Dirk loomed over the shopkeeper, bringing the full physical mass of his presence to bear. "Tell your boss we're from the Epiphany Club. We'll pay well for his time, but we ain't gonna be messed around by his cover man. Understand?"

The old man just shrugged his shoulders and treated Dirk to another bemused grin. Dirk replied with a scowl. This had been straightforward last time. They'd thrown around some cash and careful words, found the Manchurian's lair and been invited in. What was the problem this time? Had they stumbled over some stupid piece of gangster etiquette? Had he moved on? Was he just the kind of guy to mess folks around?

What the hell was the problem?

"Is this original Longquan Celadon ware?" Isabelle held up a small blue-green vase with handles shaped like animals. "It looks like a very early example."

"Yes." The old man shuffled around Dirk, eyes glittering as he zeroed in on Isabelle. "Very fine piece. Good glaze. Hard to find. You want?"

"A fine early piece like this could fetch all sorts of interest." Isabelle smiled. "I'm sure if I tell people you'll have a virtual sea of customers flooding into your shop. Everybody from artists to judges."

"Ha! I joke." The old man's grin became fixed, his body stiff. "Is imitation. Very fine imitation. Good glaze."

"So you just tried to sell me a fake?"

"Not fake. Imitation. Best quality. Chinese craftsmanship."

Blaze-Simms peered at the pot. "I don't think it is. The quality of the clay's wrong. More likely from Stoke, or possibly Manchester."

"Stoke pottery very like Chinese. Learn Chinese ways. Hard to tell difference."

"How fascinating." Isabelle's smile widened. "Perhaps I should find a policeman and see if they can confirm that?"

"No need! I sell you very cheap, yes? Specially price for friendly customer. No need for bother..."

The shop keeper's words faded to a nervous grin.

Behind him, the bead curtain twitched and a young woman's head emerged.

"The Manchurian will see you now," she said.

Dirk gave the bowing shopkeeper one last glare as they were led down a narrow corridor and into a small room panelled with smooth, unvarnished wood. The man who sat in it was much as Dirk remembered him. Anonymous, westernised

clothes, shirt crisply starched, tie ruler straight. A calm face with the slightest smile. Dark, hooded eyes.

"Welcome." He waved them to seats with a hand whose bottom two fingers had been cut off at the knuckles. "Sir Timothy. Mr Dynamo. It is a pleasure to see you again."

Dirk lowered himself onto a wooden stool too small to comfortably take his bulk.

"And who is your charming companion?" the Manchurian asked as he poured tea.

"My name is Isabelle McNair." Isabelle didn't wait for the formality of introductions, settling with perfect poise on another of the stools and looking directly at their host. "And you are...?"

"I am simply the Manchurian." He passed them each a small bowl of green tea. "In my work, names are too important to spend lightly."

Dirk looked down at his tea. The bowl was barely more than an inch across, a drink for ceremonies, not quenching thirst. His fingers felt large and clumsy around the tiny object.

"Might I ask what your work is?" Isabelle held her cup lightly in her lap.

"I help people to find what they want, away from the glare of the open market." The Manchurian met Isabelle's gaze. If this was a staring match then it was the most sedate Dirk had ever seen. Neither showed any intensity of emotion, just the calm, quiet smiles of people chatting comfortably. People whose looks were fixed unwaveringly on each other.

"What some might call a fence?" Isabelle made the accusation sound polite.

"Of course not. That would be a crime." The Manchurian sipped his tea. "I am simply an enabler, a trader in information and services."

"And paintings," Blaze-Simms said.

"Did I sell you Lord Skelmersdale's painting?" The Manchurian set his cup down. "No. I merely directed you towards a man who could help. And now, I expect that you want my help again. So, what can I do for you today?"

"We're looking for some folks." Dirk set aside the futile little teacup. The damn thing didn't hold enough to quench a mouse's thirst. "They're in the enabling business too, only they enable with swords and knives. Black-clad, skulking types. Not Chinese, but from your side of the world."

"You wish to hire ninjas?" Their host raised an eyebrow.

"Find, not hire." Dirk leaned forward. If he could have done, he'd have cut straight through this conversation and on to the chase. "It's a particular group of ninjas. Big crew, been up in Manchester earlier in the year, stole something from us earlier today. We want our property back."

The Manchurian refilled his teacup, offered more to his guests. Silence grew around him. It scratched at Dirk's nerves but he kept himself still and quiet. He might be happiest with action, but if you wanted folks to do as you asked, sometimes you had to let them have things their way.

"I know of a group of ninja." The Manchurian sipped his tea. "They were in London in the spring and have recently returned. They are known as the Striking Snowflake, for they melt away in a moment."

"I say, that sounds like them!" Blaze-Simms beamed at the discovery, but his words were followed by an awkward silence. "Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

"Really?" The Manchurian played with the tea set again, letting attentive quiet build before he continued. "I do not know these people, but I am aware of their movements. The lands you call the Orient are a wide world of empires and oceans. London is one small city, and here it is much harder to hide."

He rose, smooth and formal.

"Wait here." He bowed his head slightly and turned toward the door. "Enjoy your tea. I will return shortly."

Once he was gone, Isabelle turned to face Dirk and Blaze-Simms.

"What an interesting gentleman." She sipped from her cup. "How did you meet him?"

"There was this painting," Blaze-Simms began. "Or at least, we thought there was, and it had been—ouch!"

"What he meant to say," Dirk said, retracting his foot, "is that there's some things we ain't at liberty to talk about, on account of promises and laws, and this is one of them."

"Of course." Isabelle's smile wasn't quite as warm as usual, but she made no further comment.

They sat in silence, Isabelle drinking her tea, Timothy scribbling in a notebook, Dirk using a spare stool as an improvised dumbbell. It felt odd, falling into regular habits so far from a regular moment, but there was no sense in letting time go to waste.

"I say." Blaze-Simms looked up from his notes. "If we can track down these Striking Snowflake fellows, maybe we can find out why they're after the tablet. I mean, I know it's meant to lead us to all sorts of knowledge, but—ouch!"

"Timothy." Isabelle retracted her foot. "Some things are best discussed in private, and not in the waiting rooms of gentlemen who sell information for money."

"Wise as well as beautiful." The Manchurian stood in the doorway, a teenage girl behind him. "If you ever need work, please come to me."

"So kind," Isabelle said. "Do you pay well?"

The Manchurian smiled and stepped back into the room, leaving the girl on the threshold.

"You are in luck." He settled back into his seat. "The Striking Snowflake passed near here a few hours ago. Arrogant Japanese, they assumed no-one would notice them among so many easterners."

He poured himself tea, the liquid still steaming as it emerged from the spout. Dirk figured that the block on which it rested must be heated from within, and he noticed Blaze-Simms craning his neck, trying to get a view of how it worked.

The girl stood silent, her head bowed, face half hidden by her hair.

"Li Fen here can lead you to where they left my... area of influence," the Manchurian said. "After that you will have to find your own way. I would not encroach on another man's manor, as these Londoners have it."

"Thank you." Isabelle reached inside her bag. "And what do we owe you for your kind assistance?"

"I would not be so crude as to ask payment for this small matter," the Manchurian said. "Merely a favour later, when it is needed. Your club has many

contacts and resources, and will assist me in some equally trifling matter, when the time is right."

"You are too kind," Isabelle said. "Are you sure you won't accept payment now?"

"Very sure. Now if you will excuse me, I have other guests waiting. Li Fen will show you out."

Li Fen silently gestured them down the corridor and through a back door, then walked ahead of them down a maze of alleyways, glancing back at each turn to make sure she was still followed. Dirk wondered if she spoke any English at all. She didn't respond to Isabelle's enquiries about her health and background, or Blaze-Simms's queries about the meanings of oriental signs and graffiti.

The last alley they walked down was a dead end, its slimy cobbles leading to a brick wall. Buildings crowded around them, blocking out the light, and though the smell made clear that something was rotting, Dirk couldn't see whether it was food scraps, human waste, or some poor cat that had come here to die.

Li Fen stopped a foot from the wall and pointed at the ground. Dirk peered down, trying to make out anything in the gloom. He crouched on one knee, something cold seeping through his trousers, and saw a wide circle sunken into the street.

"You got a light, Tim?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Blaze-Simms said. "Would you like matches, or this new device I've been working on? It has a clockwork powered mechanism which—"

"The device." Dirk peered at the manhole cover. "'Cause guess where we're going?"

"Same as Venice?" Blaze-Simms fumbled through his pockets.

"Same as Venice."

"What is the same as Venice?" There was an irritable edge to Isabelle's voice.

"Funny story," Blaze-Simms said. "We'd been on the trail of a hoard of pre-Columbian treasure brought to Europe by Italian sailors. We knew it was... Oh, do you want this?"

He held out a small box with a crank on the side.

"Just give me a second." Dirk ran his hands across the steel disk, ignoring the unpleasantly slick film that coated it. If something hadn't died here then something fairly primitive was trying to live.

"The gold part of the treasure was purely incidental," Blaze-Simms continued. "What was really of interest was a set of Mayan carvings, believed to be..."

As Timothy kept talking Dirk continued his search. Finding two holes in the manhole cover, he crammed a couple of fingers through each, braced himself and heaved. For a long moment he strained for nothing, years of rust and dirt having fixed the cover in place. But he kept pulling, muscles hot with tension, ragged edges biting into his fingers, breath harsh in his smoke-ravaged throat. Finally, with a screech of metal against metal, the manhole came loose, one side rising up towards him.

Isabelle lunged forwards, slamming the cover back down so hard Dirk felt the clang through his boots.

"What the hell are you doing?" He shook his scraped and aching fingers. His fondness for Isabelle was fading fast.

"What am I doing?" She glared at him. "What are you doing, more like!"

"I'm goin' down into the sewers."

"Just like that? No protection, no permission, no papers, just down into the sewer?"

"Well, yeah." Now Dirk glared at her, frustrated at the feeling that he was being treated like an idiot, and that it wasn't his fault. He didn't like to be ignorant, liked to have his ignorance pointed out even less. "Why not?"

"You do that and you'll be dead within the hour. Not to mention leaving us to deal with the consequences."

"What's gonna kill me? An extra large rat? Angry cockroaches? The sewage monsoon?"

"Honestly, don't you know anything?"

They stood glaring at each other, both with arms folded and chins jutting in indignation. Dirk looked to Blaze-Simms for explanation, but the Englishman only shrugged.

"I don't see how it can be worse than Venice," he said.

"Come with me." Isabelle turned and strode back toward the sound of busy London streets. "I'll sort this out, before you get us all killed."

Chapter 4

Going Underground.

Dirk watched Isabelle glide effortlessly through the crowded pub. She should have been a fish out of water, the society lady with her sharp, calculating mind in a dank, smoke-darkened hole full of labourers, sailors and drunks. But as she squeezed past, and they glanced down at her unblemished skin and costly dress, she'd make a small gesture or say a few words, and they'd smile and nod and go back to their drinks, comfortable with her presence. To Dirk, she was so obviously not one of them it was almost painful to see her here, like spotting a thoroughbred stallion dragging carts with pack mules. But to the people she passed she was one of the crowd.

It was weird. These English folks lived their lives defined by class, yet seemed oblivious to its implications, like fish who didn't know they were wet. Every fragment of their lives, from the moment they burst squealing into the world to the last thud of earth on their grave, was coloured by class, but they were so used to it they didn't even notice. Marx and Engels could scream from their rooftops while agitators stirred people to riot and the authorities to repression, yet those same rioters would never see the little ways in which their every manner, every move, announced and reinforced their status to the folks they met.

But Isabelle knew. She saw and understood, and with that understanding came power. The power to overcome class barriers and join any crowd, to play up to those colours and find complete acceptance.

She emerged from the belly of the pub with a little old man following in her wake, and led her companions outside.

It was an ordinary London street, with cramped buildings, dirty cobbles and a thin draping of smog. There was a beggar at one end and a cluster of kids playing jacks at the other. The folks passing by looked poor but respectable, heads held high, coats worn and patched.

Blaze-Simms leaned against a lamppost across the street, trying to look casual while one hand gripped his cane and the other dangled by the gun-shaped bulge in his jacket. Dusk was falling, and the flickering gaslight threw his face into shadow beneath the brim of his top hat. Together with the bruises, it gave him a ghoulish look.

Isabelle made the introductions. "This is Boris the Boat. He's kindly agreed to take us beneath the city."

Boris tipped his cap, revealing a wild spray of hair that matched the startling white of his beard.

"Couldn't we just have gone down the nearest drain?" Dirk's admiration gave way to exasperation at the reminder of why they were here. He'd bow to Isabelle's superiority when it came to grace, beauty and dealing with people, but she still hadn't explained anything and that was getting on his last spare nerve. Apparently chasing ninjas left time for side trips to dingy pubs in shady parts of London, but not for explanations.

Boris snorted.

"Maybe you want get shot or drowned in sewage by Underlord." His accent was Russian, tinged with the odd strained syllable from years of living around Cockneys. "I am poor immigrant and I know this. How you not know how your country works, huh?"

"It ain't my country." Dirk caught himself speaking in an exaggerated western drawl. He might not be a man of any fixed state, but he was still a proud American.

"I'm starting to wonder if it's even mine." Blaze-Simms twirled his cane. "I've barely spoken with an Englishman all day."

"Is this really what we've come to?" Isabelle sounded like an exasperated schoolteacher. "Casual jingoism and alarmist claptrap?"

