

# THE HANGMAN'S REVOLUTION

EON COLFER

**WARP**

BOOK TWO

HYPERION  
LOS ANGELES NEW YORK

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Summary: FBI agent Chevie Savano escapes into the past to escape the secret police after they kill Charles Smart just as he is telling her of the WARP program, and she and Riley team up to find Colonel Clayton Box before he can launch missiles at the capitals of Europe.

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*WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN . . .*

**T**OWARD THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, Scottish professor Charles Smart succeeded in stabilizing a time tunnel to Victorian London (constructed from exotic matter with negative energy density, duh). Within months the FBI had established the **Witness Anonymous Relocation Program** to stash federal witnesses in the past. When the professor learned that Colonel Box of WARP division was planning to use the wormhole to manipulate governments and regimes, he fled, horrified, into the past, taking his codes with him—a wasted gesture, really, since Colonel Box and his entire unit had disappeared on a mission only days before.

Smart returned to the twenty-first century some years later, but he was far too dead to share his secrets. His arrival had quantum repercussions, which ensnared young FBI consultant Chevron Savano and even younger Riley, a boy from Victorian London who wished to escape the career of assassin mapped out for him by his evil master, the conjurer and murderer for hire Albert Garrick.

Garrick pursued his apprentice to the future and back, but he was ultimately cut adrift in the Smarthole with no means to reassemble his physical person.

More stuff happened, too. High adventure, close calls, and belly laughs—but that’s another story (it’s quite the story, to be honest) and has no place muddling up this report.

So all’s well that ends well for our spirited pair of young adventurers?

For Chevie, not so much, as we will find out.

For Riley, even less so, which will become almost immediately apparent.

Chevie’s brief presence in Victorian London caused temporal ripples, which were to have a dire effect on the present. Simply put, Chevron Savano was noticed in the past by the previously mentioned Colonel Box, who had actually set up shop in Victorian London. As a result, the colonel was prompted to have Riley murdered and then move up his world-domination plan by a few days, causing the downfall of major world powers and the emergence of the Boxite Empire. If Chevie had not been noticed, then Box would have stuck to his original Emergence

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Day and the catacombs where he made his base would have flooded, foiling his plans forever.

Chevie now lives as a Boxite cadet in a timeline that is not her own. Her mind is rejecting modern-day London and allowing her original memories of time travel adventures and the FBI to bleed through. For cases like Chevie's, Professor Smart predicted two hypothetical outcomes: either the time traveler drowns the visions in antipsychotic drugs so that he/she may live some kind of normal life, or the visions will become so vivid that their discordance with actual events will drive the subject insane.

When we join the story, Chevron Savano's visions are becoming extremely vivid, and if there were antipsychotic drugs handy, they certainly would not be wasted on a mere army cadet.

## 1 » MOLEY & GOOGOO

*If you go back in time and assassinate Rasputin, then there's no need to go back and assassinate Rasputin. So is old Grigori dead, or isn't he?*

—Professor Charles Smart

*BOXITE YOUTH ACADEMY, PRESENT-DAY LONDON,  
NEW ALBION, 115 BC (BOXITE CALENDAR)*

**L**ONDON TOWN.

Once there had been a magic about the city. Just hearing the name conjured images of Dickens's young trickster Dodger, or of Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street putting his mind to a three-pipe problem, or of any one of a thousand tales of adventure and derring-do that were woven through London's magnificent avenues and shadowy network of backstreets and alleys. For centuries people had journeyed from across the world to England's capital to see where their favorite stories were set, or perhaps to make their fortune, or maybe to simply stand and gaze at the wonders of Trafalgar Square or Big Ben.

Not anymore. Those days of magic were long gone.

For one thing, the tourist industry did not really exist in the Boxite Empire, and for another, Big Ben had been torn down decades ago to make room for a giant statue of the Blessed Colonel, whose stone eyes watched over the city and everyone in it. And Big Ben was not the only landmark dragged under by the Boxites. Brick by brick, the Empire was erasing relics of the past and remaking London in its own image: uniform, imposing, gray, and implacable.

Almost all of the office buildings were constructed out of poured concrete with little in the way of distinguishing marks, just row upon row of dimly lit windows, lidded by half-drawn blinds. As the older London buildings were worn away by acid rain, they were demolished and replaced by utility blocks dropped in place by mega-copters. The blocks were pre-wired and plumbed and just required connection to the main supplies to be fully operational. London's history was being erased on a daily basis.

One such building that had fallen into disrepair and was due to be dynamited in six months' time was the Boxite Youth Academy, the officer school for the Empire's military, where cadets from all over the world came to be indoctrinated in the way of the Blessed Colonel.

Inside this most austere academy no attempt had been made to cater to the comfort or physical well-being of the cadets. Benches were hard stone, and thin mattresses were laid on flat planks. The Spartan model was often cited and weak

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candidates were not encouraged to play to their strengths but instead traded to one of the Boxite Empire's harsher institutes.

Inside her cubicle, seventeen-year-old Cadet Chevron Savano woke before the morning's reveille siren but kept her eyes closed in order to prepare herself for the day's nightmares.

No, not nightmares, Chevie thought. Though the Blessed Colonel knows I have plenty of those. These are daymares. Waking visions.

Chevie tugged the cot's rough army blanket over her head so that the wall-mounted Boxlights could not even cast a glow on the insides of her eyelids.

What's wrong with me? she wondered. Why do I see things that aren't there?

These visions were interfering catastrophically with her training at the Boxite Youth Academy. Chevie's scores had dipped quite sharply in recent days, so much so that the file clipped to the foot of her bed had an orange card tucked into the folder.

An orange card. A review. The first warning and perhaps her last if she could not make a satisfactory show of herself. The academy rules were sacrosanct. One serious slip, and her place would be offered to the next in line.

And it was a long line. Millions of souls long.

Her review was today, and if it went badly, she could be sold to a Box soldier factory in Dublin—or worse, to the mines in Newcastle as a spade monkey.

Chevie shuddered.

*A spade monkey? Surely that would be a fate worse than death.*



Chevron could pinpoint exactly when the visions started. It had been six months ago, on the night she'd sleepwalked down to the academy's musty basement and collapsed in a heap of mysterious half-formed clothes: long ropes of drenched, saturated cloth that looped her body like dark serpents. She had been wearing neither nightshirt nor slippers, just this strange material that dissolved into slop as she slowly woke. Then her stomach had convulsed and she'd vomited a strange glowing gel that turned to light particles and drifted away like fireflies.

Light? she remembered thinking.

*Am I dying?*

*Is this death?*

But her breath had come in rattling whoops, and Chevie's heart had hammered a testimony to her hold on life.

*How did I get here?*

*Where is here?*

Cadet Savano had covered herself with an old dropcloth yanked from a pile of paint cans and she'd stumbled to the top of a wrought iron staircase, her legs as weak as a newborn's.

I am in a basement of some sort, she'd thought.

*This is where the Timepod was, dummy,* said a voice in her head. *You've come back.*

This voice, which was to become very familiar, made no sense, and so Chevie had ignored it.

Chevie had pounded on the locked door, calling out for help, which arrived eventually in the lumpily muscled shapes of the academy's night watch: two Thundercats, Clover Vallicose

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and Lunka Witmeyer, secret police attached to the academy. So Chevie was in the academy, at least.

Thundercats? Chevie had thought. She'd giggled and was instantly horrified.

Thundercats? Why would that name make her giggle? A person did not giggle around Thundercats. They were licensed to use necessary and unnecessary force up to, but not exceeding, the infliction of mortal wounds.

How do you exceed mortal wounds? wondered Chevie.

*Two days*, the Thundercats had told her that night, frowning above their splashback visors. *Two days we've been looking for you, orphan. And you show up in a restricted area. How in the name of the Blessed Colonel did you get down here? And why are you laughing? Do you find us amusing?*

Chevron could only shake her head dumbly. There was nothing in her mind but lingering dreams, confusion, and questions that truncated each other before they were fully born.

*How did I . . .*

*What was that . . .*

*Riley?*

*Who?*

*Why?*

It was at that moment the visions—visions that would rip her ordered life apart—began. Before her disbelieving eyes the Thundercats had cracked and split into broken mirror images of themselves. They were replaced by an elderly woman with an unruly cone of hair piled on top of her head.

*I knew you'd come, she'd said. Charles said you would, and Charles Smart is never wrong.*

Then the elderly lady had disappeared, and the Thundercats were reassembled—and Chevie found herself thrashing in their arms, desperate to beat her way free from whatever nightmare she had woken into.

*Quietly does it, little bird,* Sister Lunka Witmeyer had advised her.

Chevie had trembled like a criminal on the Trafalgar Square public rack.

