

THE RISE OF THE
IRON MOON

By Stephen Hunt

The Court of the Air
The Kingdom Beyond the Waves
The Rise of the Iron Moon

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THE IRON MOON

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1

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'Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man.'

Rabindranath Tagore

CHAPTER ONE

Purity Drake tried to struggle as the long needle of the syringe sank towards her arm, but the leather straps on the restraining table were binding her down too tight.

‘Try not to move,’ ordered the civil service surgeon operating the blood machine. ‘We really do need to take a clean sample this time.’ He looked across at the official from the Royal Breeding House. ‘She can talk, can’t she?’

‘Oh yes,’ said the breeder. ‘Her family madness comes and goes, but when she’s not fitting, she’s actually quite well-spoken, for one of them.’

Talk? Surely that was a hypothetical question right now. Purity wanted to swear and scream, but the restraining table was fitted with a rubber sphere that inserted itself in the prisoner’s mouth. After all, the civil service’s surgeons didn’t want their deliberations on bloodwork and which pedigree lines to crossbreed to be interrupted by abuse. She thrashed and tried to yell as the needle sank into her arm with a flare of pain, the glass tube of the syringe slowly turning crimson. She had been feeling faint enough before, on short rations for waking up the guards with her nightmares and

Stephen Hunt

her cries – and her rations really hadn't been that generous to start with.

'We're under a lot of pressure to give this one a clean bill of health,' said the breeder.

The Greenhall surgeon shrugged and tapped the transaction-engine drum rotating in the steam-driven blood machine. 'I can only give you back what the machine says. How you choose to act on that information is up to you.'

'Come on,' pleaded the breeder. 'You know how thin on the ground we are for fertile females. She's just turned sixteen, we can't afford to let—'

The surgeon tapped the vial of blood, making sure every last drop cleared into the siphon on his machine. 'I can see precisely how thin on the ground you are. This family's history of lunacy would never have been allowed to breed down another generation in the old days.'

'Beggars can't be choosers. She's the last one of her house; we can't afford to let an entire royalist bloodline die out. Not now.'

The surgeon absently rubbed Purity's black hair as if she was a cat. 'Ah yes. The invasion.'

Ah yes. The invasion. Purity's eyes welled with tears at the memory of it; the carnage in the Jackelian capital and the charnel house that the Royal Breeding House had been turned into by the invading troops. The choice her mother had been forced to make by the foreign soldiers from Quatérshift, between Purity and her half-brother. Which of the royalist prisoners was to be allowed to survive. No choice at all, you always went with a fertile female; they were almost guaranteed to be forced to have children, to continue the family line. Purity tried to close the memory off. Her mother and brother being marched into the Gideon's collar, the chack-chack-chack of the Quatérshiftians' notorious killing machine, each report a bolt through the neck.

The Rise of the Iron Moon

‘Pity about her madness, then,’ sighed the surgeon. ‘She’s pretty enough, all things considered. Very unusual to see eyes this pale and blue. Green used to be the most common colour for the royalists’ eyes, you know. A little piece of trivia. I collect them.’

Behind them, the blood machine began to rattle as a tape spool printed out its results.

‘Is she fit to be taken to stud?’ asked the breeder.

Purity struggled at the terrible thought of it, trying to break her bonds. Let her still be sick, with whatever illness was stopping them from treating her like a prize mare in season, even the fever of the family madness that had gripped her so tightly.

The surgeon shook his head, confused. ‘No, it’s another partial match for her. Less distinct than last time. Very odd. I can’t even confirm her identity against her house records, let alone declare her clean for your use.’

‘Your machine isn’t working,’ spat the breeder.

‘It was working well enough for the duke’s son I had in before,’ said the surgeon. ‘And I wager it’ll be working fine enough for the children I have in tomorrow.’ He rubbed the wound on Purity’s arm with a swab, a brief sting of alcohol. ‘What’s going on in inside you, eh? Your precious royal blood. We’ll do it the hard way, then. I’ll get her sample sent over to the department and they’ll check her bloodwork for diseases and the like. We don’t want the next prince to have six fingers, now do we?’

The breeder snorted. ‘We’ll need another massacre over here before the likes of her would be used to sire a prince. The royal family are mad enough already from inbreeding without throwing this one into the mix. No, any children we squeeze out of her will only be used to diversify the royal breeding pool around the edges. Hopefully we’ll be able to

Stephen Hunt

screen the worst of the lunacy out of her children if we can find her a suitable stud.’