"No ma'am." Dirk shuffled uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Terribly sorry." Blaze-Simms, like Dirk, was now looking at the floor.

"I should think so too." Isabelle turned to Boris with a smile. "Perhaps you could lead the way?"

"Da."

They followed the Russian around the back of the pub and past a couple of sheds to a canal. A pair of ducks sent ripples through the oily water as they paddled in slow, leisurely circles. A dirt path ran along each bank, shored up with concrete emplacements and wooden posts decorated with a few tiny clumps of weed.

A narrowboat was moored at the near bank, most of its length enclosed with walls and roof, with only a small patch of open deck at each end. Smoke drifted from a bent chimney pipe, past the hooked poles and coils of rope that covered the roof. Boris stepped on board, helping Isabelle on after him.

"You cast off," he said as Dirk and Timothy prepared to join them. "You know how to do this?"

He opened a hatch and disappeared into the bowels of the boat while Dirk and Blaze-Simms untied the ropes holding her in place. The coarse hemp had swollen with damp, and even with Dirk's frontier living experience it took a couple of minutes to get the knots untied. He coughed at the smoke billowing from the stack as the engine purred into life.

"One of you help with coal." Boris popped up at the far end of the boat, wagging a shovel.

"I'll go." Blaze-Simms strode excitedly toward the boatman. "I want to peek at the engine."

He scurried off to the rear of the barge while Dirk settled down on a bench at the front, his back to the low rail. They were drifting away from the path, gathering speed down the canal. The backs of factories and houses loomed above them, brick cliffs broken by the light of an occasional window.

Isabelle sat beside Dirk and let out a long sigh. Her whole body slumped, hands hanging by her sides. They'd all been going strong for hours, and now she looked exhausted, but Dirk still had questions. He needed to know where they were going, and why, and what she had planned along the way. On top of that was the issue of sharing information - he was sick of not knowing what was going on, and if they were working together he needed that to stop. But it was hard to start such a conversation when she could barely sit upright.

"It's been a long day," he said.

"The longest." She tilted her face to look at him, a curl of dark hair plastered to her forehead. "You may be surprised to hear this, but chasing ninjas and fleeing burning buildings aren't normally part of my day."

"Well, you know, every day's a ninja day back home." Dirk smiled. He couldn't help it around her. "So I can say with confidence that you're doing great so far."

"Thank you." She leaned against him, her head resting on his shoulder. "That means a lot to me."

Any questions and challenges went rushing from Dirk's mind. All he could think of was the gentle pressure of her body against his, the smell of her sweat and perfume close enough to overwhelm even a London canal. She made a small sound, almost a purr, and wriggled a little, making herself comfortable.

Slowly, tentatively, he stretched out his arm and placed it protectively around her.

They drifted down the canal like that, Isabelle dozing by his side, Blaze-Simms's voice a happy background chatter from the stern of the boat. Dirk knew from the stars and the last fading light that it took them about half an hour, though the perfect moment of it seemed gone in an instant.

"Almost there!" The calm was broken by Blaze-Simms as he strolled along the top of the boat. Isabelle jerked upright at the noise, blinking and rubbing her eyes. Dirk pulled back his arm and glared up at the Englishman.

"Still not sure where there is, though." Blaze-Simms thudded down onto the deck and settled on the bench opposite them. His front was smeared with coal dust, his hands black with it.

"We're going into the sewers," Isabelle said. "But we're going the polite way."

"So what, we go knock on the outhouse door?" Dirk raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Very funny." Isabelle shook her head. "We're going in through the front door of the man who rules down there, and we're going to ask for help as well as his permission to travel."

"Someone rules under London?" Dirk asked.

"People live under London?" Timothy sounded even more bemused.

"Oh dear," Isabelle said. "What world have you two been living in, with your tea parties and libraries and adventures with paintings? People live everywhere. From the frozen rim of Siberia to the sun-blasted Sahara, from the wide American plains to a tiny island made of bird droppings. Everywhere. People. They adapt, they learn, they build civilisations.

"There are miles of tunnels under London, and all manner of materials to build a life from. Of course people live there. Their ruler swears fealty to the Queen once a year, in a darkened back room of the palace. But they have their own rules, and it would be both dangerous and terribly impolite to forget that."

The barge had turned down a side channel and was heading towards a lock, its entrance illuminated by the full moon. In the white light, silhouettes scurried around the top of the lock, turning handles, pushing beams, opening the wide gates. The narrowboat slowed as it passed through the gates and ropes dropped out of the darkness, lassoing the boat's mooring pins and pulling tight. It was an impressive display of rope work, small loops hitting first time in moonlight. Dirk was so out of practice that he wasn't sure he would have made those shots.

"We gettin' to this front door soon?" He stood to stretch his legs and catch a glimpse at the fellows on the path. They remained elusive, shadows in the night.

"We're there," Isabelle replied.

With a thud the front of the barge hit the inner lock gate. Ropes strained and men groaned as they inched the boat back, then the other gate slammed shut behind them. Cries of "Clear!" came from both ends of the lock, immediately followed by a rattling of gears. The sluice gates opened with a roar, murky water foaming white into the lock below, and they sank into darkness, walls of filthy grey stone rising around them, dripping with slime and weeds.

Dirk reached out and ran a finger over a passing block, acquiring a layer of green slime that stank of pure, unfiltered rot. It wasn't lovely, but he'd dealt with far worse. He flicked the slime away into the canal.

As the moon disappeared over a man-made horizon the churning water fell silent, the boat settling into its new level, and the gates swung open towards them. Ahead, illuminated by the boat's lantern, a tunnel mouth gaped, jagged with fallen masonry like the shattered line of a boxer's teeth. A wooden board hung above the entrance, one word scrawled in wide strokes of red paint across the crumbling planks.

"STYX."

The whole place gave Dirk the creeps.

On the towpath a figure sat hunched under a hooded robe, one withered hand clutching a dented tin bowl. As they drew level he shook it, rattling whatever was inside.

"Penny for the Underlord, lords and ladies?" he called out in a hoarse croak. "Them pays what comes to hell."

Dirk glanced at Isabelle, who nodded and pulled a purse from somewhere in her dress. She reached over the bow and tipped the contents into the battered bowl with a clatter that echoed into the darkness. Timothy followed suit, leaning out as they drifted past the huddled figure, dropping more coins into the pot. Finally, Dirk stretched out behind him, leaving a few glittering disks in the dish.

"Hope you take small change," he said, surprised to find himself feeling a little embarrassed. "I don't carry much."

"I takes whatever I can get." The man winked at him. Even that gesture added to Dirk's nervous edge.

In the tunnel, the workings of the narrowboat made their presence felt. The sound of its engine echoed around them and the smell of coal smoke, rather than drifting off into London's already murky air, hung around them, the tunnel's air flow carrying it forward faster than the boat moved.

The tunnel was brick lined, its smoothly curved surface dotted with weeds and moss. The sound of the boat was accompanied by the drip of water into the canal, a far louder sound than Dirk expected, each pointed sound echoing round and back, becoming magnified in the confined space.

"Hello?" Blaze-Simms called into the darkness, grinning as he listened to his voice return to him a dozen times over. "I say!"

"Timothy," Isabelle whispered, "do remember that people are watching us."

"Oh yes. Sorry." Blaze-Simms grinned sheepishly as these last words too echoed back to him.

It was cold in the tunnels. Up above, the air had been warmed by the summer sun. Not so down here. Dirk found it soothing after the heat and labours of the day, but Isabelle was shivering. He took off his jacket and draped it across her shoulders. She smiled at him and as he stepped away their fingers brushed. This time Dirk shivered.

The tunnel opened up into a circular chamber, still brick lined, with moorings at the far side. Gas lamps flickered on the wall beyond the moorings, their flames tinged with green.

Boris brought the boat round in a graceful curve, bumping sideways against the moorings. Dirk grabbed a rope and leapt onto the bank, tying them in place while Blaze-Simms and Isabelle climbed onto dry land.

"Thank you, Boris," Isabelle called down to the boat.

"No problem," the old Russian said. "You want I take you back also?"

"No, thank you. We'll find our own way home."

"Is good. Tomorrow is Sabbath. I don't work on Sabbath."

Dirk cast off the rope and the boat chugged away, back along the tunnel to the world above.

Isabelle led them through a doorway and down a long line of stairs. The theme of gas lamps and slippery brickwork continued until they emerged into another man-made cavern. This one was at least fifty feet across and half that high, its walls lined with piles of crates and barrels, heaps of warped timber and mismatched bricks. The ceiling disappeared not into walls but into the shadows behind these stacks, hiding the true size of the space.

They strode out into the middle of the room, then stopped.

"What now?" Dirk asked.

"Patience," Isabelle replied.

Something was stirring around the edge of the room. Shadowy bodies emerging among and above the crates. Faces peering out between the heaps. The shuffling and tap of footfalls. Whispers, coughs, deep breaths.

"Hello!" Blaze-Simms waved, then paused, squinting. He'd clearly spotted the same thing Dirk had.

The denizens of London below were emerging from the shadows, the first trickle of arrivals growing to a crowd. Among them were midgets and a pasty giant, folks with half a face or a missing limb. Hunchbacks, lepers and slack-faced loons. One man whose every inch of skin was covered in hair, and another who dragged himself along on a wheelbarrow, double-elbowed arms dipping to the ground.

Not a single one of them was normal and whole.

"What the hell's with this place?" Dirk whispered as he stared at the mob of warped bodies. "Everyone looks like they've escaped from Barnum's freak circus."

The crowd closed in, surrounding Dirk and his companions in a small circle of bare floor. Their uncanny nature sent a shiver down Dirk's spine. He could rationalise it all he wanted, think they were normal folks inside, that this was all just accidents of birth or life or both. He could tell himself that these things happened all the time, that you just didn't normally see so many of them at once. He could urge himself to be grateful, that there but for a whim of the world went he. But for all that, the revulsion still welled up within him, a baser instinct at which he felt ashamed.

The giant leaned over, long blonde hair hanging past her face, and stared Dirk in the eye.

"You're the freak down here, straight-boy," she said. "You'd better not forget it."

Surrounded in darkness by a hostile mob, Dirk had to fight the itch to reach for his gun. He cursed his own stupidity for saying anything at all, never mind saying it loud enough to be heard. They were on someone else's turf, looking for their help. Getting into a fight would be the worst possible start.

Well, the worst start short of getting lynched without fighting back. But the crowd had stopped closing in, and now they too were waiting expectantly, not leaping forward to make good on the giant's implied threat.

"I'm sorry to intrude, and for my friend's frightful comment." Isabelle looked serene as ever, smiling at the people around them. "But is one of you the Underlord?"

A chuckle echoed around the ceiling, bounding and rebounding until its soft stutter became a chorus of mirth. It seemed to come from all around, trickling with the condensation from the walls, rising worm-like from the ground. Dirk spun around, searching for the source. Tension gripped him.

The chuckling gave way to a voice that rasped like rusty steel.

"Over here, boys and gals."

At the far end of the chamber a man towered above them, raised up on a stack of wooden crates. A semicircle of miner's lamps lit him from below, casting his shadow up the wall in gigantic proportions. One hand spun a fob-watch on a tarnished chain, while the other held up a hand-rolled cigarette like it was the most exquisite cigar in all of London. He smiled a shrivelled smile from beneath a moustache like a tiny, greasy rat.

"Looks like we've got guests. Should I be getting out the good china?" He took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew a smoke-ring. "And before that, is there any reason I should let you live?"

Chapter 5

The Underlord.

Dirk had faced enough self-styled masterminds in his time to hear the words coming. Before the Underlord had even finished his threat, his hand was on his gun and halfway through drawing. He'd be happy to shoot this smug villain full of lead.

But before he could get the Gravemaker from its holster Isabelle's hand was on his, restraining him.

"You think you have a choice, old chap?" Blaze-Simms's swordstick snicked clear of its sheath. "You're not the first villain to try to kill us, but as you can see, we're still standing."

"Timothy, put it away." Isabelle's tone clearly struck a chord, the blade disappearing almost on reflex.

"You've got them well trained, haven't you?" The Underlord's smile had something of the sneer to it.

"Their training is entirely their own," Isabelle said. "Unfortunately, so are their manners. I am Mrs Isabelle McNair. This is Sir Timothy Blaze-Simms and Mr Dirk Dynamo, of the Epiphany Club. We would like to permission to enter your domain, and the honour of a conversation with you, if we may."

"Epiphany Club, eh?" The Underlord tilted his head, catching the lantern light. Swept-back hair glistened like fish scales. "I knew several adventurous types at Cambridge who went on to join the club. I don't suppose you know Roger Harcourt-Phipps?"

"Of course." Isabelle smiled. "Splendid boxer."

"Small world, even above the ground." The Underlord took a last puff on his cigarette and ground the butt beneath his heel. "You can relax. I've no intention of killing you. Not yet, anyway. You found the ferryman, you paid the gatekeeper, and you had the good manners not to wander round my manor without permission. The least I can do is offer you tea."

The receiving room was another brick vaulted chamber, better lit and with less dripping from the walls, but still without the air of something designed for human habitation.

The Underlord sat in a wooden throne, clearly ancient and clearly battered by wear and damp. It creaked as he leaned forward, placing his elbows on the end of a long table. His three-piece suit was old and patched, and flecks of mud marked his sleeves.