Who was the elderly woman in her visions? And who was Charles Smart?

These were things she could neither answer nor ask aloud for fear of being judged *unstable* and being shipped off to a school for the hopeless. Chevie's mind teemed with forbidden questions. They kept her awake at night and made her feel dopey all day.

It's a tumor, she thought several times a minute. My brain is eating itself.

And now it was several months later and the visions had cracked the chalice of Chevie's life, which had not exactly been brimming with golden hope to begin with. She was a cadet in a school that bred police, soldiers, and spies for the Boxite army. A hard life of mistrust and interrogation lay ahead of her, if she was lucky. And now it seemed that she would not be lucky. Just like her best friend DeeDee had not been lucky.



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Chevie opened her eyes and, for the time being at least, the world was as her mind stubbornly insisted it should be. No hallucinations. No sharp pain in her temple, which lately had preceded the visions.

*I am in the dormitory. Good.*

The bunk above her was empty. DeeDee—her friend, counsel, and confederate ever since enrollment—had slept there. They had studied the Boxnet together and practiced their hand-to-hand combat with each other. But DeeDee was gone now, executed for spying, and Chevie herself had been under a pall of suspicion for months.

Chevie was no traitor, and even if she had questions or doubts about Box's Empire she kept them to herself, because the alternatives to living under Box's wing were the wilderness of the Blasted States or the mountain encampments of the barbarian Jax.

*No one is happy all the time. The colonel himself was forced to hide in London's catacombs for decades before he emerged with his divine machines.*

Suddenly and without the warning of approaching footsteps, the curtain was whipped back, and Chevie's view was obscured by the hulking forms of Thundercats Lunka Witmeyer and Clover Vallicose. Once again Chevie fought the impulse to giggle.

*Thundercats? Why would that be funny?*

The Thundercats were a special division within the Boxite army. A band of trained specialists who had a fearsome reputation for brutality and thoroughness. They specialized in

party security and weeding out traitors. It was unusual that Thundercats would be assigned to the academy, but the director had requested them, claiming it was better to pull weeds than fell trees—meaning that young traitors were easier to kill.

“Box cherish you, Cadet,” said Vallicose.

“And you, Sister,” Chevie said automatically.

“I cherish you slightly less than Box,” said Witmeyer. “But then, I am a mere mortal.”

Witmeyer was the comedienne of the two.

Lightheartedness was a personality trait not encouraged by the military, unless it could be put to good use as an interrogation technique or battle distraction. It was said that, when she was stationed in France, Sister Witmeyer told knock-knock jokes even as her helmet wiper raked Jax gore from her splash-back visor.

Chevie swung her legs out of bed, stood at attention, and awaited further instructions. The Thundercats were more than an hour ahead of the posted schedule, but it was not their place to offer an explanation, and hardly her place to ask for one. Today she would not stray even a single degree from protocol. For all she knew, the review had already begun.

“Don’t you have something to say to us?” asked Vallicose.

What? wondered Chevie. What am I supposed to say?

Vallicose started off the sentence for her. “Happy . . .”

“Happy Emergence Eve, Sisters,” blurted Chevie.

“You had forgotten, perhaps, that on this day in 1899, the Blessed Colonel and his army were making their final preparations to emerge from the catacombs and take back the world?”

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“No, Sister, I hadn’t forgotten. We owe everything to the Blessed Colonel.”

Vallicose scanned Chevie’s face, searching for any glint of insubordination, but Chevie kept her eyes front and her back ruler-straight. She was fit, focused, and one of an ethnic minority, a Shawnee Native American: a perfect model for the Boxite army posters that plastered every bus shelter and underground station.

“Hmph,” said Vallicose. Perhaps she was impressed, perhaps the opposite. Her grunt was difficult to interpret.

Lunka Witmeyer’s words were more straightforward.

“Are you seeing us, sweetie? We haven’t transmogrified into little old ladies?”

“I see you both clearly, Sisters,” responded Chevie evenly. “I apologize again for that night. It was just a fever.”

Vallicose grunted again and followed it with “A fever? Fevers don’t shunt a body through steel doors.”

They had no way of knowing, none of them, that it was not a fever that had transported Chevie to a sealed basement, but rather a time paradox that had blended the Chevie returning from Victorian London with the Chevie who was a native to this timeline.

Witmeyer snarled behind the high collar of her splashback visor, which she had absolutely no need to wear while on supervision duty inside an academy of unarmed students.

“That night, Savano? That night? But it was more than one night, wasn’t it? Seems like every night you’re collapsing into a hysterical heap; isn’t she, Sister Vallicose?”

Vallicose nodded, and her entire face bulged with suppressed anger. “She called me a *Fed* last Tuesday. What is a *Fed*? Sounds like Jax talk to me.”

The French rebels were nicknamed *Jacques*, usually spelled *Jax*.

“I—I don’t know,” stammered Chevie. “The fever comes and goes. Antibiotics are what I need, that’s all.”

Suddenly Clover Vallicose was in her face. “Antibiotics? There are soldiers dying for the Blessed Colonel right now. Lying on foreign slag heaps, watching their life’s blood splash onto unhallowed rocks, and you think their medicine should be diverted into your worthless veins? Is that what you think, Savano?”

Chevie ground her teeth to keep herself from collapsing. “No, Sister. Of course not. Heroes of the Empire should always take priority. Any one of us cadets would be proud to lay down our lives for them.”

Witmeyer laughed, then finger-ticked an imaginary box. “Straight out of the manual, but well remembered under pressure.” She nodded at the cadet. “Now get ready, Cadet; the director is waiting.”

Chevie shuddered. She could not help it.

*Director Waldo Gunn.*

A hero of Box’s War, awarded the Empire Cross. For thirty years the director had endured working undercover in Provence. Director Gunn was a true believer and a master assassin—who resembled nothing more than a diminutive, kindly grandfather.

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*Look at the hands, the other cadets whispered as he passed in the corridor. They are darker than the rest of his skin, stained red by Jax blood.*

Chevie had only seen Director Gunn in person as he strode the academy corridors on Box's business, surrounded by committee members and his personal guard, a phalanx of pistoning legs and swinging arms.

*I have never seen his hands.*

*Forget Director Gunn's hands. Get dressed, Cadet, Chevie told herself. Your life is at stake.*

Chevie hurriedly zipped up her regulation navy jumpsuit and high boots, tugging on a peaked cap emblazoned with a golden Boxite Youth Academy symbol. She stepped smartly past Vallicose and into the dorm.

The Thundercats marched Chevie Savano down the academy's long corridor, their boots drawing creaks and groans from floorboards that had long since sprung their pegs. The dormitory's other cadets were concealed behind drawn curtains, and the only significant sounds besides boots and boards were the occasional whimper of someone with night terrors and the background drone of Colonel Clayton Box's collected speeches, which were piped through the sound system twenty-four hours a day.

The corridor was a hundred feet long, the length of what had once been four joined but separate terraced houses on Farley Square in Bloomsbury. Through the sash windows Chevie saw



the steel edges of the Blessed Colonel's pyramidal mausoleum, and the crimson laser glint from the all-seeing-eye mounted on its peak.

*Like Sauron*, thought the second Chevie, who was hiding inside the mind of the first one. Traitor Chevie, as she had named the mind disease that was determined to get her killed.

*Sauron?*

*What is a Sauron?*

The door to Director Gunn's office was conspicuously plain, in stark contrast to the wall in which it sat. The wall was decorated with a heroic mural depicting the second round of Boxstrike, when the United States, the British Isles, and mainland Europe were brought forcibly under angels' wings. The style was typical of the Empire, with muscled figures in profile, and fans of crepuscular sun rays. The door was a simple wooden panel, adorned with nothing more than faded blue paint.

This door had been Director Gunn's only modification to the building when he took office. A door transported from the guesthouse in France where Waldo Gunn had poached Jax information and personnel for all those years.

How many now dead men have touched that doorknob? wondered Chevie as she paused before knocking.

Witmeyer poked her with a gloved finger. "Are you nervous, sweetie? Is that it?"

Chevie bit her lip and nodded. It was true, she was more nervous than she could remember being. In fact, she was bordering on frantic.

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I am at war with myself, she realized. How could a person win that fight?

She flexed her fingers to stop their shaking, then once more reached toward the door.

“Enter, Cadet,” came the commanding voice from within.

The director knows I’m here, thought Chevie. It’s true what they say: Waldo Gunn has the sight.

*Sure, the sight,* sneered Traitor Chevie. *Or a camera over the door.*

Chevie curled her fingers into a fist, then stuffed it in her mouth to stifle the sob. They would execute her in the yard if she could not control herself. They would ask for volunteers from the ranks of her own class to shoot her.