Seated in high backed chairs along the sides of the table, Dirk and Blaze-Simms glanced at each other, waiting for Isabelle to take the lead. Aside from the

Underlord, she was the only one looking relaxed, apparently unruffled by the filth and menace of their surroundings.

They'd been herded here by the malformed crowd, which had then retreated, forming an audience from doorways and alcoves around the edges of the room. Now that he'd got used to them, Dirk mostly felt pity for these poor souls, worn down by fate and left to linger here in darkness.

The décor of the room was mildewed mock gothic. Banners hung from the walls, decorated not with ancient heraldry but with slogans from regatta days or the logos of merchant fleets ploughing the Thames. Red velvet covered the table, but it was a patchwork affair, half a dozen pieces of faded cloth stitched together with their worse stains out of view. The candlesticks were mostly beer bottles, given a decorative aspect by the mixed dribblings of wax that coated their sides.

"I built some of these tunnels." The Underlord pointed at the brickwork above their heads. "Not the ones you've been through today, but others. I was a civil engineer, doing public works. North London sewers mostly, and a couple of covert links between government buildings. That's what made me aware of this hidden realm. You can't see so much of the darkness and not start to think how it might all add up."

He clicked his fingers and a dog padded into view, a tea-tray strapped to its back. Settling back into his battered throne, the Underlord proceeded to pour out four cups of tea, passing them to his guests.

"I've got to thinking that the Chinese have it right when it comes to tea." He dropped a lump of sugar into his cup, added a careful splash of milk. "It's not just a drink, it's a sacred rite. It's the uniting strand that binds us together. High and low, rich and poor, we all take time for tea."

"Some get finer tea than others, though." Dirk stirred his own cup. He might not like the Underlord's taste in dramatic menace, but he was always happy to discuss politics and society. Might as well make the most of a bad situation.

"You believe in class distinctions, Mr Dynamo?" The Underlord's eyes narrowed.

"I believe that they exist, not that they should." Dirk sipped his tea. It was better than he'd expected.

"I believe in neither. True, some are wealthier than others, some have finer homes or better health. But the bonds that matter stretch across that. Those of shared spirit, of character, of nationhood, of living a unique moment in history.

"What sort of class would you call us down here? Proletariat, perhaps? Or do we even qualify for that? A down-trodden mass, forced to live in the darkness below the privileged and powerful?"

He leaned forward, eyes glinting with intensity in the candlelight.

"You think that I am forced to live down here? An engineer, a man of learning such as myself? I choose to live here, for the wonders and joys that it brings. As much as a prince or parliamentarian, I live surrounded by the glories of our age. Look around you. What do you see?"

Dirk turned his head, gazing around the chamber. Not that he needed to look. He'd taken in every detail by the time he'd been there ten seconds. But this was a moment for social games, and this was one he could play. So play he did, acting out an exaggerated turning of his head, a roaming of the eyes, a thoughtful nodding. He stared again at the dripping walls, bricks running together as the

foulest of the waste slowly dissolved their surfaces. The muck-trodden floor, brown with things it was best not to consider. The rickety table and the improvised candlesticks, chipped china and mismatched napkins, not hiding the grimness of this world but enhancing it, forcing the eye and the mind to address their surroundings however squalid and absurd.

He turned back to the Underlord and paused for a long second, wondering what answer the man was after. He settled on the obvious.

"Sewers," he said at last.

"Exactly right!" The Underlord grinned like he'd been handed a barrel of gold. "That one word captures the wonders which we have achieved. A marvel of engineering and infrastructure, miles of public construction beyond anything our ancestors could have envisaged, humbly hidden beneath the feet of the nation. We keep our real glories hidden.

"Like these men and women. To the ignorant masses who walk our streets they are just wretched, dirty and broken beneath industry's wheel. But they are so much more. Their toil, their spirit, these are wonders of the age. See Toby here..."

He waved over a tall, muscular man with weather-beaten skin and a massive grin. One shirt sleeve dangled empty by his side.

"Toby," the Underlord said, "tell our guests what you did for a living."

"I was a navvie, m'lord." Toby's tone was deep and rattling, a rock-slide of a voice. "I dug canals and laid railway tracks."

"You enjoyed it?"

Toby's smile widened, almost splitting his face in two. "I see coal in London, come all the way from Yorkshire, and I think to myself 'I done that'. I'll love my job forever."

"Sam!" The Underlord waved at someone in the shadows. "Tingling Sam, get yourself over here!"

A small man, crouched over his clasped hands, scurried out of the crowd. He bowed his head, nodding as he walked, like a pigeon hunting crumbs. When he reached the Underlord he looked up, revealing a face torn by a patchwork of scars, whole swathes of skin smooth and red or deathly pale.

"Sam." The Underlord lowered his voice, as if talking to a small child. "Sam, what do you like to do?"

Sam glanced around nervously, eyes flitting over the visitors and then back to his master. His lips twitched uncertainly.

"It's alright, Sam," The Underlord said. "You can talk in front of these people. What is it you like?"

"Splosions." Sam shot a furtive look at Isabelle as he said it, breaking briefly into a smile. "I make splosions."

"What do you make your explosions for, Sam?" The Underlord leaned forward eagerly.

"Stuff." He paused thoughtfully, then counted off on thin fingers. "Bombs. Guns. Digging. Fireworks. Fun."

"Could you do that if you weren't a Victorian, Sam? If you didn't live in this great and glorious age?"

Sam scrunched up his face, as if trying to remember some long-forgotten lesson. Then he shook his head.

"Sam is a chemist," the Underlord explained. "An artisan of explosives. Through science, he can control the details of his work. Size, intensity, colour, effect. He is a master of a craft that could not exist in any other age. Isn't that right Sam?"

"I like when they're tall and red." Sam was looking at Isabelle again, imparting a shared secret. His voice shook with quiet intensity. "It makes me tingle."

"Some people don't see the world I live in." The Underlord waved a hand at the broken masses huddled around him. "They believe that there is only shiny, clean wonder in our age. Wilfully or obliviously, they do not notice. Others see the blemishes, frailties, injuries, and see corruption in everything. The wiser see both, but see them in conflict, a battle between corruption and perfection, whether embodied by culture, class or race.

"But down here we see the truth. The two are not separate. They are not opposing forces grinding away at each other, or principles caught in some delicate balance. They are aspects of one and the same thing, a single uniting power seen from a million different angles. It exists in every space and every moment, and all are made equal by its touch. It is the march of history, the touch of divinity, the living soul. It is the modern."

The Underlord fell silent. Dirk felt numbed by the barrage of words, and Blaze-Simms's face reflected his own feelings of stunned bewilderment. It was hard to tell how much of what they'd just heard made any kind of sense, there'd been so much of it. But Isabelle, like the Underlord's followers, was nodding thoughtfully, as if taking in an insightful lesson. Somewhere in the chamber, condensation dripped from the ceiling, its irregular beat puncturing the quiet.

"Enough of my ramblings." The Underlord picked up his teacup. "What can I do for you?"

"We believe that someone else has come into your domain." Isabelle raised her own chipped cup, holding it as delicately as one would the finest china. "A group of orientals. They stole something from Sir Timothy's house, and we would like it back."

The Underlord poured himself more tea. He did it carefully, filling the cup to a precise level, watching the colour as he poured in the milk.

"I don't know anything about orientals." His spoon clicked against china. "If they are down here then we haven't seen them."

"All the more reason to get involved," Isabelle said. "Surely you can't let people wander around your territory without your permission?"

"A good point. What's a lord without authority over his lands?" The Underlord sipped his tea. "So you want my help tracking down these orientals, and you want your property back when they're found. But what's in it for me and mine? These could be dangerous sorts. I might be better off just letting them leave. Or ambushing them and taking whatever you're after for myself. You've gone to quite some effort to get here, so it must be valuable."

"As you admitted, there's the authority issue." Isabelle set her cup aside and crossed her gloved hands, taking on a deeply serious look. "All your good subjects watching us now know that you've been invaded, and you'll need to show them that you can deal with that.

"As for why you should let us take our property, the answer is because you will get our help. These are dangerous men. Very dangerous men. We have fought

them several times, and beaten them, but they keep coming. Look at Mr Dynamo. Do you think any but the most deadly and determined opponent keeps running up against him? We'll help you exert your authority, and you'll help us get our property back. What do you say?"

The Underlord opened a wooden box of cigars and proffered them around the table. They all took one, even Isabelle, to Dirk's surprise and the Underlord's clear amusement.

"I like you, Mrs McNair." The Underlord lit his cigarette, paused thoughtfully as he took his first mouthful of smoke. "You're not afraid to stoop to my level."

"We're all on one level, your lordship." She lit a match on the arm of her chair. "Didn't you just tell us that?"

Dirk took a drag on his cigar. It was cheap and nasty, but it had been a long day and he didn't reckon it was over yet. Any little pleasure to see him through.

He stole a glance at Isabelle. Any little pleasure.

"I don't suppose you're widowed?" The Underlord was still looking at Isabelle.

Smoke caught in Dirk's throat. Any liking he had for this greasy little guy was fading fast.

"No, your lordship." Isabelle blew a smoke ring. "Mr McNair is merely busy elsewhere."

"Curious," the Underlord said. "And here you are, wandering the sewers with two other men. You'd have thought a husband would get concerned."

As they looked at each other, Dirk got that old, familiar feeling that he was missing something. There were many things that got him frustrated, but that feeling was top of the list.

"Can we get goin'?" He pushed back his seat. "The longer we wait, the further ahead of us those ninjas will get."

"Of course." The Underlord waved his cigar, smoke trailing through the air. "Plaguepit!"

Someone emerged from the shadows, hunched over in what looked like a monastic habit, the edges frayed and trailing. A sickly miasma hung around the figure, a smell of rot and vomit. Dirk took a deep drag on his cigar, trying to drown it out.

"If you're from the Epiphany Club I'm guessing that you're scholars," the Underlord said. "Are any of you men of science?"

"I'll say." Timothy looked up excitedly.

"Then you should have a look at old Plaguepit here."

The Underlord flicked back the figure's hood, revealing the most horrible face Dirk had ever seen. It might have been a handsome face once, a face that inspired lust and envy. Maybe it had once been plain, or merely ugly. But now it was a devastated mess, blistered, pocked and scarred, the muscles of one side hanging loose, pus seeping from spots and boils.

"Plaguepit here's a whole gallery of biological curios, all by himself. Isn't that right, Plaguepit?"

Plaguepit nodded, his ear wobbling like it wasn't quite fixed in place. Despite his wretched condition he managed a sloppy smile. He seemed familiar with this role as an object of curiosity for strangers.

"A lord needs to take care of his subjects," the Underlord said. "So I've developed my knowledge beyond engineering and into the medical sciences. I've read the works of Mr Jenner, and those who've come after him. That's why I keep Plaguepit around. He comes from a long line of very resilient people. Any time someone in my realm gets a new disease they pass it to Plaguepit. He beats it down, then passes it back harmless to my subjects. Nothing beats Plaguepit."

"But that shouldn't..." Timothy began, and was silenced by a kick from Isabelle.

"Ingenious," she said. "You're clearly a man who knows how to make the most of what he has."

"You're right." The Underlord grinned. "But there's so much more to that than Plaguepit."

He leaped from his seat, cigar tip carving red arcs through the air as he waved it about.

"Come on, I'll show you the real work."

Striding across the room, he set off down a tunnel, his subjects parting to let him through. Dirk and his companions followed. As they passed the lines of twisted bodies and scarred faces, Dirk felt like he was in an inversion of a freak show where normal, well-formed men were the objects of fascination. Roll up, roll up! Come and see the amazing upright man and his companion the thinker!

They twisted and turned through the dank spaces beneath London, up stairs and down slopes, along tunnels so narrow they had to walk sideways and through caverns so vast the ceiling disappeared into darkness.

Much of the journey took them along paths beside the capital's busiest sewers. There were some smells, like battlefields and infection wards, that you never got used to. This was one of them. Dirk felt the bile rising in his throat. He'd have held his nose, but he wanted to keep his hands free in case he slipped on the slimy path.

"Nothing gets wasted down here." The Underlord's voice echoed proudly from the brick vaults.

They emerged half way up the wall of a wide chamber, like the hall of a great palace, but one made of brick, pillared with sewage-weathered stone and painted with putrid slime. People bustled about in the space below them, sorting through piles of rubbish, making heaps of old and rotting food, of broken down furniture, of torn clothes, bricks and rubble. Everything was sifted through, the repairable retrieved from the irredeemably damaged and the unusably vile. What was left was piled into mine carts and pushed through the doors at the far end of the hall.

"This is where we find our treasures." The Underlord beamed with pride. "The things wastefully abandoned or pointlessly thrown away. You'd hardly believe the stuff people will discard. A man could get rich just picking out the gems. But through here, here's the really inspired bit."

He led them along a raised walkway and through an opening in the sewer wall. On the far side was another large chamber, this one filled with the crunk and clank of busy machinery and the smell of well-oiled mechanisms. A dozen sweaty labourers were shovelling heaps of refuse into receptacles like reinforced bathtubs, then standing back as glowing piston-driven presses crashed down on the rubbish. There was a hiss of steam and a smell as acrid as burning hair. Then the

pistons rose and the tubs tipped, dropping solid sheets of who-knew-what onto a conveyor belt.

The Underlord paused.