*Remember DeeDee.*

Deirdre Woollen, her dearest friend since first grade, had been hauled out of class, interrogated for two days, and then executed. And all because Deirdre had been discovered unsupervised in the director’s study while the war maps were on display.

*She was a Jax spy,* they’d whispered in the dorms. *Gathering intelligence.*

DeeDee a spy?

Chevie had been shocked.

*Shocked because DeeDee was dumber than plankton,* Traitor Chevie whispered in her ear. *DeeDee was your friend, but she couldn’t gather enough intelligence to spell c-a-t. Deirdre Woollen probably got herself turned around while searching for the bathroom, and Gunn shot her for it.*

It was true, Chevie knew, but she couldn't allow herself to think it, in case she talked in her sleep.

Sister Witmeyer knuckled Chevie's skull. "You have been summoned."

Chevie found the courage to grasp the doorknob and turn it, and as she walked into the office, she heard Traitor Chevie in her mind.

*You better let me out of here, Cadet, because if you don't, neither of us is leaving this room alive.*

*Please, thought Chevie. Please be quiet.*

The director's office was long and narrow with a red carpet stretching down the center like the tongue of some gigantic animal. Director Waldo Gunn was a fan of the art of homodermy—a special type of taxidermy—and the stuffed and preserved corpses of notable academy martyrs lined the walls. Chevie knew that the waxy, rouged cadavers were a testament to the dedication of these graduates, but secretly she thought that she would rather be burned to ashes and forgotten forever than end up as a lifeless sentry in this room. Chevie kept her eyes front and tried not to feel the frosty gaze of the Empire's heroes on her shoulder blades.

The director was seated at his desk, and from ten feet away Chevie could smell the aroma of must and garlic that traveled with him like a personal cloud.

Being a committee member had its privileges, among them smelling however the hell you felt like.

*He stinks, said Traitor Chevie. Somebody power-hose that guy.*

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Director Gunn had been tapping a stylus on a Boxnet tablet, and he suddenly stopped, almost as though Chevie had spoken aloud.

Oh no, thought Chevie. Oh no.

Director Gunn seemed elfin behind the large desk, with his too large head and pinhole blue eyes peering out above a faceful of gray beard.

“Did you speak, Cadet Savano?”

The voice was curiously low. For some reason, Chevie had always expected it to be higher.

“No, sir, Director. I don’t think so. Not that I know of.”

Gunn sighed. “‘I don’t think so?’ ‘Not that I know of?’ These blurtings of yours are why you stand before me today.”

“Exactly, Director,” confirmed Witmeyer, who, along with her partner, had followed Chevie inside.

“Umfh, Director,” muttered Clover Vallicose.

Chevie started, surprised to find the Thundercats at her shoulders.

*Silent assassins.*

Gunn leaned back in his antique chair with its turned-down armrests.

“Come closer, Chevron. Stand before me.”

Chevie walked forward in a daze, her progress halted by the bang of her thighs on the desk’s rim. She noticed her own photograph displayed on the tablet’s screen. The director had been reviewing her file.

Gunn sighed again. “You showed such promise, Savano. Such aptitude. . . . But now . . .”

The director set down the pad and intertwined his tiny, hairy fingers in his lap.

*Hobbit!* shouted Traitor Chevie in her head. *Hobbit. HOBBIT. HOBBIT.*

It was silent, but somehow deafening. Chevie felt a line of sweat trace her brow.

“I am aware, Director, that the past few months have been disappointing . . .”

“Disappointing?” huffed Clover Vallicose. “Catastrophic.”

“All of these bewildering outbursts,” continued Waldo Gunn. “These strange terms. FBI, what is the FBI?”

“I . . . I don’t know, Director.”

“And yet you used these letters to describe our academy.”

Chevie couldn’t even remember this specific outburst, though the letters did seem familiar.

“And in history class you shouted, ‘Tell it to Oprah!’ What is OPRA? The Oriental People’s Republican Army, perhaps?”

Chevie shook her head helplessly. “It’s not me, Director. I don’t say these things.”

“Oh, you say them. The question is why.”

“She’s a spy,” said Vallicose bluntly. “A Jax spy sent to sow confusion.”

Chevie flashed back to how DeeDee’s face had looked before the bullet struck her. She had seemed a hundred years old.

“I am no spy, Director,” she said. “I may be ill. A tumor, maybe, or a virus, but I am no spy. I love the Empire. I would die for the flag.”

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A huge Empire flag hung on the wall behind Gunn, perhaps the most recognizable image in the world: a gold circle, and inside the circle a 3-D box, the lower rear horizontal and forward right vertical rendered thicker to form a cross.

*This is all wrong*, thought Traitor Chevie, brain-shuddering at the very sight of the image.

Director Gunn spun the pad absently on the desktop, puffs of mildew rising from his sleeve.

“You love the Empire, Cadet?”

“Absolutely, Director. With my body and soul.”

“And do you know the Empire, Savano? Do you realize the sacrifices this empire has demanded of the faithful?”

History questions, thought Chevie. I have a chance.

“I do,” she said. “Chapter and verse.”

Director Gunn *hmm*ed. Cadet Savano had set herself a challenge.

“What do you know of the Blessed Colonel, Clayton Box?”

*An easy one.*

“Colonel Box. A god who came among us to scorch sin from the earth.”

Gunn waved a testy hand. “Yes, yes, yes. Any child with a cereal box knows this. You are a cadet. What is your *understanding* of the Revolution?”

Chevie frowned; this was a loaded question. Director Gunn was asking for her take on the Revolution. He wanted her to summarize, and *summaries* often included opinions, and *opinions* could get a person killed.

Chevie spoke slowly, taking her time, trying to ignore the hulking Thundercats breathing beast-like in each ear, waiting for the order to pounce.

“The world was in chaos. The empires of man were vast and cruel. Millions of souls perished through ignorance, cruelty, want.”

“But more important than the perishing?” said Gunn in a voice that seemed too deep for his miniature frame.

*Take it easy, Bilbo, thought Traitor Chevie. I'm getting there.*

“More important than the dying bodies were the lost souls. People were dying in vast numbers without enlightenment. God decided that He could no longer suffer this, so He appeared on earth in the form of Colonel Box to build a New Albion that would be a shining example of virtue to the world.”

“And how did the colonel plan to build this New Albion?”

“He recruited his disciples, the first Thundercats.”

Traitor Chevie couldn't swallow this. *It's a spiel. A hoax, a joke. The whole world is being conned. Box was a rogue soldier. I remember the file.*

The effort of keeping these blasphemies inside forced beads of sweat through the skin of Chevie's brow.

“For thirty long years, Colonel Box and his disciples went into the catacombs below London, where they communed with the souls of the faithful and slowly built the colonel's machines. When they returned from the underworld on Emergence Day, Colonel Box ordered his men to launch the first missiles at the Houses of Parliament, Windsor Castle, and the naval port of

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Portsmouth. Most of the government and monarchy got their just deserts in less than an hour, and it took little more than a day for Colonel Box to arm his legion of London poor folk and take the capital. Within a month, Britain was completely given over to the colonel. The reign of man was at an end. Colonel Box set the arms factories in Sheffield to building the great ballistic missiles that the colonel had designed, and in under a year, after the second round of Boxstrike, the earth once more belonged to the righteous.”

Traitor Chevie brain-snorted. *London poor folk? Criminals, more like.*

Director Gunn nodded; so far, Chevron Savano was on track. “The transition period was not without its hiccups, was it? Some problems are too small to be solved with missiles.”

“No, sir. There was opposition. Those who denied the colonel were publicly hanged all along Swingers’ Row by . . .”

Chevie’s train of thought ground to a halt.

Gunn was on her like a grizzled tomcat on a cornered mouse.

“Publicly hanged by who?”

Chevie could feel the Thundercats shifting at her shoulders.

*Who? Who was the hangman?*

“Surely you remember, Cadet. After all, the entire war is known as the Hangman’s Revolution. A little irreverent, perhaps, but cleansing was essential. The Hangman is one of our most honored saints. Beatified by the colonel himself. His portrait is on the wall in front of you, for heaven’s sake.”



*Listen to this guy, said Traitor Chevie. He believes his own bull. Box granted sainthood to an executioner. That's like a monster pinning a medal on a troll.*

Chevie gazed at the portrait, hoping for inspiration, and an image flashed in her mind's eye. The wiry man from the painting but holding a tattooist's needle, the cracks in his nails traced with ink. She gave voice to the image without thinking about it.

"The tattooist," she blurted. "Anton Farley the tattooist. He was the hangman."

Gunn jumped to his feet, slamming his palms on his desk. *The director's hands are red!* Chevie saw. Red with Jax blood.

"Farley the tattooist!" he roared.

*Roared? Really?* said blasphemous Chevie. *That's more like a bleat.*

"Shut up!" said real-world Chevie. "Just shut up."

Gunn fixed her with his blazing eyes. "Shut up? You would . . . Do you know who I am?"

"Hobbit!" shouted Chevie. "Hobbit . . . Hobbit . . . HOBBIT!"

The Thundercats moved, each grabbing one of Chevie's shoulders.

*I have so had enough of these guys,* thought Traitor Chevie, the silent killer, the betrayer.

If the Thundercats had been expecting resistance, they would have fared better; but Cadet Chevron Savano had only proven to be a middling combatant at best. And, in any event, the particular moves she used now had never been taught in the academy.

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Chevie took Witmeyer first, spinning under the Thundercat's outstretched arm and jabbing her kidney with four straight fingers. Continuing the pirouette, Chevie bent Vallicose's knee with a powerful kick, then turned back to Witmeyer, who seemed bemused to be in intense pain. Chevie grabbed the warrior nun's splashback visor and yanked it downward until their faces were level.

"Hi," said Chevie, in a tone that was somehow more shocking than the assault, then she punched Witmeyer in the nose. Chevie could never put the Thundercat down with force alone, but pain was distracting Witmeyer, which gave Chevie a chance to snag her weapon and cover Vallicose as the warrior nun reached for the buzz baton on her hip.

"Leave it, Miley," Chevie ordered, flicking off the pistol's safety. Then she nodded to Vallicose. "You too, Gaga."

Inside, Cadet Chevie was wailing in terror.

*What?*

*Did the Traitor teach me to fight?*

*How else could I have attacked Thundercats?*

*The Traitor has damned me to hell.*

*Miley?*

*Gaga?*

Of course the *most* dangerous person in the room had been forgotten, as her brain erroneously assigned him the role of *least* dangerous person in the room. This had been the secret of his success in France. Director Gunn scabbled onto the desk, hefted his tablet computer, and bashed Chevie across the skull.

Cadet Savano toppled in angular sections, and as unconsciousness drew its slow curtains across her senses, the last thing she heard was Gunn's sarcastic voice.

"My most feared Thundercats laid low by a helpless girl. Perhaps you two are not as formidable as you think, eh, Moley and Googoo?"

*Ha, thought Traitor Chevie. Moley and Googoo? Hobbit be stoopid.*

Then both Chevies were lost in the dark.

## 2 » POWDERED WIGS & PARASOLS

*A guy walks into a bar and says to the barman: "Gimme one whiskey  
for myself and ten billion for all my possible alternate selves."*

—Professor Charles Smart

*ORIENT THEATRE, HOLBORN, LONDON, 1899*

**N**OW OUR STORY MIGRATES, FOLLOWING THE curve of Professor Smart's wormhole, emerging in the Victorian Era, where three million souls fuss and sprawl on the banks of the Thames, Fleet, and Lea. Where the sky is black with Machine Age pollution that would choke a Pompeii donkey. Where life is cheap and death is gratis. And if this prose seems overly soused in bleakness, let me remind you that we have not even touched on the great slums, where rendered fat is considered a culinary delicacy and the chief distraction for the legions of red-knuckled, soot-faced orphans is a brisk game of rat-hunt.

But we will not tarry in these quagmires of deprivation, for our tale entices us elsewhere. We follow the ruffle of crow

tail feathers across the patchwork rooftops of Soho and Mayfair toward Holborn, dipping through the majestic spans of its viaduct and hovering above a chalked sidewalk that proclaims in footstep-smudged capital letters that the grand reopening of the Orient Theatre takes place on this very day. In truth, the phrase *grand reopening* seems a trifle hyperbolic given the dilapidated state of the building beyond, but exaggerated claims are the essence of theater, are they not? The public demands embellishment. Superlatives only, if you please. Sopranos are *incomparable*. Comic turns are invariably *sidesplitting* (only clowns can offer mutilation as an endorsement), and magicians are occasionally *magnificent*, often *incredible*, and without exception *great*.

The Orient Theatre's resident illusionist would consider himself currently *great*, though in truth he is often *astonishing* and on occasion even *amazing*. Indeed, he once idly toyed with the professional moniker the Astonishing Amazini before settling on the more modest title: the Great Savano.

Perhaps the name bongs a gong?

The Great Savano, known as Riley to his handful of friends, lay napping on that afternoon in the steel bathtub that had served as his bed for the past weeks. About six months ago he had inherited the Orient Theatre and the various caches of gold sovereigns that were hidden around or buried under the building. It may seem a lavish bequest for a mere magician's assistant, but the boy had earned it a hundred times over in his fourteen years. Each gas jet in the footlights had cost him a punch around

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the earhole; every seat represented a night spent shivering in a locked cellar. For the curtains he had paid with ingots of servitude, while the proscenium arch had been bought with the hours he had spent suspended on a painter's scaffold, squinting as he traced the curls of its scrolls with a gilt-dipped brush. He had, essentially, signed the theater's papers with his own blood, while his sweat and tears had served as payment for the main stash of glittering sovereigns beneath the conductor's podium.

Even now, as his wiry frame folded itself into the tub, swathed with waves of his fox-fur magician's cloak, boot heels clanging on the steel vessel, Riley paid in dark dreams for his ownership of the Orient. His old master, Albert Garrick, haunted him, dripping threats into his ear. He never showed his face, mind you; he just whispered ghastly terrorizations. How he would punish Riley, how he was not perished but merely adrift in Professor Smart's damned tunnel, how he would haul himself from the ethereal nothingness and wreak bloody vengeance.

*I have time to plan my escape, Riley, my boy. Time is all I have.*

Garrick was the devil, thought Riley, as he thrashed and pulled for the surface. And the devil can never be banished so long as one soul fears him.

*I fear him, Lord knows I do.*

It was not the devil who awaited him in the land of queen and men; it was Bob Winkle, resplendent in his new travel suit.

Bob Winkle, the young grifter whom Riley had rescued from a life of crime in the Old Nichol and set up with a bunk

in the Orient. Bob the Beak, as he was known by some, because he had shown quite a knack for winking information from reluctant sources.

“Yer going to bash a hole in that tub with all the jiggling,” was Bob Winkle’s comment now. “Kicking like a dangler, you are.”

Riley granted himself a moment before engaging. A breath or two to exhale the shade of Garrick and anchor himself in the wide-awake world.

“You plump out that rig well, Bob,” he said at last. And it was the truth. Bob cut a fine figure in his newly delivered suit: a jacket of orange tweed with brass glinting on cuffs and waistcoat, legs stuffed into the vases of high boots.

“I resembles a circus monkey,” said Bob equably. In Bob’s opinion, a circus monkey was a few steps up the ladder from a tenement snakesman on the greasy pole to Newgate Prison.

Riley’s hands emerged from folds of fur, and he curled his fingers around the tub’s rim. “I’ve seen a monkey, Bob. Your mug ain’t half so appealing.”

A josh between young men. Nothing extraordinary on the face of it. No more out of place than a sailor in a gin joint, but for Riley casual jokiness had a newborn quality. His mind was beginning to slough off the tight membrane of Garrick’s tyranny, just as Bob had shed his scraps of mortified clothing, his archaeological layers of compacted dirt, and the unhealthy ochre hue that had pasted him since birth. In truth, with some mileage between him and the shadow of Old Nichol, Bob Winkle was flourishing. He had sprouted several inches

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in the half year since his salvation, and his hair had revealed itself to be wheat yellow. Riley's old frame, on the other hand, stubbornly refused to lengthen, but at least his humor was brightening somewhat—while he was awake, at least.

Bob lent his governor a helping hand. "You don't have to sneak a kip in the tub, boss. We has a bed, you know."

"A specter wouldn't fit sideways on that mattress," said Riley. "I'll hang on to my bath, if you don't mind. You're not exactly wearing a hole in it."

Bob rapped the tub. "I ain't a mackerel, boss. And dirt seals the pores, keeps sickness out of a body."

"And I ain't sneaking a kip. I was up all night rigging the theater, as you know. That was a well-earned snooze."

There were more comfortable places to grab some sleep, Riley knew, but the FBI had stashed him in a tub when Garrick was nipping on his coattails in the future, and he had survived that day, so even though the tub itself had little to do with that undeadness, he clung to it as a symbol.

*Sleep in a tub,*

*Dodge the nub.*

The rhyme would never be immortalized in the pages of the *Strand* magazine, but it comforted him nonetheless.

Bob poked Riley's cloak with a finger, feeling the fine chain mail hidden in the lining. "I see you've taken to sporting this in the tub now? Surely that ain't in the bather's handbook."