"The Compactor." He had to shout to be heard above the noise of machinery. "We use it for the real waste, the stuff even we can't reuse. Everything gets sprayed with an acidic formula that loosens its shape, melts it a little. Then the mix is heated under high pressure causing a reaction in the formula, binding everything together. We use the results for construction, and occasionally for fuel."

"What are you constructing down here?" Timothy asked, peering eagerly down at the Compactor.

The Underlord smiled his tight little smile. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Unease crept through Dirk. He understood that the world was full of secrets, but folks who gloated about them were usually up to no good. Yet there was much to admire in the Underlord's work, and so he pressed the feeling down. The man was helping, there was no need to let prejudice get in the way.

The walkway was scrap-built, like everything else in the Underlord's domain. But it was solid enough underfoot, barely creaking as Dirk made his way across the room. Below him, the Compactor chambers glowed, clanging shut then swinging open with a hiss of acrid steam. This was how the superstitious imagined hell, rows of fierce jaws opening on the glow of the flames below. To Dirk it was something glorious, the ultimate expression of the human will. Here anything could be remade, anything could become useful. There were no limits. No need to leave anything or anyone behind. God was dead, heaven and hell with him. Man ruled all, and man could make himself great.

He leaned over the rail, trying to get a better look at what went into the process. Mostly broken, indistinguishable fragments and twisted shapes he would once have thought beyond all use.

Anything. Anything could be remade.

Something slammed into his back. He went over the rail, into the air. The compactor opened wide.

Dirk tumbled in toward fire and steel.

Chapter 6

On the Trail.

Dirk shot out a hand. Skin brushed rusted metal, terror taking hold as the railing slipped through his fingers. He was falling, the compactor gnashing its teeth below him.

His hand hit a strut and he grabbed on tight, quivering with tension as he dangled above the rending jaws. Steam spurted past him in super-heated bursts, the hiss and roar of machinery surrounding him. Above, a hunched figure shifted furtively back from the rail and disappeared.

Dirk could feel his grip slipping, his fingers losing their hold on the strut as its rusted surface rubbed away beneath them.

"Help!" he called out, his voice lost in the noise of the vast, echoing chamber. "Help me, dammit!"

He shifted his body, swung from left to right and managed to get enough momentum to swing his other hand up onto the strut. He grabbed it firmly, even as his initial purchase became nothing more than a painful finger hold.

Frustration bubbling up within him, he fought to stay calm. How had he been so careless as to let someone creep up on him? Why had he relaxed so much in a place full of strangers, freaks and lunatics?

"Help!" he called out again. Both hands were sliding away now, slippery with sweat and steam, their grip closed on little more than layers of rust and flaking paint. He looked around below him. Maybe if he could swing himself forward as his grip went he could fall past the machines. Sure, it was twenty, thirty feet that way, and he wouldn't have much momentum. Even under the best of circumstances it was a long shot, and this definitely wasn't the best of circumstances. But if that was the only chance he had...

Hands closed around his wrists and he found himself hauled upwards. He almost swore with relief as they dragged him over the edge of walkway. He lay there for a moment, enjoying the firm ironwork beneath him and the lightness in his arms, now released from the burden of bearing his whole weight.

"I say, old chap, you gave us quite a scare." Blaze-Simms looked at him with concern. "Were you hanging there long?"

"Too long," Dirk said.

"Sorry about that." Blaze-Simms fished a notebook and pencil out of his pocket. "Didn't notice at first. This place is just so fascinating."

The Underlord stepped forward, a little grin twitching up the corner of his greasy moustache.

"You should be more careful, Mr Dynamo," he said. "Leaning over like that, slipping into my crushing pans, you'll end up as bricks."

"I didn't slip." Dirk took a deep breath to keep his temper in line. This would be the test of their host's intentions. He didn't want to pre-judge the man, but it was hard not to as he sniggered at Dirk's discomfort. "I was pushed."

"Not again." The Underlord's eyes narrowed. "Stupid sods."

He whirled around and bellowed to the room. "Machines off! Everybody stop! We're having a meeting."

The alcove was dark, the walls slimy and cold. Dirk sat forward rather than smear his shirt with the clinging goo, and Isabelle did the same.

He clenched and loosened the hand with which he had grabbed the railing. The palm was badly grazed, the skin rubbed raw, flecks of rust buried in tender flesh. It was the sort of low key, slow burning pain that was hard to ignore, especially given it made his hand next to useless. It was going to hurt to pull a door handle, never mind carry any weight or squeeze the trigger of a gun.

"Let me look at that." Isabelle leaned forward, gently but firmly prying his fingers apart. Her touch was warm and reassuring in the darkness.

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, a white lace square with delicate, embroidered edges. With long finger nails she pulled the slithers of rusted metal from his hand. Each time, the pressure of those nails sent a shiver of pain up

Dirk's arm, but he kept from flinching, holding steady with his hand in hers. With the visible rust gone, Isabelle wrapped the cloth carefully around Dirk's wound, turning his hand over to knot it around the back. Then she held his hand in both of hers, examining her handiwork.

"That should keep it clean for now," she said, and Dirk realised how close their faces were, leaning forward in the darkness. Her warmth radiated against his cheek.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," he murmured.

"Please." She looked up at him. "Call me Isabelle."

Outside, the Underlord was still arguing with his followers, berating some, cajoling others, trying to rouse the crowd without setting more of them against the visitors. Blaze-Simms could occasionally be heard answering a point—calm, reasonable, and so very English.

"How come he's the one talking to them?" Dirk asked. "Ain't that more your area of expertise?"

Isabelle shrugged. "It seemed more appropriate. Even people who will listen to a woman in private may not when she's speaking in public."

"That ain't right." Dirk felt an unexpected burst of indignation. "You've a way with words more than any man I've ever met, and a kindness with folks that'd get any man doing what you please." He paused, realising how awkward his last point had been. "I don't mean that like it sounded. Not that you're manipulative, or—"

"Relax." She laughed and squeezed his hand. "I understand. And thank you. I try to be kind to people, to make people happy. It is one of the few ways a woman can make a difference in this sad, strange world of ours. But some people's happiness matters more than others."

Dirk gazed into her eyes, saw that gentleness looking back at him, so different from himself or from any woman he'd been with.

"I..." Words failed him. She leaned forward, her lips pressed against his. The taste of her was like electricity jolting through him. Their hands tightened together, his pain forgotten in the intensity of delight.

He pulled back, overcome by a moment of guilt.

"You're married," he said. "I can't..."

She looked away, but her hands were still around his, their fingers intertwined.

"What if..." She hesitated. "What if I weren't. What if—"

"I say!" Blaze-Simms thrust his head into the alcove, squinting into the darkness. Isabelle and Dirk jerked back away from each other. Cold soaked into Dirk's back as he pressed against the wall.

"I think they've finished talking," Blaze-Simms continued. "The Underlord wants us all out here."

Dirk and Isabelle both rose at once, bumped into each other in the confined space. She laughed softly and he stepped back.

"After you, ma'am." Feeling confused and awkward, he slipped back into the comfortably familiar.

"Thank you, sir." She led the way out into the chamber.

The Underlord's people stood in wide a ring, the Underlord and another man in the centre. The man's shoulders sloped down to the left, and the right side of his

body was substantially more muscled than the left. His face was downcast beneath a matted grey beard.

The Underlord beckoned Dirk forward into the circle.

"Dirk Dynamo, this is Frederick Raddles," he said with the casual ease of a man introducing two friends at a party. "Mr Dynamo, say hello to Old Fred."

"Howdy," Dirk said, holding out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

There was a pause. Around the circle people shuffled their feet and whispered to one another.

"Fred." A hard edge rose in the Underlord's voice. "What do you have to say to Mr Dynamo?"

Old Fred mumbled indistinctly.

"What was that?" the Underlord said.

"Sorry," Fred muttered, finally meeting Dirk's eye. "For trying to kill you."

Dirk stared in disbelief at the lop-sided cripple. The idea that this man had pushed him over the bannister at the edge of the walkway was absurd. He wondered if the Underlord was covering for something. It was the only explanation that seemed to make any sense.

Then Fred shifted his weight, the muscles of his right side visibly rippling, popping the seams of his stained and much repaired shirt. Now it made a lot more sense.

"Not everyone down here likes or trusts outsiders," the Underlord said. "That's what comes from being mocked and beaten any time you show your face in daylight. Ain't it, Fred?"

Fred shuffled on the spot, eyes down cast once more. Just watching his discomfort made Dirk uneasy.

"It isn't right for my people to take matters into their own hands," the Underlord continued. "Is it, Fred?"

"No, sir," Fred mumbled.

"And he won't do it again, will you?"

"No, sir."

"Right!" the Underlord pulled a wrinkled cigarette from behind his ear and struck a match. "That's settled then. Isn't it, Mr Dynamo?"

Dirk glanced around the circle of warped faces, some eager, curious and welcoming, others filled with wariness and fear. He wasn't sure it was settled at all. But what else was there to say? They needed these folks' help. But now he'd take that help with a backward glance and a wariness of his own.

"Sure is, your lordship." Dirk stuck out a hand towards poor Fred. The lopsided elder ran his hand across his nose with a loud sniff, then took the handshake. His right hand was like a vice squeezing Dirk's fingers, but his left hung withered and twitching at his side. Dirk squeezed back, accepting the challenge of Fred's gaze.

"Grand," the Underlord said. "Now, I've got a realm to rule, and you've got some intruders to catch. Turpin here will be your guide. He's a simple soul, but he knows the tunnels like the back of his hand."

Dirk looked down at the dirt-slathered cherub staring up at him, and the pudgy paw now being held out. He sure hoped their guide knew more about the tunnels than would fit on the back of that hand.

"Well Turpin," he said, "I hope you're real smart."

With his high voice, round face and chubby fingers there was something endearingly childlike about Turpin. He was an adult, the hair spurting from his ears and his incongruously low voice said as much, but even his wide smile was that of a toddler at play as he waddled along the path beside the sewer. At times the tunnels would split and he paused to examine his surroundings, peering at the walls and the ground, kneeling down for a close view of the dirt.

Dirk stayed close to their guide, holding up one of the lanterns they'd been given by the Underlord. He had done tracking in tunnels and sewers before now, but it was a long way from his area of expertise. Give him the sun and the open plains and he could follow week-old prairie dog tracks. But spotting a trail in the darkness and ooze below London took knowledge you couldn't learn in the new world. He wanted to know more.

"This way." Turpin beamed and shone his lantern down a side tunnel.

"How d'you know?" Dirk asked.

Turpin pointed at a green smear among the grey and brown coating the brick wall.

"It's growing back." His voice was full of pride in his skills. "If it's growing back now then it's been hurt today. Someone leaned here."

He turned down the side tunnel, singing softly to himself as he walked. Dirk paused to observe the mark on the wall, the layers of mould and filth, memorising the pattern and what it meant.

"I say, isn't this exciting?" Blaze-Simms asked. His bruised face was still smudged with soot from their journey on the canal boat and he had muddy spatters half way up his carefully tailored trousers. He kept stopping to scribble in his notebook, but Dirk could hardly complain at the delays, given that he was taking tracking lessons as they went.

Besides, he was more concerned with Isabelle than with Timothy. She had been quiet since the alcove, letting Dirk and Blaze-Simms finish off their conversation with the Underlord, giving him the briefest of parting words. She was not meeting Dirk's eye either, though that was a hard thing to judge in the darkness as they trudged down paths often wide enough only for one man, sometimes less than that as they clung to the wall, toes perched on a precarious few inches of slippery brickwork with a rotting mess of sewage below.

Dirk tried to keep his mind on the task, but it was mighty tricky with the memory of her lips brushing his. She was a married woman, and a man had to stand by his principles no matter how hard that was. But it was pretty damn hard right now.

"Down here." Turpin led them down a tunnel so low only he could stay upright, Dirk and his companions stooping to follow through. "You'll get to see something really special."

He closed the shutter of his lantern, urging them to do the same. Without the lamps' orange light, a silvery glow could be seen coming down the tunnel ahead, glistening off the walls, making the gaps between bricks stand out like a web of dark veins.

"Sometimes," Turpin said in an awed whisper, "I think even the walls themselves might be alive."

They stepped out of the end of the tunnel into a chamber filled with the same eerie light. It was like stepping out into moonlight, but moonlight that flowed from every surface, leaving no hiding place for shadows. Every inch of Dirk and his companions was illuminated, from the stains on the underside of Timothy's sleeves to the warts beneath Turpin's straggly hair. But even in the harshly overwhelming light Isabelle remained as beautiful as ever.

The light seemed to come from the walls themselves, from the floor beneath their feet, and most of all from a pool in the centre of the room. Once part of the sewage system, it had been cut off by the deliberate damming of one end and a masonry cave-in at the other. It should have been stagnant and grotesque with trapped waste, or dried out over time, reduced to a layer of slime and crusted sewage. But instead it was full of water that seemed to glow from within, the silhouettes of fish shimmering back and forth beneath its surface.

Dirk placed a hand on the wall and it came away glowing. His skin tingled and shimmered as something writhed on its surface.

"I don't know what it is," Turpin said, "but I've never seen it nowhere else. There must be something special in this place, cause I tried taking some away once and it stopped glowing after a couple of hours, left me with nothing but a jar of grey slime." He shook his head sadly. "I come here when I can. It's the most amazing place."

Blaze-Simms had pulled a magnifying glass from the depths of his pocket and was peering at the stuff on the wall. The light distorted as it shone through the lens, becoming a bright circle in a wide, dark ring. He had a notebook pressed against the wall with his elbow and was scribbling in it with the other hand.

"Amazing," he said. "Something in the walls must be reacting with agents in the water to feed them. But how did they develop down here, with no natural light? Did they migrate in some more complex form, or do they exist elsewhere as well? This could be—"

"Could be a big distraction from what we're really about." Dirk hated to say it, the room was mighty pretty and he was as curious as Blaze-Simms to know how it worked, but they had other concerns. "Those ninjas ain't gettin' any closer."

"You're right." Blaze sighed and put his pencil away. "Lead on."

Turpin led them through a narrow doorway in the far side of the chamber and down a winding series of tunnels, along sewer-side paths and up access ladders. Dirk was learning to spot the signs their guide followed. The scuff marks on the walls that were made by people passing, and those that belonged to whatever else was living down here. The ripples in the filthy water that showed a disturbance down a distant tunnel. The footprints he might have missed, formed only of the faintest hint of mud amid a layer of slime.

The glowing room wasn't the only odd thing growing in the space beneath the city. Spiny fins sliced the surface of the sewer. Mosses and fungi clung to the walls. Dirk leaned against one while he adjusted his boot, and it felt like the cold grey thing was trying to grow over him. Of course there were insects—beetles, millipedes, cockroaches as long as his hand, buzzing clouds of flies.

"Don't you get rats this far down?" Timothy paused again to scribble something in his notebook.

"Oh yes." Turpin's eyes went even wider. "Gosh, we haven't seen any in while, have we?"

"Surely that's a good thing?" Isabelle looked as calm and comfortable as a person could seem, despite hitching up her skirts to avoid the sewage.

"Oh yes, I'm sure it is." Turpin said. "It's just odd."

Dirk walked on ahead and peered around the next corner. He could hear a whistling, like the warble of a bird, but not one he had ever heard before. There was a scurrying in the dark, something scuffling over stone. The sound grew louder, faster, closer.

Raising his lantern, he lit up the path ahead. Instead of flagstones he saw a seething mass of fur and claws. It scampered toward him out of the darkness, lantern light glinting from hundreds of pairs of rodentine eyes.

He called back to the others. "Reckon I've found your rats."

Chapter 7

Different Ways.

The rats rushed along the path, a tumbling, malevolent mass of hunger, scything the air with filthy claws and jagged teeth. Tension gripped Dirk as he backed around the corner and toward the others.

The creatures scurried after him. A high pitched whining followed them, seeming to drive them on, to agitate them as it rose in pitch. They gnashed their jaws and scabbled madly with their paws, still heading straight towards Dirk. A terrible image filled his mind, of being swamped by these creatures, drowning in a tide of claws, fur and filth.

He drew his gun, hand stinging from the scrapes he'd taken at the compactor, and snapped off a shot at the front of the pack. The roar of the Gravemaker echoed in the closed space of the tunnel. Dozens of rats were flung through the air in a blast of stone chippings and bloody rodent remains. But the swarm kept coming, leaping over and through their fallen kin, something like madness in their eyes.

Dirk fired again and again, desperately trying to hold back the tide, but they were on him - scrambling up his legs, dropping from the wall, crashing over him like a wave as they leapt and gouged to overtake one another. Claws dug through his shirt and into his skin. Teeth bit his hand as he tried to batter them off. He kicked some of them into the filthy water but they kept coming. The horrible mass of filth and fur threatened to overwhelm him.

Even his lantern was covered in rats, weighing heavy in his hand. Fighting back a sense of claustrophobic panic, he swung the lantern against the wall and it smashed open, oil igniting as it spilled across the path, blocking the rats' way. A few tried to dive through it, but their agonised screeches and the stink of burning flesh deterred the others behind them. The swarm split, some still scabbling up the top of the wall and over onto Dirk's head, others diving off into the water and swimming on, pointed heads bobbing in the stream.

Dirk slammed his body against the wall. There was a sickening crunch as tiny ribcages were crushed between his chest and the stones, and he could feel the warmth of their blood soaking through his shirt. He pulled two more from his face, their last scrabbles a sickening sensation against his skin, the smell of filthy fur making him gag. He flung them out into the water then ran his hands back over his head, knocking a dozen more clear.

The torrent of rats had ended, and he was almost free of them. A multitude of tiny scratches and bits stung his flesh as he shook a last furry body from his boot and turned down the tunnel towards the others. Timothy was swinging his lantern wildly as he tried to shake the attackers off. Isabelle had curled up on the path, sheltering her head in one hand as they scrabbled all through her dress. Even Turpin was lashing out wildly, knocking them away with blows from his chubby fists and small feet.

Dirk reached Timothy first, sweeping a score of rats from his back and dragging two large specimens off his arm. Timothy yelped as the creatures' teeth were torn from his flesh, and large drops of blood spattered the path. With only a few rats left, Dirk squeezed past him along the edge of the path, slipping on a slime-slayered stone and almost toppling over into the sewage below. He managed to keep his balance, just, and to step around Blaze-Simms to Isabelle.

Her defensive posture had done little to deter the rats. They could still smell flesh and feel the warmth coming through her clothes. They were scrambling over each other in a heap on top of her, biting and scratching in their desire to be warm and fed. Her sword stick protruded from the heap, lashing back and forth with flicks of her wrist. But all that did was sweep a few from the path, while the rest kept scrabbling and scratching across her. She screamed as Dirk picked her up, swinging her out above the water and shaking her about. Rats plopped into the sewer, splattering Dirk and Isabelle with sewage.

When Isabelle was almost clear, Dirk set her back down on the path and turned toward Turpin. But the little man was in no need of help. The water near him was foaming with the frantic movements of scores of rodents, and dozens more lay scattered and broken on the path, heads crushed, necks snapped, backs broken. Turpin had a sack out and was dropping the bodies into it, humming a tune to himself as he worked.

"A use for everything!" He grinned.

Dirk dabbed at a trickle of blood running down his cheek. He didn't want to know what the Underlord and his followers would do with a sack full of rats. If he asked them for a meal he'd be keeping an eye out for claws and tails. However efficient these people's way of life was, there were still parts that turned his stomach. It wasn't rational, but even as a man of reason he felt nauseous at the thought.

"I say, that was pretty ghastly." Blaze-Simms straightened his jacket, now torn as well as stained.

Isabelle glared in embarrassment at the path.

"I..." she began, but faltered before she could even begin the meat of the sentence.

"Don't worry." Dirk placed a hand on her shoulder. "That was pretty damned grim for all of us. Was all I could do to keep from screaming myself."

His small lie was rewarded as she leaned close to him, her body trembling. He wanted to wrap her in his arms, to give her comfort and a shoulder to cry on, but didn't know if he should, if he even could. Frozen by indecision, with Timothy and Turpin stood nearby, he waited too long. By the time he moved his arm she was stepping away, straightening her skirts and rearranging her hair.

"Are we likely to face that again?" She looked at Turpin, her usual calm fighting to restrain the panicked tone still in her voice.

"Never seen that before." Turpin shrugged. "Not the sort of thing rats usually do, but I'll know what to do with it next time."

He shook his bag of broken rats.

"Don't reckon that was just about the rats." Dirk thought back to the moment he'd seen the seething mass of fur. "There was a whistling sound. Someone driving them on, maybe."

"A sonic agitator to manipulate the native fauna." Blaze-Simms was making notes again. "How ingenious."

"The ninjas?" Isabelle asked.

Dirk nodded. "It sure ain't the cockroaches."

They almost lost the trail. The rats, drawn in from all over the surrounding tunnels, had left such a mess of tracks that it obliterated any trace of human passage. But Dirk had learned from Turpin's earlier lessons. Peering at the traces around a series of tunnel mouths, he found one where the resident bats had been scared away by something larger passing through. Carefully following the passage, he studied the walls, ceiling and floor, until human footprints emerged from the dwindling rat tracks.

They set off down the tunnel, but their pace slowed, Blaze-Simms and Isabelle struggling to keep up. They'd all had a long and exhausting day, and no rest for a good few hours. The thought of it made even Dirk's muscles feel cramped and weary.

"Hey, Turpin," he called out.

The little man turned from examining an intersection, a big smile across his face. "Yes?"

"Is there anywhere round here we can take a rest?"

"Of course!" Turpin said, then paused uncertainly. "Um... Oh yes, I know."

He led them down a winding series of tunnels, away from one sewer, along a plank across another, and through a brick archway into the echoing space beyond. Dirk tried not think about what dripped on them from the arch.

Turpin swung his lantern up and set it on a shelf to the left of the archway. A wide lens in front of the shelf caught the lamp's light and dispersed it, filling the chamber beyond with a soft yellow glow. The room was about thirty feet square and seemed to be newly built. Though made from old bricks and blocks of compressed rubbish, the cement was still fairly new, its surface not worn by time or smoothed by the damp that seeped down every wall in the sewers. Bunks were set into the back wall of the room, and a row of wooden cots ran beneath the shelves on the left hand wall. To the right were rows of cupboards, again set into the walls, their doors made of scrap panels or chunks of timber nailed together in irregular fashion.

The centre of the room was filled with tables and chairs. Its barracks hall feeling was reinforced when Dirk glanced to his right and saw a selection of weapons, from old fashioned rifles to sabres, axes and knives, all hanging from hooks. It was a ramshackle arsenal in keeping with the whole of the Underlord's realm, the weapons mismatched and mostly outdated. But they were in good repair. Even the oldest blades, which looked like they'd been forged in the sixteenth century, had been ground to a sharp edge and greased to protect them from the damp.

"What a charming place." Weariness crept into Isabelle's voice as she sat at one of the tables. "Is this the Underlord's doing?"

"Oh yes." Turpin rummaged through one of the cupboards, pulled out a couple of large cans and a package wrapped in oiled cloth, its edges sealed with wax. He placed them on the table by Isabelle, along with four chipped plates, some forks and cups and a dusty wine bottle.

Dirk and Blaze-Simms pulled up chairs, the furniture creaking beneath them. Dirk opened the cloth package, wax cracking and crumbling away as he tugged it open. An oaty smell rose from within as a pile of biscuits were revealed. Meanwhile, Blaze-Simms had pulled a finger sized gadget from his pocket, unfolded something between a knife and a spanner from one end, and was using it to open the tins.

"I say, it's stew," he exclaimed, sucking gravy from one thin finger. "Not bad, either."

They shared out the biscuits and gravy while Turpin poured the wine.

"It's not strong," he explained. "But it keeps better than water."

"Not terribly good either," Blaze-Simms said after a sip. "But anything would be refreshing right now."

"And it is very kind of you to do this for us." Isabelle shot a quick glare at Blaze-Simms.

Turpin grinned. "Happy to help."

Dirk tucked in, scooping up the stew with one of his biscuits. There was meat floating in the brown gravy, though it was hard to tell what sort, and the same went for the lumps of root vegetable. The biscuits were hard and brittle, even after a soaking in stew. But after all that walking it was like the most delicious banquet. His stomach rumbled into life and he glanced at Isabelle in embarrassment, but she was too busy eating to notice.

After the first few mouthfuls, with the edge taken off his hunger, Dirk slowed down and took the time to properly observe his surroundings. This place seemed to have been built to hold twenty men and keep them comfortable for some time. There were chess sets out on a couple of the tables, and chests labelled "Books" and "Blankets" in one corner. Beneath the weapons were the tools needed for their maintenance—oil, cleaning rags, whetstones, cases of ammunition. Beneath the home comforts, this place had the trappings of war.

"Underlord built this, huh?" He looked at Turpin, then back down at his stew, trying not to seem like he was offering any challenge. "What'd he build it for?"

"For more people to live with us, of course." Turpin spat fragments of biscuit and beef in his enthusiasm to reply. "He says this is the future, hundreds of us beneath the great cities, taking up less space, keeping out of sight, just getting on with our lives."

"Seems he's stocked for more than that." Dirk knocked his fork against one of the empty cans. "Those cupboards must hold enough food to feed an army."

Turpin laughed.

"We might even be one!" He lowered his voice. "The Underlord worries that one day there will be war. That the government can't last, and there will be revolution, like they've had in France and America and places like that. He says that we must be ready to protect ourselves, and anyone who comes to us for protection. We aren't to take sides, but we aren't to give in either. If we can protect people then they will want to stay. That's what he says."

"Is that why you stay?" Isabelle was looking up from her empty plate, dabbing at her lips with a handkerchief.

"Um, I suppose. But it's more than that." Turpin waved a hand around, taking in the room and all it contained. His voice rose in confidence, losing the uncertainty that had marked his speech. "He gives us a home, food, people to be with. But there's something else. Before he found me I was lost. I'd fallen out with my family, lost my home, no work, barely more than the clothes I stood up in. I was sleeping in Regent's Park, getting moved on most nights by men with sticks and badges. But worst of all, I had no aim, nothing to aspire to, nothing more to do than hunt for scraps and a place to sleep. But the Underlord gave me that purpose, gave us all that purpose. We're building something down here, and it will be beautiful." A tear welled at the corner of his eye. "We were rejects, unwanted, cast out by the modern world. But thanks to the Underlord, we are the future."