Riley flexed his legs, testing the cloak's weight. "Onstage, the chain mail can turn aside a blade if one of the tricks goes awry, but I need to wear it easy as pie, like there's not an ounce



of strain on my legs. For that casualness I got to practice, Bob. And perhaps if you practiced your card handling with the same dedication, you'd be a sight further along the road to wearing your own cloak."

Bob changed the subject sharpish. "I 'ad a cable from my source."

The source was an investigator friend of Bob's who had been dispatched to Brighton to sniff out Riley's half brother, Tom, who had last been seen in that seaside town.

Riley looked up sharply. "And?"

"Nothing much," said Bob. "E's poking around, but no joy so far. Waste of tuppence if you ask me. I'm going there now on the afternoon train."

"But you'll miss the grand reopening."

"Can't be helped, boss. You gots your budge; I've got mine."

Riley nodded. Bob would flood the town with Old Nichol muck snipes. If anyone could sniff out hide or hair of a lost man, it was a hungry urchin from the tenements.

"How are the Trips? Is the show set?"

The Trips were Bob's brothers, whom Riley had lodged with a decent widow woman who made sure they got grub and schooling. In their spare time they helped around the theater and ran errands.

"Still set, same as the last time you asked," said Bob. "Mirrors, smoke bombs, flashers, blades, gramophone, curtains loaded. The sack is stuffed with rats, as we used to say back in the Nichol. I sent 'em out with playbills. Paper the whole town they will."

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“Excellent,” said Riley, taking the dozen or so steps to the small kitchen, where a hot roll and a mug of ale waited for him on the corner table. “I told you, Bob. I ain’t drinking no more before nightfall. Chevie would have my scalp.”

Bob shrugged, then helped himself to the ale. “Ah, yes, the Injun princess. It wouldn’t do to earn Chevron’s displeasure, ’er being in the future and all.”

Bob Winkle had taken active part in the final act of Riley’s struggle with Garrick and so was well-ish versed on the time-traveling shenanigans, though he only knew the half of it and only believed a quarter of that.

“Chevie’s gone, Riley,” said Bob, then emphasized his pronouncement with an ale belch. “Into the henceforth, or into a hole in the ground. You said it yerself, she’s likely to have ear-hole palpitations.”

“Smarthole mutations,” corrected Riley.

“Whichever, makes no odds. The point being that much as I would love to be reunited with Miss Chevie, seeing as she expressed a wish to walk out with me, it ain’t very likely. So live yer life according to yer own needs and not under the shadow of the future.”

This was quite the speech; Riley suspected that Bob Winkle missed Chevie almost as much as he did.

“There is nothing wrong with learning lessons, Bob, and adjusting yer behavior according-wise.”

Bob finished the beer. “Don’t I know it, boss? I ain’t attended a single rat fight since we moved here. Nor trawled the Belgravia sewers for posh drain droppings.”

“Ah, sewage-dipped posh droppings,” said Riley, deadpan. “The pearls of London town.”

Bob grinned, revealing a row of ivories that were remarkably white for a tenement graduate. “Hark at the comedian. P’raps we should give you a second spot on the playbill. How’s about Charlie Chuckles as a moniker?”

Riley returned his mate’s smile and bowed low. “Charles Chuckles, Esquire, at your service.”

They both laughed, and then Riley finished his roll, chewing slowly, enjoying the slow dissolve of fresh-baked dough, untainted by the fear of a sudden blow from Garrick.

I ain’t afraid, he thought. At this exact moment in the day, I ain’t afraid.

Riley felt as though his caged heart had been set free.

“Ahem,” said Bob. “When you has finished with the far-off looks and the simpleton smiling, we should be doing a final run-through before I skedaddles.”

Riley affected a stern gaze. “You are cognizant of the fact that I am your boss, Master Winkle?”

Bob huffed and descended the three wooden steps to the backstage area. “I ain’t even cognizant of the meaning of the word *cognizant*.” He paused at the foot of the steps. “And Bob Winkle has a rule: if he don’t understand it, then sod it.”

Not a bad rule, thought Riley; then he followed his friend into the belly of the theater.

*Our* theater, he realized, and a jaunty spring introduced itself to his step. It was quite possible that Riley had never even

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formulated a sentence containing the word *jaunty*, not to mention contemplated becoming a living example of its definition.

Jaunty, thought Riley. Look at me, all jaunty and such. Jaunty Riley.

The stage was modest by the standards of London's famous West End, barely fifteen feet from left to right, twenty if the wing nooks were added in; but Riley was proud of the old girl nonetheless, despite the fact that here he'd been punched, kicked, sliced, etherized, and on one occasion hung from a noose tied to a rafter.

He patted one of the proscenium arch's pillars fondly. "That weren't your fault, eh, girl? You were looking out for me."

Still, the memory made Riley wince. "Tell me, Mr. Winkle, did I ever relate the story of how Garrick says to me one fine morning: 'Riley,' he says. 'How's about we re-create the hanging of Dick Turpin at York? And how's about—'"

Bob groaned. "'And how's about you be Turpin?' That worn-out tale. I heard that more times than I heard Great Tom a-bonging from St. Paul's."

This, Riley thought, would be the ideal time to check on Bob's studies, while he was chock-full of his own hilariousness.

"Well then, Mr. Winkle, perhaps you would tell me something else? Seven somethings in fact."

The cockiness gushed from Bob's face, and had it been liquid, it would have filled his boots.

"Bob is busy," he said. "Bob has duties."

Riley tugged a slim leather-bound volume from his pants pocket. He had destroyed many of Garrick's possessions, but this handwritten *Guide to Magicks & Illusion* was a priceless inheritance of daily practical use.

Also, it cheered Riley to think that Garrick's ghost would shrivel with horror at the notion of his notebook's being consulted by the one who had banished him from this earth.

"Chapter one," he read. "'Magic of the theatrical kind, being very separate from actual conjuring, has seven basic elements.' Seven, Robert Winkle. Trot them out, if you please."

"Seven," repeated Bob. "You said no testing today, guv, on account of the grand reopening."

"No, I never did. Seven."

"Seven." Bob was currently Riley's assistant, but his dearest wish was to twirl his own wand. However, to do this, he would have to step up his rote learning, and rote learning was not Bob's strong suit. He put his fingers to his temples and stared out into the seats, the very picture of a mentalist.

"Well, misdirection is first. The bones in the cemetery know that much."

"Misdirection," said Riley. "We don't want the punters peeping where we don't want them peeping."

"Then the ditch. Dumping what we doesn't need the marks spying, like the Rams do with corpses at Caversham Lock."

"Disposal," corrected Riley. "We ain't a criminal gang dealing in dead bodies, just doves and the like. Next?"

Bob chewed a thumbnail. "I know this, bossman. It's the conceal, ain't it?"

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Riley rubbed his hands together until a rose sprouted from the fingertips. “The conceal, or the palm. Hiding an object in an apparently empty hand.”

Bob’s jaw dropped so far you might think Riley had pulled an elephant from a tulip bulb. “Well, I never seen such smooth finger work. You is wasted, guv. Up on the lawn in Leicester Square you should be, dipping for wallets.”

Riley was not about to be distracted by such brazen bootlicking, but he gave himself a moment to smile at his apprentice’s efforts nonetheless. “Four to go, Bob, regardless of where I should or should not be.”

Bob made a great show of checking an invisible pocket watch.

“Oh Lord, lookee at the time, how she flies,” he said. “And I too must fly if I’m to make the Brighton train.”

Bob buttoned his new jacket to the neck and pumped Riley’s hand.

“Break a leg, O Great Savano. I will cable you from the seaside.”

Riley knew that it was pointless to quiz Bob any further. In young Winkle’s head, he was already halfway to Brighton.

“Very well, Bob. Off with you. Cable as soon as you have news.”

“And that will be right soon, or my name ain’t Handsome Bob Winkle.”

*Handsome Bob?*

That was a new one.

And with no more delay, in case Riley would squeeze in

another question, Bob was down the aisle and out the front door, leaving Riley alone in a place where he was determined to forge brand-new memories.

Riley's preparations were interrupted by a clatter coming from the front of the house, tumbling down the center aisle, and mounting the stage itself. It was the stir of men entering the building and being none too genteel about it. These were men who cared not about such things as busted hinges or broken locks. It was in they wanted; and in they were coming, regardless of barriers.

Riley had initially smiled, thinking the Trips were back and famished, but his grin soured when he saw what was barreling down the aisle toward him.

"Rams," he said. "With the king himself at the head of the bunch."

Riley fought his instinct to run and hide. Instead he squared his shoulders, threw back the specially tailored folds of his black fur-trimmed velvet cloak, and bowed dramatically.