Dirk pondered the little man, his face so serious, his tone so determined. That brief outburst of eloquence had come as a surprise after the snatches of limited conversation they'd had working their way through the sewer. The Underlord's plans brought out something in Turpin that wasn't normally there, and it sounded like the same happened for many of the Underlord's followers. Now at least he knew how the guy had pulled this lot together. As for why, if Turpin wasn't telling the truth, or the Underlord wasn't telling it to his people, then the surface world had something to worry about. An army growing beneath its feet, alienated, excluded, and wondering about its own fate.

Turpin rose and went to another cupboard.

"One last treat." He pulled out a jar. The stopper popped out and he pulled something from inside, a dried, brown thing covered in white crystals. "Sugared rats." He passed one to each of them. "My favourite!"

Isabelle squirmed in her seat, while Blaze-Simms peered at his with curiosity and pulled a scalpel and tweezers from his pocket.

Turpin looked at them both with puzzled disappointment. "Don't you—"

Dirk slapped Turpin on the back, took a big bite from his rat.

"It's fantastic." He grinned as he chewed on the stringy, sweetened flesh. "Makes me glad you're on our side."

He looked once more at the weapons lining the wall. It was hard to avoid the suspicion that the Underlord was on a side all of his own.

Rested and fed, they set out through the sewers with renewed energy. Dirk could hear the change in tone, Isabelle and Timothy talking in hushed but excited voices, rather than trudging along in the weary silence that had come to

dominate their journey. He wanted to fall back and join them, to listen to the sound of Isabelle's laughter, to be the one telling anecdotes of his adventures. He could feel a hot lump of jealousy at the fact that it was Blaze-Simms making her laugh. But he pressed down the childish thought, focusing on what he really needed to do, helping Turpin to follow the trail.

Despite the break, it soon became clear that they were making progress, getting as close to the ninjas as they had all day. The tracks were fresher, splashed puddles still empty, the dirty water not yet refilling the tracks. Turpin's previous excitement was receding into nervousness.

"What will we do when we find them?" he asked. He was still grinning, but the smile was starting to look forced.

"It'll be fine." Dirk patted his holstered Gravemaker. "Fightin' ain't for everyone. Just do what you can, and if all else fails keep your head down." He tried to sound more confident than he felt. "Ninjas ain't so tough."

In truth, he was feeling more confident than he had before. If they were catching up that meant that their prey were slowing down. Whether they were starting to tire or struggling to navigate their way through the unfamiliar tangle of tunnels, it put them off guard, and that was what he wanted to see. True, there were more of the ninjas than of Dirk and his friends, but in the narrow confines of a sewer that wouldn't count for much. Maybe it was just the release of energy that came from being well fed, but he reckoned the odds were swinging in their favour.

They reached a junction and Turpin frowned.

"It's all scuffed up," he said. "They're trying to lose us."

Dirk lowered his lantern and peered at the path. It was no more than a foot wide, a narrow lane of stones beside a turgid river that flowed, thick and slow and covered in flies, through two brick arches up ahead. The path split like the tunnel, one fork following a rusted iron bridge across the stinking flow, the other sticking to the wall. He looked at the way the dirt lay on the way onto the bridge, the way it had been kicked around in both directions.

Behind them, Isabelle and Timothy stopped and peered around, for all the world like a pair of walkers pausing on a stroll through the park.

"I say, is something the matter?" Blaze-Simms called out.

"It's just gettin' a little tricky," Dirk said.

"If anyone can follow them, I'm sure you can." Isabelle's confidence filled Dirk with a warm glow of pride, and a determination to prove her right. He looked even closer, scouring his memory for anything he'd seen before that might help with this.

There'd been that time in Chicago, hunting Confederate agents through the grimy streets as the smoke stacks billowed. They'd split, one heavy footed and slow going, the other trying to take paths that left no prints. But he'd still caught them both, and got the blueprints back.

Then there was that time on the plains, with the rogue Sioux brave who stepped back through his own prints to throw Dirk off. That had ended in a bloody fight, but not through any failure in his tracking.

And of course that night in the Alps, with Gabo the Monkey Man hanging over their heads the whole time they traced his followers through the snow. If not for

his mad sniggering they'd never have known he was there, and his criminal empire would still be going strong.

Dirk stepped past the end of the bridge, careful not to disrupt what passed for tracks. There was something leading away down the path to the left. Footprints, scuffed but still visible, a trail someone had tried to hide.

Or had they? The prints were a little larger than before, a little less distinct than they had been, just like the footprints of that Indian brave. A trick to lead them down this path. They'd head that way, find that the tracks ran out somewhere hard where a person might not leave a trail, but there'd be no prints coming off the far side.

He turned, shone his light over the bridge.

"Check over there," he said.

Turpin clattered across.

"No footprints," he called out. "But there's nothing to leave them in."

Dirk let himself smile a little. *That's the way I'd go*, he said.

He stepped forward, about to cross the bridge, when something caught his eye. A thin track in the mould growing up the wall, as though something had been dragged down it, or a string had dangled through the slime.

"Hold up." He peered at the line and at the walls around it. The slime was scuffed in other places too, just a little, as if by someone taking great care to apply the least pressure they could. He tilted the lantern up, following the marks up to the top of the wall, and onto the ceiling.

Metal hooks glittered in the lantern light, shiny and new, steel hoops just big enough to provide a hand or toe hold, jammed into the cracks between bricks. The ceiling itself was scuffed where hands and knees had brushed against it.

"Son of a bitch," Dirk whispered. These guys must be incredibly strong and agile, to hammer those climbing hooks into place while hanging upside down, never mind to crawl along like that, hanging from the roof, but it was a hell of an effort to do anything else. He whistled in admiration. 'Triple bluff.'

He waved Turpin back across the bridge and, one eye still on the ceiling, led them down the path. They walked on for another fifteen minutes, as the tunnel narrowed and the sewer flowed faster past their feet. Beetles scurried across the stones and millipedes wriggled their way up the walls, pale and fragile, their antennae twitching at the passing people. The odd rat scurried nervously past them, but not the hordes that had overwhelmed them earlier.

After a while the hooks in the ceiling ended and there were footprints on the ground once more, leading past a narrow opening to their left and continuing on down the path. Dirk followed them for a moment, the others with him. Then he stopped, looked down at the blurred edges of the tracks, the clearer prints leading away and the gap in the wall behind them.

"Well I'll be," he whispered. "They've done it again. They've doubled back."

"Very good, Dynamo san." A voice echoed around the tunnel, bouncing back to surround them from every direction. "But not good enough."

Silent as shadows, black-clad figures stepped out onto the path behind them and emerged from the darkness up ahead. Eyes sparkled from the narrow bands of skin visible on their faces, and the edges of swords glittered in the lantern light. All around the ninjas closed in, blades raised and ready for the kill.

Chapter 8

The Striking Snowflake.

Shuriken hissed out of the darkness, glittering points of death skimming past Dirk's head and pinging off the walls. He ducked and rolled forward along the slime-coated path, slamming into the nearest ninja. The black-clad figure tumbled into the water, sending stinking waves up and down the sewer.

Dirk sprang up, shoulder first, into the next ninja. There was a crunch of breaking ribs and a hiss of breath as the man went over. Dirk flung him after his comrade, another splash echoing around him.

A pistol cracked somewhere behind him, followed by the clash of steel on steel as the ninjas closed with the others. They were coming from every direction, but the greatest number were up ahead. Dirk saw one of them giving out orders, pointing to him and then past towards Isabelle. A hot wave of anger rose through him.

"Push back," he called out. "You can break clear. I'm goin' for the boss."

He yanked his gun from its holster, firing before it was even fully raised. A ninja fell, his shin giving way beneath him in bloody ruin.

Another was scampering towards Dirk along the wall, for all the word like a giant spider. He leapt, clawed gloves stretched forward, but Dirk had better reach and his fist collided with the ninja's face just before those gouging metal fingers could reach his own. But the ninja still had momentum, his body colliding with Dirk, sending them sprawling on the path, rolling over and off into the sewer.

Dirk gagged as he was plunged into sewage, the filth forcing its way into his mouth and nose while bladed fingers dug into his lower arm. He lashed out frantically with his feet, collided with something just soft enough to be flesh, and the blades released their grip. He kicked once more for luck, then started to swim, bobbing to the surface in a wave of sewage. He spat out what he could and sucked in deep lungfuls of air, desperately trying to clear the sickening taste from his throat.

Something hissed out of the darkness and Dirk dived back down, mouth firmly closed. With quick, powerful strokes he swam to the edge of the path and reached up, hooking someone's legs out from beneath them as he heaved himself upward. He swung wildly, lashing out at anything nearby as he blinked water from his eyes. The tunnel was a blur of flailing lanterns and twisting shadows, the clash of swords fading down the tunnel through a cloud of grunts and groans. The Gravemaker still somehow in his hand, he rose and turned to aim.

A force like a ton of masonry slammed against the back of his head. As he slid forward into blackness, he wondered for one dazed moment if the ceiling had fallen down.

The first thing Dirk felt as he rose into consciousness was the stone, cold and wet, pressing against his face. He tried to turn away from it, but his head was

pounding and something was pressing him down, stopping him from rising. He couldn't quite remember where he was, but it clearly wasn't anywhere good.

He suppressed the urge to struggle, to twist and writhe and mindlessly throw his weight into shaking off whatever was oppressing him. Instead he took a long, deep breath and tried to ignore the ache in his brain, instead focusing on what the rest of him could feel.

He was flat out on a stone path. He was soaked to the skin and something stank. He hoped it wasn't him. This place was dark but not pitch black, and as well as the throbbing in his skull he felt a sharp pain in his arm.

He'd been in a fight. He kind of remembered that. Something about books, or maybe a stone. He'd been with someone. Probably Blaze-Simms. It was usually Blaze-Simms. But Blaze-Simms was always on his side, so who'd done this to him?

"I know that you are awake," a voice whispered by his ear, breath creeping across his skin. A woman's voice, hard and determined.

Of course, Dirk thought as memory came flooding back. Ninjas.

She barked some words that meant nothing to Dirk and the pressure disappeared from his back.

"You may sit," the ninja leader said. "We have your gun, and the knife from your boot. Try to stand and Hasegawa-san will knock you out again."

Dirk blinked and levered himself up, sitting with his back against the wall. His brain must have been more rattled than he thought. The name Hasegawa rang a bell, but he was damned if he could work out why. And now that he paused for thought, that woman's voice seemed faintly familiar too, like a politician he'd heard at hustings or some guy he'd met twice at a party.

"Do you want to live, Dynamo-san?" She crouched down next to him, eyes glittering like diamonds amid the swathes of black silk that covered her face.

"Who doesn't?" Dirk rummaged through the back corners of his memory, looking for something to hook on that voice. He thought of the orientals he'd met, running through the names and faces carefully filed away, linked by mnemonics and mental constructs like any other thought he'd considered worth preserving. That martial arts master in San Francisco, with his eager young followers and his predilection for dope. The visiting professor who'd spoken about the mathematics of people at the Epiphany Club. The guys hauling fish and cloth around the East End. That Chinese couple on Hakon, the guano trader and his wife. Last time he'd seen them she'd been chasing after him into the jungle, while that mad bear roared and charged about.

The guano trader's name was Hasegawa Minoru.

"Stop following us, Dynamo-san." The woman's voice was harder, sharper than it had been on Hakon. No more the shrinking wife, timidly following her husband around. But there was enough the same. "We have what is ours. This can be over."

"Whatever you say, Miura Noriko." Dirk looked her in the eye, watching for a reaction.

These guys had discipline. No one around him even flinched as he said the name, never mind turning their heads to see their boss's response. But the silence grew sterner somehow, their stillness stiffer, warier than before. They stood silent, waiting expectantly.

At last she reached up and pulled the cloth from across her face. The lantern light picked out a stern, thin lipped face.

"I am surprised it took you this long," Noriko said. "Disappointed even. The great adventurers and investigators of the Epiphany Club, unable to make the connection between our presence on Hakon and that of the ninja."

"I was a little distracted, what with the locals and all." Dirk tilted his head, trying to find an angle at which it didn't ache. "And there were some things throwing us off the trail. After all, ain't ninjas normally Japanese?"

"Yes." Noriko raised an eyebrow.

'And you're Chinese.'

"No."

"Oh." Dirk almost laughed. "So you were pretending to be Chinese on Hakon?"

"No." Noriko's small brow furrowed. "I never claimed to be Chinese."

"But you let us keep believing it."

"You believed I was Chinese?" She sounded indignant, her voice rising, arms folded defensively.

"Well, yes." Dirk shifted, uncomfortable at more than the stones and the damp. "You had a Chinese name, Chinese clothes—"

"Japanese name. Japanese clothes. Totally different."

"How were we meant to know that?"

"You are smart enough to know where ninjas come from, but can't tell the difference between Japanese and Chinese?"

"Um... Well, can you tell the difference between an American and an Englishman?"

"The English are better dressed, and can tell that I am not Chinese."

Dirk thought of Blaze-Simms, with his stained jackets, frayed cuffs and similar ignorance over what made a name Chinese. But this didn't seem the time to tell tales.

As Noriko stood, Dirk glanced around. There were a dozen ninjas lining the path, all clad from head to foot in black, with short swords at their waists and belts of shuriken criss-crossing their chests. One of them sat on the path while another splinted his leg, and a third was missing the sleeve off his tunic, which was being wrapped around what looked like a bullet wound. That left ten healthy bodies for Dirk to contend with. Fighting his way clear didn't seem too viable right now. He could take down ten men, no problem, when armed, in good shape, and facing ordinary guys. But unarmed, in a dark, slippery tunnel, his body already bruised and battered, against ten warriors of the Orient's finest fighting tradition? He didn't like those odds.