"Your Majesty," he said, and confetti showered from the rafters, as though Otto Malarkey and his gang of thugs, bludgers, cads, nobblers, and all-around ne'er-do-wells had been expected.

The Battering Rams were London's premier gang of organized criminals, a title that had previously belonged to the Hooligan Boys, a bunch who had forfeited any claim to the term *organized* when they dynamited the eastern wall of Newgate Prison

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while the majority of their imprisoned war council was leaning against the other side. It was said that the bluebottles were shoveling Hooligan parts for weeks. The Battering Rams were an altogether cannier bunch. No rowdy, gin-soaked men of the moment, these. No, the Rams were more your seasoned criminals, in it for the long haul. Veterans, most of them, who had been blooded in the Transvaal or China. They appreciated a tidy battle plan, and they were prepared to follow a man with a bit of flair. And in Otto Malarkey they had found a tactical genius who had flair flowing out of his beloved pirate boots.

Otto had never been a pirate as such, but he had smuggled taxables into Whitby under the famous smuggler clergyman Reverend John Pine, who had gifted Otto the boots from his deathbed. Malarkey learned the classics at Reverend Pine's desk. He took strategy from Caesar and politicking from Cicero. For his renowned skill with the sword he had to wait till he was dumped into the island prison of Little Saltee, where he learned the gentleman's art from a fellow inmate. When the Rams' previous king, one of Otto's brothers, perished in an ignoble wrestling match with a mountain gorilla, Otto inherited the Battering Rams' horned crown. He had steered the gang to realms of ill-gotten gains they could never have dreamed of under previous Ram kings. Lately, though, it had to be said, the power had gone a little to Otto's head and his trademark flair had taken a turn for the flamboyant.

He was plowing his own fashion furrow and bringing quite a few of his hardened mates along with him.

So now, when Riley unfurled from his theatrical bow, he



was greeted by a front row half full of snorting, bristling coves who sounded and smelled like the Battering Rams he knew so well. But they looked like dandies from some ancient royal court, resplendent in powdered wigs and rouged cheeks, and in their midst sat Otto Malarkey himself, the most powdered of the lot.

Riley spoke as he straightened. "Good evening, ladies and . . ."

The traditional theater greeting stuck in his gullet when he noticed Otto twirling a lace parasol.

"Ladies . . . and . . ."

Otto waited politely for a moment, then whispered through a funnel of fingers like a prompter from the wings. "Gentlemen. Ladies and gentlemen."

Riley forced a smile but was careful not to laugh. A display of mirth at this juncture could prove fatal. "Gentlemen, of course. Ladies and gentlemen. Apologies, Your High Rammity. I was not expecting an audience at this hour. Perhaps the advertisement chalked on the sidewalk outside was smudged by the passage of feet. The curtain does not rise on the evening's entertainments for another three hours."

Otto Malarkey idly opened and closed his parasol indoors, which was very bad luck. Riley felt a tingling of foreboding in his teeth. Theater folk are devout disciples of Lady Luck.

"I is King Ram, my young conjurer, and a single fig I does not give for what is expected. The world is, as the Bard might say, as I like it. I rolls up how and when I choose. I pay

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what I fancy if I fancy. I do not look to others; they look to King Otto for tips and cues. Take this current rigout, for example.”

He paused then, almost challenging Riley to giggle, a challenge he wordlessly declined.

“We takes our high fashion cues from nature. The toughest peacock wears its feathers, the tiger revels in its stripes, and so we wear our finery, so that all may see us and know not to cross steel with the fancy boys of the Battering Rams.”

During this speech Riley felt his old training rise up from the dusky caverns of his mind and settle over his skull like a shroud. Not the magician’s training, though that was some of it; what dictated his actions now was the part of him that had absorbed Garrick’s skills in combat and assassination. It could well be that Malarkey simply fancied himself a trot to the theater with his bully chums and death would not be dealt here today, but if the High Rammity did have violence in mind, he would find Riley ready for him.

“Perhaps His Majesty and his esteemed company would enjoy a demonstration of my talents? A preview, if you will.”

Malarkey rapped the floorboards with the handle of his parasol. “You is a clever lad, a real dimber-damber. I always said it, Riley—or should I say, the Great Savano—but before we abandon ourselves to the wonders of the Orient, let us take a moment to chat viz your obligation to the Brotherhood.”

This was another long and winding statement, and while it meandered along, Riley examined what he now considered

the enemy. There were six Rams arranged before him: Malarkey himself—or Golgoth, as he was known in the ring—a giant of a man barely contained by the ruffles of what looked like an opera shirt. He was flanked by Noble and Jeeves, two of his most experienced bludgers, who had manhandled Riley somewhat during their previous encounter, both barely recognizable under bonnets of powdered wig, the effect of which was ruined somewhat by facial scarification and heavy stubble. Beside Jeeves sat a man so colossal he had enough skin for two, and to the right of him sat a Ram so small he might have needed the extra skin. The monster was Otto's little brother, Barnabus, saddled with the nickname "Inhumane" Malarkey in reference to the prosecuting attorney's description of the assault that had earned Barnabus a half stretch in Newgate. The smaller man was Inhumane's constant companion and general dogsbody, Pooley. Inhumane was squeezed into a blue silk frock coat with golden piping that had been tailored for a less robust frame, and Pooley was dressed in the uniform of a Russian Hussar. All were bearing obvious steel, and possibly hidden steel to complement it. All except Farley, the Rams' tattooist, who sat two rows back, clad in his customary dark coat and worn breeches. A writing pad sat upon his knee, and he scribbled while Malarkey talked. It seemed the tattooist had now become the chronicler of King Otto's life and times.

Riley studied the Rams and dispassionately reckoned that he could, with his training, dispatch three before the others took him. Though there was another way he might remove at least one with no resistance. He was skipping ahead to this

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point in his hastily assembled plan when he registered Otto saying the word *obligation*.

No ordinary word this. It wasn't like saying *pie and sausage*.

*Obligation* was a big word among the Family. *Obligation* was taken as serious as cholera.

"Viz my obligation, Your High Rammity?" said Riley, careful not to show fear. "What obligation are you referring to? We ain't in Ram country here in Holborn."

But he knew. He knew in his gut what his obligation was.

Otto did not speak; instead he tugged one lace glove from his giant paw with utmost deliberation, finger by finger, then tapped his own right shoulder.

Riley knew what lay under the silken sleeve. A Ram tattoo similar to the one Farley had inked on his own shoulder six months previous, during a particularly testing escapade that would have puffed out Allan Quatermain himself. Riley's choice at the time had been to either take the ink or be fed to the pigs. Taking the ink had seemed less immediately terminal.

"You is one of us, lad," said Inhumane. "You is Family."

Riley maintained his showman's face, but behind the smile, panic was boiling his fluids.

*How could I not have foreseen this? I am a Ram. Everything I do belongs to them.*

"Everything of yours is ours," said Malarkey sweetly, as though the king were privy to members' thoughts. "This here building. The swanky velvet seats therein. Tell me, boy, you ain't been spending Ram chink on refurbishings, have you?"

Riley spread his arms. "Just a few knickety-knacks. Here

and there, odds and ends.” It was gibberish, but he was stalling for time.

“Coz that would be a royal decision. Committee at the very least. You should’ve submitted a request form.”

“I didn’t know there was such a form, Your High Rammity. I never thought.”

This was apparently hilarious.

Pooley drummed his thighs with bone-thin fists. “E never thought. Hark at him.”

“E never finks,” said Inhumane, and he chuckled long and low, with a sound like far-off cannon fire. “That is the problem.”

“Brass tacks then, Mr. Malarkey, sir,” said Riley. “What’s on my account?”

“Brass tacks,” said Malarkey. “I like you, boy, which is why I ain’t taking this personal. I ain’t taking all of this sneaky earning the wrong way. I *could* see it like you been dipping into my pocket. Taking the bread out of my starving little brother’s pie hole.”

A thought struck Inhumane. “I *am* starving, as it ’appens.”

Otto laughed, waving the parasol like a baton. “See? He’s starving, is Barnabus. You wanna watch out—he’s likely to take a bite out of yer leg. He’s partial to tender meat, is Barnabus.”

Riley went slightly on the offensive. “So, we’re all square at the moment, King Otto?”

Had Riley been famed comic George Robey, the cacophony of laughter following this statement could hardly have been

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more enthusiastic. With eyes closed, one would have sworn that the Orient was packed to the gods based on volume alone. The mirth shook the men and the men shook the theater until their seats strained their floor bolts.

“All square?” wept King Otto, having taken a pull of brandy from the handle of his parasol. “Dear me, Riley. You is a tonic and no mistake. All square?” He thumped the Rams in range. “Did you ever hear of such a thing? There ain’t no *all square* in the Brotherhood, my boy. All square is not a condition we deals in.”