"You folks must set an awful lot of value by that stone," Dirk said. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to steal it."

"Steal?" Noriko snorted. "Is it stealing to take back what is ours?"

"How do you work that one out then?" Dirk asked. "Those slabs came from Egypt. Last I heard, Egyptians didn't pay homage to the land of the rising sun."

Noriko shook her head. "You think that the rest of the world does not interact, Dynamo-san, that we waited for westerners to bring us together? One of your slabs travelled the silk road long ago, a strange artefact of a fallen civilisation. It was kept at the Emperor's court for hundreds of years, a curio, rumoured to be a

map to exotic knowledge. No-one found its source, though several tried. But it remained safe for centuries, relegated by slow steps to a small room of an obscure imperial dwelling house, valued by scholars and those who enjoy the obscure.

"Until last year, when a gang of thieves broke in and stole it away. They were apprehended, of course, but not before they had passed the tablet on to the mysterious gaijin who hired them. It took many months to track it down, in the hands of your Mrs McNair. Even when we followed her to Hakon, we were unable to find out whether she had it with her or where it was hidden. But now, at last, it will be returned."

"All those months of effort, all this violence, for something you yourself called obscure?" Dirk struggled to keep the annoyance from his voice.

"No, Dynamo-san." Noriko shook her head. "For pride."

Dirk looked around the tunnel at the slimy walls, the flowing sewage, and the filth that clung to all their clothes. He took a deep breath, almost choking on his own stench.

"So this is pride, huh?" His laughter echoed hollowly round the tunnel. "Tell me this. How proud are you gonna be if you get that stone back home and your scholars tell you it's the wrong one?"

Noriko glared at him. She had a good glare, the sort that would wither a lesser man down to a trembling mess. "It is the right shape, the right size. It has the symbols."

"Same symbols, or similar symbols?" Dirk asked. "You don't strike me as a scholar of Egyptian hieroglyphics. There's at least three of those things out there. I don't know if you've got the right one, but I do know you ain't got Mrs McNair's, and it don't seem like you can tell the difference."

Noriko turned away, talked in hushed tones with one of the other ninjas. Dirk could hear just enough to know they weren't talking any language he recognised. He guessed it must be Japanese, though after the whole Chinese fiasco he wouldn't place any bets.

While he waited he scanned the walls and floor, looking for anything that might work to his advantage. A stone, a decent stick, a rat he could kick to make a distraction. Nothing. Just a whole lot of ninjas with a whole lot of very sharp blades. He didn't know what they had planned for him, but he didn't hold out much hope.

Noriko turned back to him.

"Clearly there is more to do if we are to retrieve the correct stone," she said. "We are grateful to you for showing us the error of our ways. You are an honourable foe, and deserve to be treated as such. But we cannot have you following us." She raised her sword high above her head. "I shall make this quick."

The sword flashed down and Dirk's world went black.

Chapter 9

Pistons.

Dirk dreamed he was back on Hakon, at the party at the governor's mansion. He was dancing around the room, Isabelle McNair in his arms. He was as poised and graceful as she was. They danced in the centre of the hall, moving faster and faster, leaving the rest of the room a blur around them. The faces of Cullen, Braithwaite and Noriko, spiralled away into a haze.

Her face moved closer to his and he felt her breath against his cheek as she whispered in his ear.

"Dirk." Her voice was faint amid the tumult of the ball.

The room smelled awful. Dirk realised it was the guano. Of course - the mansion was built on guano, just like the whole island.

"Dirk," Isabelle said. This time her breath stung his cheek, and her voice had become lower. "Dirk, you have to wake up. Dirk!"

He felt a slap across his face, raised a hand to defend himself.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Timothy Blaze-Simms exclaimed, staring down at him. Blaze-Simms was clutching Dirk's lapel with one hand, the other raised as if to strike him again. "I was starting to worry that might not work."

Dirk shook his head, trying to cast off the fog of unconsciousness. He was on cold, wet stone again. The same cold, wet stone he'd last woken on. Once more and he'd have to start calling this place bed.

He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked around. Except for a lack of ninjas, the tunnel was just the same as before. Isabelle and Turpin stood behind Blaze-Simms, looks of concern and curiosity respectively filling their faces.

"You always were one hell of a nurse, Tim." He raised a hand to his forehead, where a lump like half an egg was throbbing painfully. It hurt more when he touched it, so he stopped. "How long have I been out?"

"Not too long." Blaze-Simms took a step back. "An hour, tops. We managed to fight clear and catch our breath, then crept back as soon as things had quietened down."

"I'm sure you were real stealthy." Dirk hauled himself upright. His knife and gun were lying a few feet down the path. Someone had even cleaned the sewer muck off of them. Guess that's what they call honourable, he thought as he slid the knife back into its sheath.

"It is true that our opponents have the edge on us when it comes to sneaking," Blaze-Simms said. "But we did our best. And so far, no more ambushes."

Dirk wondered about pointing out that "so far" amounted to sixty minutes of sitting still. But he couldn't deflate his friend's proud grin.

"We need to keep on them," Dirk said. "They'll go after Isabelle's stone next." He felt a stirring of gallantry as he strode protectively towards her, wobbling as his head adjusted to being upright. "Don't worry, that ain't gonna happen."

"Thank you, Mr Dynamo." Her lips curled in amusement. "Perhaps you can tell us more as we walk?"

Turpin took the lead, hunting for tracks through the twisting darkness. He seemed very familiar with this stretch of the tunnels, hurrying past alcoves and side passages, fobbing them off as inconsequential in his rush to catch their prey.

Still woozy from being knocked out twice, Dirk struggled to keep up with their guide. His dip in the sewer had left him soaked and the cold was seeping through his body, stiffening his muscles and sending shivers up his spine. He swung his

arms and tipped his head from side to side, trying to loosen up muscles left tight and awkward from lying flat out on the path, to get some warmth back into them. As they walked he talked, filling the others in on Noriko and her mission. Struggling to collect his thoughts, he stumbled tongue-tied through an account of what he'd learned.

"How embarrassing," Blaze-Simms said when the Chinese-Japanese mix-up was explained. "I shall have to apologise if we meet again."

"They stole from you, beat me senseless, and now you want to apologise to them?" Just occasionally, Dirk struggled to keep his patience with the Englishman. This was one of those times.

"That's terribly sweet, Timothy," Isabelle said, "but perhaps not the best approach?"

"Hm." Blaze-Simms seemed to give the point serious consideration. "Maybe the swordstick instead."

He stopped in his tracks, pausing at the entrance to a side passage that Turpin had just rushed past.

"I say, what's down there?" He pointed to where something gleamed in the light from his lantern.

"Nothing!" Turpin called back sharply. "Come on, this way."

"There's definitely something." Blaze-Simms's voice became muffled as he disappeared down the narrow passage. "How intriguing."

"We should keep going." Turpin scurried back toward them, his voice rising with tension. "The ninjas might get away."

Dirk paused. He wanted to keep moving, to settle the score with Noriko and her sword-wielding pals. After all this, he didn't want to let the tablet get away on one of Blaze-Simms's whims. But they'd built a career out of following those whims, the wild instinct and flights of fancy that caught Blaze-Simms's mind and led him toward the truly extraordinary.

Isabelle was looking at him, one eyebrow raised, as if to ask whether he was going to get his friend to focus this time. Turpin peered down the passage in agitation, muttering about invaders as he shifted from foot to foot.

After a moment's reflection, Dirk followed Blaze-Simms down the passage.

"What is it?" he asked as he emerged into a surprisingly large chamber. It looked to have been built recently, the bricks still clean and red, not pitted together through years of erosion. In the middle of the room was a silver-brown cylinder nearly ten meters across, with pipes running in from the direction of the sewer and an opening like the hatch on a steam train's firebox. It disappeared up into the roof of the cavernous chamber.

"Some sort of piston, I think." Blaze-Simms ran a hand down the side. "I don't know what the alloy is. Something messy and impure, by the look of it. Between that and the scale of the thing, I wouldn't want to try firing it more than once."

He walked around the outside of the device, pencil scratching across the page of his notebook.

"Good welding," he muttered, talking more to himself than to any of his companions. "But what's it for?"

"This one of yours?" Dirk turned to Turpin who, along with Isabelle, had followed them into the chamber.

The little man's child-like excitement was gone, replaced by a nervous chewing on his cracked lip.

"Um, well..." he murmured uncertainly.

"It's alright, Turpin." Isabelle placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Whatever it is, I'm sure the Underlord put it here with the best of intentions, didn't he?"

"Yes." Turpin nodded slowly, eyes darted back and forth. "Best intentions. Good things. But we really should go." Something lit up behind his eyes and he turned to Dirk. "The next bit of the trail, it's tricky, but I found this smudge..."

As they headed back to the tunnel, Blaze-Simms lost in scribbling equations, Turpin pointing out trail signs no-one else could have seen, Dirk caught Isabelle's eye. She glanced at Turpin, then back down the side tunnel, then back at him, and arched an elegant eyebrow. Dirk gave a small nod. Something here stank. Something other than him.

After a while, they found themselves at the mouth of a wide side tunnel that sloped upwards, its paved surface broken by wagon rails. There was a slight indent in the path where the two met, layered with a rich crust of ancient mud. Dirk crouched near the floor with Turpin, peering at a mess of criss-crossing footprints. It was hard not to get caught up in the little guy's excitement as they worked to disentangle what had gone on, pointing out odd discrepancies in the layers of prints to each other, trying to figure out the order of events.

"Look." Dirk point at several sets of prints to their left. "I've seen that before, with plains Indians laying an ambush. Walking backwards from a spot to make it look like more folks going forwards. But the way the feet fall ain't quite right. Angles are a little out, and it scuffs the dirt backwards."

"Oh yes!" Turpin gave his eager to please grin. "I see. So in that case... One." He pointed to a set of prints leading up the tunnel. "Two." A second set, leading out. "Three." A third set, some the backwards ones, apparently going in when some were really heading out.

Dirk nodded. "That figures. But why?"

"They didn't know what I do." Turpin's grin grew bigger with pride. "That used to be a way out for works carts. But some of the other works nearby shook the roof loose and it caved in."

"Other works?" Now it was Blaze-Simms's turn to sound excited.

"Underground trains," Turpin said. "The Underlord let them dig lines round here. They're meant to stay clear of the sewers, but they don't know them like we do. They broke a tunnel up there in the spring." He pointed ahead down the main sewer. "It's still broken."

He peered once more at the footprints, then gave Dirk a satisfied smile. "The ninjas went up, found they had to come back, then tried to trick us into going up there too."

Dirk nodded, checked his pistol was in place. "Time it took them to make that mistake, we must nearly be caught up."

The trail led them on down the sewer, up a ladder whose crust of rust had been dislodged by recent footfalls, and into a very different space. It was still man made but cavernous, rough walls held by wooden braces and iron brackets, with the

beginnings of more permanent brick walls around the lower parts. The earth was packed flat, rutted by the wheels of the large, hand-pushed wagons that sat idle along one side like an abandoned mine, and by larger tracks like an inverted railway gouged through the rock-strewn soil. Lamps hung from a pipe along the ceiling, lighting the tunnel with their sickly green flames, disappearing down the tunnel openings in two opposite walls.

"I say," Blaze-Simms called out, "there's another of those piston things."

"This really ain't the time." Dirk looked around for footprints.

Blaze-Simms had wandered over to the far side of the works, where a section of the tunnel wall had crumbled away, revealing another chamber beyond. He poked both head and torch through the gap, light gleaming off a huge brass cylinder, then emerged, scribbling something in his notebook.

"Turpin." Blaze-Simms's voice had gone distant, a sign Dirk had long learned to associate with moments of triumph and disaster. "How much of London is the Underlord planning to bring down?"

The little man's mouth hung open.

"Timothy." Isabelle's eyes drifted between the aristocrat and their diminutive guide. "What do you mean?"

"It's obvious, when you think about it." Blaze-Simms was still scribbling in his book. "The size of the pistons, the way they're placed. I couldn't work it out based on one, but they're positioned to exploit key points in the sewer network. And other tunnels, of course. Fire up enough of these machines, and you could bring down a sizable portion of the city. Just drop it into the ground."

The chill Dirk felt came from more than just the temperature in the sewers. He thought of the devastation that would come as London fell to a massive cave-in. Thousands, perhaps millions of people caught up in a madman's scheme to make the city above him part of his domain.

"My word, that is impressive, isn't it?" Isabelle said, smiling at Turpin.

He nodded uncertainly.

"And then you'll all move in and take the scrap, I imagine?" She was still smiling like a hostess setting a difficult party guest at ease. "Show the people above who's really in charge. That's what the weapons are for, and the little barracks rooms, isn't it?"

Turpin nodded.

"We'll be in charge. It'll be..." He looked around, seemed to remember who they were and where their priorities lay. "Oh."

He turned and leaped down the ladder. Blaze-Simms went as if to follow him, but Dirk caught his arm.

"We can deal with the crazies later," he said. "Right now, we've got us some ninjas to catch, and they ain't been as careful as they think."

He pointed to a lone footprint, barely visible in the packed earth at the base of a track.

Dirk turned to Isabelle.

"You stay here," he said.