Riley felt despair drop over him neat as a butterfly net. “Perhaps you could set me straight, King Otto.”

Financial details were too vulgar for royalty to deal with, so Otto delegated. “Farley, spell it out for the Great Savano. Keep it simple. After all, he’s only a lad, despite his grand title.”

Farley smiled at Riley, the first display of friendly teeth since the Rams had arrived. The conservatively clad tattooist seemed out of place in such rambunctious company. A scrivener among pugilists.

“Here’s the bad news, Riley. Once you take the ink, then your life is forfeit to the Rams. You may lease it back at the king’s pleasure for a half share of your worldly goods past and present.”

“Past worldly goods? How’s that to be collected without a time machine?”

Farley looked up from his notebook. “King Otto can hardly be blamed if you once had a fortune then lost it. Fifty percent is due nonetheless.”

The High Rammity swigged once more from his parasol flask, then spat into the aisle. "Magnanimous as I am, I waive the past. Present fortunes only."

Riley bowed. "You are too kind."

Otto sat bolt upright. "Sauce? You are giving me sauce? P'raps my terms is too lenient, then? You could be catching a bullet before the magic show. Sixty percent if you insist on lip, O Great Savano."

Catching a bullet, thought Riley. How clever of King Otto to refer to the most anticipated trick in my repertoire: the bullet catch.

Fifty percent, sixty. It made no difference. Riley was to be a slave at Malarkey's pleasure, and he knew it.

"So, to continue," said Farley, "sixty percent of whatever the Orient brings in. If she brings in nothing, then we sell her lock, stock, and we plump the coffers with the proceeds. If the Great Savano makes a go of it, then we seed the crowd with dippers and do a side trade in the three w's."

The three w's: wallets, watches, and nose wipers.

Disaster.

Even if the Orient did well, the pickpockets would drive Johnny Punter away. Riley knew well how this tale played. He would end up working for the rest of his life to pay off some dreamed-up debt while his half brother moved away from him in the world. Best to cut loose before the Rams sniffed out the diverse buried boxes in which Garrick's blood-tainted sovereigns were stashed. He would change his professional moniker

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and go on the circuit, maybe tart up an old wagon and tour the county fairs.

“You is mine, lad,” Otto was saying. “You are my soldier. And I will have my due as sure as old Horatio is on his column in Trafalgar Square. And when this place has been squeezed, I will put you to work for me in the Hidey-Hole, pulling rats from hats.”

Oh no, thought Riley. Not me. I’ve been to the future and back. I’ve learned a dodge or two. The Great Savano does not enter into servitude for men in powdered wigs.

“As Your Majesty commands,” he said, bowing low once more. “But allow me the opportunity to negotiate.”

Inhumane stopped mouth breathing long enough to comment. “‘Negotiate,’ ’e says. Negotiate. We is Rams, lad. Negotiating ain’t a condition which . . . the other side . . . of the . . . Rams we be . . .”

It was hopeless; the sentence had gotten away from him, and so Inhumane fell silent, working it out on his fingers, chewing on the phrases.

“I agree with my brother in sentiment if not delivery,” said Otto. “No negotiations. It’s a question of rules. Rules is like hearts. Once you break them, they stay broke.” He waved his parasol in Farley’s direction. “Get that, did ye? It was a good one.”

The tattooist dipped his nib in an ink bottle, which was perched birdlike in his breast pocket.

“All preserved for future kings,” he said, moving his pen across the page in quick scratches.



“Good.” Malarkey returned his attention to the stage. “So, negotiating? There will be none.”

“Hear my proposal, King Otto,” said Riley. “It’s for the benefit of the enterprise. Our joint enterprise.”

In truth, Riley had less interest in negotiation than Malarkey did. He knew it was fruitless, but appearing to have an interest in a wrangle for terms made it seem as though he had accepted the proposition in general. It was classic misdirection.

Otto stretched his legs and hooked his pirate boots over the stage lip.

“I’m entertained,” he said. “I admit it. And so long as I am entertained then I am inclined to listen. So proceed, Riley boy, but take a care to be entertaining.”

Riley bowed once more. “As you wish, Your High Rammity,” he said, the calmness of his tone belying internal turmoil. Tonight’s performance was forfeit; he would use the illusions already set up to spirit himself away from the stage into the bowels of the Orient, where Garrick’s treasure was hidden.

Riley walked briskly to the wings and selected one chair from three—the plain wooden model with the secret hinges and elastic cord threaded through the hollow legs and back.

Riley, who was now every inch the Great Savano, tilted the chair onto a single hind leg, spinning it under his hand, reeling in the audience’s gaze.

“A theater is not really about walls or dressing rooms or even a stage,” he said, his voice slightly singsong, mesmerizing. “It’s about seats.” The chair spun faster and faster, its legs

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blurring together. "Seats love their work. They relish the fat, rich posteriors that will descend from on high."

Inhumane frowned, an expression that settled with a certain familiarity onto his features. "This seat is relishing my posterior?"

Riley spun the chair over his head, then brought it crashing down so that it collapsed into segments and splinters. "But when the seats are empty, they simply fall to pieces."

Smashing an old chair, even with such deft manipulation, was not such a great achievement, so no one applauded.

"But when those seats are full . . ."

Riley lowered himself slowly into a seating position until it seemed certain that he would fall.

"When those seats are full . . ."

Riley dipped even lower, but then . . . but then the broken chair began to jitter and fuss, dancing to some unheard music, knitting itself together until, in a rush, it surged upward into wholeness just as Riley descended to meet it.

The chair, magically restored, took Riley's weight with a puff of sawdust.

"When those seats are full, they are money machines," Riley told his audience. Then, on cue, he opened his mouth and rolled out his tongue, revealing the sovereign that lay thereon.

Riley made to snatch it, but then his tongue slid sharpish back inside his mouth, and his teeth clacked shut.

"Gold!" he said, as though nothing lay on his tongue. "You saw it! Bright and shiny gold. He has it. We wants it. So how do we get it?"

Pooley stood on his chair. “Bash ’is bleedin’ teeth in, and cut ’is bleedin’ tongue out.”

These blunt verbals broke the Great Savano’s spell somewhat, but Riley recovered well.

“Yes, my stunted friend. We could *cut his bleedin’ tongue* out, but then this is the only gold coin Johnny Punter will ever donate to the Rams’ coffers.”

Malarkey was listening now. Riley was twice as sharp as the average street cove, which made him four times brighter than the glocky duds sitting beside him today.

“Tell me then, my clever boy. How does we get that sov, and others like it?”

“That is the question. A sovereign for a sovereign. We get the sov by making Johnny Punter want to give it to us.”

Riley snapped his fingers together, and a flurry of butterflies fluttered from their tips, spiraling in a tight cone up into the penny seats. The audience’s mouths dropped open, as did Riley’s own, and out rolled the gold-bearing tongue. He whipped his own tongue like a jump rope, and the sov leaped into his hand.

“Presto,” said Riley, neatly palming the coin from one hand to another, then flicking it through the air. The sovereign spun end over end to land with the soft fat plop of pure gold on flesh in Malarkey’s waiting hand.

“Your cut, King Otto,” says the magician, all smarmy and professional, finishing the bit with a bow so low, he was eyeballing his own anklebones.

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Malarkey closed his fingers around the coin in case the Great Savano would magic it away somehow.

“You puts on a good show, little Ramlet,” he said. “But—”  
Riley cut him off smoothly, taking back control.

*The person in control of the room is in control of the illusion,* Garrick had told him. *He decides whether or not magic comes into the world. You must be that person.*

“But my show is not finished,” Riley said, projecting to the gods. “And I am improvising to tailor my illusions to Your Majesty. The Great Savano has another point to make, and in a most entertaining fashion.”

Malarkey winced. His hair told him something was wrong. Beneath the wig, Otto’s famed raven tresses yearned to be free and itched at the roots like they always did when things was a little off-color. Malarkey’s *hair-sight* had saved his life on more than one occasion—but Oh Lord, couldn’t that junior Ram chappie do the magic act like a topper?—so one more trick, then down to business.

*I never gets to go to real theater anymore. It’s all knife acts and then screaming.*

So he said, “Sharpish, Ramlet. And I better not sniff a whiff of underhand or it’s coming out of yer hide.”

Riley bowed again, but it seemed to King Otto that all this bowing and scraping was perhaps not as respect-laden as it might be. Another point to dwell on later.

*After the trick.*

“So we have our customer for the present,” said Riley,

bowing slightly. "But what will happen to Johnny Punter if we follow friend Farley's counsel and fill the theater with Family?"

*Family.* A cozy name for the criminal so-called fraternity.

Riley pulled a handkerchief from inside a wide pocket in his cape and shook it out until it unfurled to the size of a tablecloth.

"That was folded, is all," muttered Inhumane, eager to prove himself a smarty-pants. Then as often happened, his words ran away too fast for his stumbling mouth to keep pace. "Folded is all, and then with the shaking wot . . . under his . . . cloak. Wot's a magician's cloak called now? So, anyways, it gets big, and now youse is all like, oh 'eck, and . . ."

Malarkey poked his brother with his drinks parasol. "I know, brother. Now think yer words inside yer head and let the pup perform."

Riley worked the handkerchief. It was as Inhumane had guessed: simply folded, but not *simply* folded; the pattern of folds was as precise and complicated as an origami dragon, designed to conceal two wires shaped to cover his head and shoulders. Once the wires were perpendicular and the frame assembled, Riley draped the cloth neatly over himself. It assumed his shape and covered him completely. Riley stumbled stiff-legged this way and that, his arms stretched out before him, his eyes peeping through the gauze.

"See?" said Riley. "I am surrounded, confused, and blinded. I am being dipped, poked, jostled, and fleeced. Never again shall I cast my shadow across the Orient Theatre's lobby. I shall away from here and take my gold with me."

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This bit of patter was to give him a chance to depress the trapdoor latch with his toe.

“Never shall I return here with my hard-earned chink, thinks old Johnny to himself. For I am a-dripping in nervous sweat and leered at by dodgy-looking coves with black teeth and murder in their beady eyes. And this is what happens to Johnny Punter when he hears Family members sniffing at his collar.”

Riley found the latch and pressed it. Now all that he needed to do was make a neat jump to the basement to demonstrate how Johnny Punter would disappear—and to actually disappear.

He wrapped the magician’s cloak around himself for the jump, pulling the folds tight to speed his passage through the tight wooden frame, when all of a sudden, and to the great surprise of all present, the usually serene Anton Farley seemed to take issue with his performance.

“No! No!” Farley said, jumping to his feet. “Enough of this tomfoolery. Back away from the trapdoor, or whatever you have there, boy. Come down here with these fools.”

Silence.

Stunned silence.

Was Farley issuing commands? Had he just referred to his fellow Rams as *fools*? And didn’t he sound more like a spoon-in-the-mouth toff now than a shiv-in-the-sock Ram?

Riddle upon mystery.

In situations like this, Malarkey, due to rank, would be deferred to for first reaction.

“Farley? Is it a brain fever that has seized you? Fools, you say? Fools, is it?”

Farley pulled a pistol of the revolver variety from his ink-sack, waving it casually as though it were an everyday item.

“Fools, cretins, idiots. Take yer pick.” The tattooist slapped his own forehead. “Listen to me. *Yer* pick. Take *your* pick. I have been undercover for so long . . . you have no idea. Sometimes I don’t know what day of the week it is.”

Pooley was sneaking a knife from his boot, so Farley shot him in the heart, barely pausing to draw a bead.

“No loss, that one,” said Farley. “No wailing outside Highgate for him.”

The gunshot echoed to the rafter, fading with each balcony until it became a whisper of its former self, and Pooley was dead where he sat, life leaving him with the wisp of smoke that drifted from the hole in his chest.

“A revolver,” said Malarkey, conversational in his surprise. “I never knew you were in possession of a revolver. American, is it?”

Inhumane began to sob, fat tears collecting in his deep eye sockets before spilling down his cheeks. “I don’t understand.”

For once, the giant imbecile was not alone in his state of mind. Only one person understood what was going on here, and he was the one with the bullets. Malarkey was struck to petrification, not on account of fear but from sheer disbelief. Otto Malarkey had been a war baby, born on the outskirts of the Balaclava battleground during the Crimean War. Gunfire

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and cannon shot were his lullaby. So it was not the thunderclap of Farley's revolver that rooted Malarkey to his seat, it was the shock that the tattooist would first call him a fool and then shoot one of his soldiers.

"Farley, man, what are you doing?"

"What am *I* doing?" said Farley. "You're dressed like Elton John in the court of Louis XV, and you're asking me what I'm doing? You've got a powdered wig on, Otto."

Malarkey pawed the wig from his crown. "I had an inkling this was ridiculous. Why do none of you coves tell me true when I asks yer opinions? And what is an Elton John, in the name of God?"

Farley ignored the question, instead speaking into his wrist as though a fairy were concealed within.

"I have them, Colonel. All together, the entire inner circle. And the boy, as a bonus. We won't get another opportunity like this, sir."

He waited a moment, cocking his head as though an unseen specter was whispering in his ear. And this attitude of speaking into his wrist and listening to the air rang a bell in Riley's memory.

I have seen this before, he realized. Or rather, I will see it in the future. Did not Chevie's comrades in the FBI communicate in this fashion?

Before he could fully untie the riddle-knot, Farley received his answer.

"I know all that, sir. But I strongly suggest moving up our



schedule. The FBI sent Savano, and they could send someone else. So either we move or we dismantle the wormhole landing plate in Half Moon Street.” He waited again, pacing in the aisle.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, then sighed with a relief that seemed to wipe ten years off his age. “You won’t regret it, sir.”

“Out of his noggin,” whispered Malarkey. “The man is talking to the air.”

Riley tugged the fitted sheet from his head. Farley was not out of his noggin. Farley was not who he pretended to be. He was acting like a new man. Gone was his deferential demeanor, his air of quiet compassion. Shoulders that had been hunched from long hours of needlework were now ramrod straight. His eyes were bright with new purpose.

No. Not new purpose—revealed purpose.

“You have no idea, *King Otto*,” Farley said, leveling the weapon specifically at Malarkey, “how long I have waited for this. All these years I have been listening to your delusional claptrap. Rabbiting on like you were the Chosen One. Well, today, you get to meet your god and find out just how chosen you are.” Farley dropped his voice down to his boots in a reasonable impersonation of King Otto. “‘Update me price list—there’s a decent cove, Farley.’ ‘Fetch me a pie from Old Lady Numpty—there’s a nice monkey, Farley.’ ‘Do you think I should wear me fleece out on the town, Farley? Only it scratches me shoulders so,’” Farley added a japing lurch to his impression, which was indeed reminiscent of the king with a few toddies in him.

Riley watched all this and thought: I need to make my move while Farley is airing his grudges, otherwise he might

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remember I'm standing here.

Riley must've thought too loud, because Farley swung the gun around. "You there, time traveler. Trot yourself down here with the rest of the bunch."

Riley knew that to leave the stage on Farley's terms would mean death, so he spoke directly to Malarkey.

"That's a revolver, King Otto. Five bullets left."

Farley snorted. "Clever boy. Five bullets. One each."

But Otto had been shot before on numerous occasions; indeed there was a musket ball lodged in the meat of his thigh that he'd grown quite fond of rubbing when he was in vacant or pensive mood.

"It takes more than one shot to kill a Malarkey, Judas," he said, and his voice carried an undertone of menace, now that the surprise had passed.

This notion did not appear to unduly worry Farley. In fact, he seemed glad the point was made.

"I said we should have killed you straight away," he said. "I wrote a report on the subject."

Malarkey did not fully understand this, but nevertheless he took it as a compliment. "Well, I does be a dangerous creature. Both mind and muscle rolled up in one person, as it were."

"Not you, you rouged cretin. The boy. He is too smart by half."

King Otto leaned forward in his seat, grasping the arm-rests, ready for action. "It don't take much smarts to count to five, Farley. You ain't gonna get all of us."

Riley, meanwhile, was feeling a shade guilty for mentioning

the bullet count. Farley would be forced to plug the homicidal Rams before turning his barker to the harmless boy-magician.

*And it will take three shots to slow Inhumane, I'll warrant.*

By that time Malarkey would be at the tattooist's throat, handing Riley the second's grace he needed to jump through the trapdoor.

*I'll be gone in a twinkle. The white rabbit ain't got nothing on me.*

But Farley was no dullard. Surely the bullet count would have occurred to him.

Surely.

Malarkey rose slowly from his chair, as did his remaining men.

"I'm gonna stuff that Yankee barker down yer gullet, Mr. Farley. And after that, you're bound for a swift burial in a flour sack. Less'n you have more bullets."

Farley laughed, three harsh barks, then reached his long artist's fingers into his ink tote. When they emerged, they were wrapped around the butt of some strange-looking implement—F-shaped, with a thin string of light pointing from its nozzle.

Riley recognized it from his jaunt up the Smarthole.

*Machine pistol. Machine pistol.*

"Oh, I have more bullets," said Farley, and he pulled the trigger, spraying supersonic death across the stage and auditorium of the Orient Theatre.