"After everything we've done, you think I can't handle myself in a fight?" She flourished her pistol.

"No ma'am." In truth, he wasn't comfortable leading a lady into a dead end full of oriental warriors. But there were other considerations too. "Just need someone to deal with any that get through."

Not that he had any intention of letting them through, not with Isabelle here.

She stood for a moment, staring at him like she might bore through the half truths and see the protective instinct buried behind his words. But if she did she kept quiet about it.

"Alright." She opened the chamber pistol and checked the rounds. "But please don't dawdle. We've been down in this ghastly place quite long enough."

Dirk led Blaze-Simms down the tunnel. After a few minutes an end came into view, the flickering lamps stopping where the half-finished tunnel had ground to a halt.

At the head of the tunnel was a machine the size of a railway engine. Its front consisted of two huge wheels with shovel blades around their edges and a foot-wide drill bit between them. Rubble lay around and beneath them, with more on the conveyor belts that ran from behind the wheels down the machine's sides. There was no sign of movement.

"Looks like old Croddlesby's handiwork." Blaze-Simms gave the machine an appraising glance. "Looks a dashed sight more useful than that steam powered octopus he built back in sixty-five. I admire an articulated tentacle as much as the next man, but it was an absolute nightmare to dock."

"LNWR?" Dirk read off the brass plate on the machine's side.

"London and North Western Railway." Blaze-Simms said. "I heard they were building a new line for the outer suburbs, but they've been keeping it quiet in case the District try to steal their patch."

"Very quiet now." Dirk looked around. "Can't see the Underlord letting them stick around with that piston exposed."

"Still, someone's been tending the machines." Blaze-Simms pointed beneath the wheels.

A man in overalls lay unconscious in the mud, his hands dark with engine oil. A round bruise stood out from the middle of his forehead.

Dirk peered around by their feet. A spanner lay next to a crushed oil can, its dark contents seeping into the dirt. On the conveyor above it was a glistening footprint, and a black smear gleamed on the side of the machine.

"Hey Tim." Dirk took care not to look up as he inched his hand around towards his gun. "You remember that time in the Lonely Mountain pass, when we were being chased by the Sultan's troops?"

"Was that the time in sixty-seven or sixty-eight?" Balze-Simms asked with detached curiosity.

"Sixty-eight."

"Oh yes! They got onto the slope above us, and we had to get ready while pretending not to have..."

A shadowy figure leapt from the top of the machine. The Gravemaker was already in Dirk's hand, its roar deafening in the confines of the tunnel. The ninja's sword tumbled from his hand as he was thrown back, lifeless, onto the conveyor belt. Not another body stirred.

Dirk snatched up the sword and raced back up the tunnel.

"Was I meant to get ready?" Blaze-Simms panted as he ran behind.

"Yes!"

"Sorry!"

They burst out into the main excavation. Ahead of them, Isabelle was backing towards a wall, pistol drawn, half a dozen ninjas closing in on her. They looked around at Dirk, their eyes twinkling points in the black cloth swathing their faces.

"You'd all better back off from the lady," Dirk bellowed, his gun out in front of him, "or you'll end up as dead as your friend back there."

Glittering slithers of light hissed out of the darkness overhead. Dirk dived to one side and three metal discs tinged off the wall behind him, their sharpened edges raising sparks from the rock. Dirk raised his Gravemaker to return fire, but a shadowy shape was falling on him from above, knocking the pistol from his hand and slamming him against the floor. His vision flashed black and white as pain throbbled through him, but he swung a fist around, knocking his opponent flying.

Instincts kicked in as he scrambled after his opponent, grabbing him by the throat and lifting him from his feet. As his grip tightened the mask slipped away, revealing Noriko's bruised face, caught in a grimace of pain and anger.

"There's no need for this," Dirk said, as she squirmed in his grasp. "We can work together."

Her knee slammed into his gut, a burst of pain that buckled him over and broke his grip.

"No need?" She lashed out with the edge of her hand, bruising Dirk's arm as he hurried to defend his head. "You stole what is ours."

"We didn't steal anything." Dirk backed away, frantically blocking a flurry of lightning fast blows. "We just followed what we found."

"And now we found it." She aimed a high kick at his face.

Dirk caught her foot, twisted, flung her to the floor.

"You can have the damn thing." He tried to pin her arm with his foot. "Hell, have the whole set. We just want to know what they say."

She rolled clear, somersaulting up onto the side of a waggon.

"Why should I trust you?" She glared down at him, fists raised, poised to strike. "Someone here is a thief. Someone here is dishonest."

"You left me my weapons," Dirk said. "You must trust me on some level."

She leapt straight at Dirk, landed so close he could feel the air move. Staring up at him, her expression was filled with icy ferocity.

"If I say no?" she hissed.

A silence had fallen across the room, ninjas frozen in action, watching to see what their leader would do.

"It really doesn't matter what you say," a voice called out from the end of the chamber.

Dirk turned to see the Underlord rolling a cigarette in the tunnel entrance. His followers were streaming out of the tunnel behind him, more emerging from the ladder by which Dirk and the others had arrived. Men and women with twisted limbs, scarred faces, hunched bodies, all armed and agitated.

"You've seen too much." The Underlord gestured with thin fingers toward the vast piston showing through the broken wall. "Like the chumps who worked this line, I'm afraid you're going to have to die."

Chapter 10

Going Down.

"I'm sure this isn't necessary." Isabelle stepped towards the Underlord. "We've cooperated so far, why stop now?"

"You're not really so stupid as to have to ask," the Underlord said. Turpin had appeared beside him, wringing his hands and smiling sheepishly. "I can't have you warning people about my plan to bring down chunks of London, can I? If they find out there's a giant piston waiting to sink St Paul's and another for Parliament, they'll take action. The city's high and mighty might not lift a finger for the likes of us, but they'll raise arms and cry God for Harry if they hear we're plotting to ruin their skyline."

"Then why help us in the first place?" she asked.

"Seemed the easiest way to get rid of you all." He shrugged. "Next time I'll stick with simpletons and steam engines."

The under-Londoners were closing in, raising a range of weapons from chunks of broken lead pipe to grimy pistols and broken-tipped swords. Individually they didn't look like much, but there were dozens of them.

Dirk glanced around, looking for a way out. The Underlord's men had both exits covered, and by the way they kept streaming through it looked like there were plenty more coming. He'd been in tight spots before and found a way out. But for that to work there had to actually be a way out. You couldn't stick around and fight with odds like this, but he couldn't see any other options.

Resignedly, he pulled out his knife. These were decent people, just looking to make a life in the cast-offs that civilisation had left them. Sure, their leader had turned into a moustache-twirling lunatic, but still, these were the ultimate proletariat, preparing to throw off their shackles. In a different world, he have fought on their side. But in a different world, he and his friends wouldn't be about to die.

"At least we get to go down fighting." Head throbbing from injuries and exhaustion, he couldn't think of anything smarter to say.

"Oh, I don't know." Blaze-Simms stood beside him, sword-stick in hand, an excited gleam in his eye. "It's a long shot, but I have a plan."

They were close together now—him, Blaze-Simms and Noriko, back to back amid a growing sea of hostile faces.

"It had better be damn good," Dirk said.

"Oh, it is." Blaze-Simms nodded down the dead end tunnel where the works continued. "Ms Miura, could you please get Mrs McNair and the others into the tunnelling train. It should be sturdy enough. Dirk, we need to go that way."

He pointed through the hole in the wall to the vast piston, which gleamed in the light of a growing throng of lanterns.

"You know that's two dead ends, right?" Dirk asked. His friend could build a steam engine from newspapers and solve quadratic equations in his sleep, but he sometimes forgot the little details.

"Oh yes," Blaze-Simms said. "That's why they'll let us get through."

There were fewer under-dwellers between them and the piston than there were blocking the ways out. Still "let us get through" wasn't how Dirk would have described what happened next.

With a roar and a swing of his lantern, Dirk plunged into the mob. The lantern collided with someone's head, shattering glass and spilling both oil and blood. Then he was down to his knife, lunging and slashing and screaming like a madman, creating an arc of fear into which few of his opponents dared to tread.

He fought for show not damage, making a big display of his size and ferocity, opening up a path by force of personality as much as force of arms. Blaze-Simms followed, keeping the enemy from closing on Dirk's back.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Noriko leap off in the opposite direction, her ninjas closing in around her from the edges of the chamber. He wondered for a minute if this was the last he would see of her, if she would take this chance to get away and leave him and his allies to their death. But it seemed that Noriko had drawn the same conclusion he had, that their best chance was to stand together. She grabbed Isabelle McNair with one hand, a sword with the other, and led her people in a running fight toward the tunnel.

For all Dirk's ferocity, not all of the Underlord's men were filled with terror. Two of the bigger ones stood their ground, great pillars of rag-clad flesh with shaved heads and tattoos over every square inch of skin. They blocked his way, clubs raised, teeth bared in ferocious grins. Dirk ducked as one swung at him, just avoiding having his head caved in. He stepped inside his assailant's arc, slamming a knee up between the guy's legs. As the man mountain crumpled before him, the other one grabbed Dirk from behind, squeezing the air out of him in a brutal bear hug. Dirk jerked back, smashing the man's nose with the back of his head, elbows jabbing backwards as he squirmed from the loosening grip. The world span around him but he couldn't stop to steady himself. One last punch for good measure and he was moving on, stumbling over the groaning bodies and through the broken wall into the piston chamber.

"Could you keep them out for a minute, old chap." Blaze-Simms darted past Dirk. He started fumbling around at the base of the piston, one hand fiddling with a box of matches while the other pulled a couple of small bottles from his coat.

Dirk turned to face the mob. At least now he only had to fight in one direction, keeping them from entering the chamber. He was sure it would be easier said than done.

The next few minutes were a whirl of flying fists and angry snarls, battered flesh and bloody knuckles. The under-Londoners just kept coming, an endless flow of dirty, desperate men and women, swinging at him with whatever came to hand. For Dirk the fight was as much mental as physical, struggling for focus through a haze of adrenaline and exhaustion, mind reeling from the blows to his head. How long had they been down in this dank, stifling place, walking and fighting and walking some more? At least in the war they'd stuck to one battle a day. But this

kept going, and the bruises were piling up faster than the unconscious bodies around him.

There was a hiss behind him and a chugging sound. Slow at first, like the beat of a shaman's drum, it grew in volume and urgency until the walls rattled and the ground shook beneath his feet. The whole cavern lurched and Dirk almost fell across the man he was fighting.

"This your plan?" he yelled.

"Nearly!" Blaze-Simms grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back. They tumbled together onto the floor of the piston chamber.

The mob wavered at the gap in the wall, then parted. The familiar figure of the Underlord stepped forward, a ragged cigarette dangling between his lips.

"Looks like you've started my work for me," he sneered, stepping back into the crowd.

"Sort of," Blaze-Simms said over the growing racket of the piston.

A lump of masonry bounced off the Underlord's shoulder. He looked up in annoyance, then in growing alarm, as bricks and mortar started raining down on his people.

There was a roar, a loud collective scream, and the cavern roof caved in on the Under-Londoners.

In the shelter of the piston room, Blaze-Simms reached for the off lever.

Dirk breathed a sigh of relief.

"How did you know that was gonna work like that?" Dirk asked. "That it would bring down that roof and nothing more?"

"Simple maths." Blaze-Simms brushed dust from his hair. "Together with some observation on tunnel engineering - this really has been a most enlightening day."

They stood in the rubble of the railway workings, amid the smells of brick dust and blood. From time to time one of the injured under-Londoners would crawl out of the rubble and away into the sewers, under the silent glares of the ninjas. The black-clad warriors, along with Isabelle, had been protected from the cave-in by the sturdy railway car, and had been surveying the damage by the time Dirk and Blaze-Simms dug themselves out of the piston room.

"I'm sorry about your friends." Dirk turned to Noriko, ready to face the difficult consequences of the blood he'd spilt. "Especially the ones I killed."

"We had our task," Noriko said. "To die for it is acceptable. Would you not die for yours?"

"Not if I can avoid it." Dirk touched the lump on his head. It was starting to go down. "And if one of my friends died, I'd make damn sure someone regretted it."

"And when their friends came to bring you the same regret?" She shook her head. "You gaijin think too highly of your own emotions."

She slung a black sack from the dark folds of material in which she was enveloped, peeling back the cloth to reveal a familiar block of stone.

"So," she said, eyes fixed firmly on his, "we have a deal?"

Dirk nodded. "No more fighting. We collect the stones together. The Epiphany Club gets copies, and whatever they lead to. You get to go home with three instead of your one. More pride for you, more knowledge for us."

He reached out and, after a moment, she shook his hand, bowing her head as she did so. Dirk didn't know when he'd last felt so relieved.

"What now?" Noriko asked.

"Paris!" Blaze-Simms said. "The third stone was lost in the Seine. Hopefully it's still around there somewhere."

"Don't tell me we're going underground again." Dirk was sick of tunnels. He wanted to spend some time in bright, wide open spaces, enjoying fresh air and sunshine.

"Maybe." Blaze-Simms pulled out a notebook. "But the last report was hundreds of years old. Who knows who has the stone by now."

"Let's not get into a fight with the locals this time," Isabelle said.

"But they're French." Blaze-Simms let the weight of national prejudice hang in the air. "I mean..."

"Don't you read the papers?" Dirk asked. "The French are plenty busy enough without fighting us. They've got a war on."