Looking out through bars across the window, the surgeon folded the test results into his pockets. They were old-fashioned at the Royal Breeding House. No cursewalls laid by sorcerers. Just thirty feet of granite, the parapet patrolled by redcoats, their rifles slung over their shoulders and their shakos oiled against the rain.

The arm holding Purity’s gag in place rose with a squeaking of metal, and the breeder unlocked her restraints. ‘Thank the nice gentleman from Greenhall, then. It can’t be pleasant for a gentleman such as he, coming all the way out here to the fortress to see the likes of you.’

Purity rubbed her arm, pulling the featureless brown house-issue shawl back over her wound. ‘Thank you, sir, for taking the time to test me.’

It was a litany, really, like the oaths to parliament they made the royalist prisoners parrot in the brainwashing that passed for a school at the breeding house. The real farewell she invoked in her mind involved the needle on the machine and the surgeon from the civil service’s stinking Department of Blood losing his footing. Purity tried not to scowl. Keep your face neutral, a mask. That was the way you got through each day. She watched the breeder ring the bell-pull for someone from her dormitory to come and take her away.

Wiggling her cold toes on the flagstones, Purity stared enviously at the plain brown shoes on the Greenhall man’s feet. Even a man’s shoes like these would do, any shoes. Something to keep out the chill of the Royal Breeding House’s stone floors.

‘Take her back to her hall,’ the breeder ordered the young girl who turned up at the door – another royalist prisoner.

‘I missed the dinner call for the test,’ Purity complained.

The Rise of the Iron Moon

‘Back to your dormitory,’ snapped the breeder.

‘We didn’t get much,’ hissed the girl who had been sent to escort Purity, closing the door to the surgeon’s office. ‘All of Dorm Seven’s going hungry thanks to you.’

‘It’s the last day of short rations,’ pointed out Purity, but she could hear the paucity of the excuse even as it escaped her lips.

The dreams, the dreams of her madness. Purity had always suffered them, but they had grown so much more intense last month, as if the flaming firmament accompanying the brief passage of Ashby’s Comet across their skies had set fire to her mind. Now the thousand-year comet had sped past for another millennia-long circuit of the heavens, but its mortal effects remained – while she could get through most nights again without visions, without waking up the guards with her puking, there was still a gnawing raw emptiness in her gut.

Still, things could be worse. After the invaders from the Kingdom of Jackals’ eastern neighbour – that most perfidious of nations, Quatérshift – had broken into the breeding house and slaughtered half of the royalists a few years back, things had nudged a little to the better. The shortage of those of noble descent meant that parliament’s stooges couldn’t go as hard on the royalist prisoners as they once had. Why, when Purity had been ten, a punishment like short rations – shorties – would have meant going hungry for a month, not a week. There was a rumour that those held prisoner at the palace were even served watered-down beer for supper now, the iron in the drink good for warding off flu and fever. Purity didn’t believe it, though. Perhaps she’d bump into one of the royal family to ask the next time the palace grounds needed sweeping. Purity had known Queen Charlotte fairly well when the monarch had been a prisoner of the Royal Breeding House, though there was always the inverse snobbery of the house

Stephen Hunt

to contend with. While the rest of the kingdom loathed the imprisoned royal family with a passion in proportion to their inherited rank – *bottles for a baron, eggs for an earl* rang the cry of the stall holders in palace square on stoning day – the blueblood prisoners of the breeding house wore their ancient titles like badges of courage. Which was bad news for Purity Drake. Her ancestors had barely qualified as knighted squires when they had found themselves on the losing side of the ancient Jackelian civil war. Add to that the fact that Purity was a mongrel – the mysterious identity of her father the result of an unplanned liaison forbidden by parliament’s breeding programme – and it wasn’t much of an exaggeration to say that there were guards patrolling the breeding house with more status than her among the royalist prisoners.

The hard shove in the small of her back as they got to Dorm Seven was a frankly unnecessary reminder of her position. Purity’s heart sank as she saw the line of dorm mates waiting for her return. Emily was at their head, the self-appointed duchess of their dorm by virtue of her rank and her bulk. She had Purity’s shoes, looted from her mother’s few possessions after the massacre. They were faded and scuffed, but everyone knew whose shoes they were. Only the strong prospered in the breeding house. The rest made do with bare feet.

‘It’s the last day we’re on shorties,’ said Emily, ‘and we don’t want you shouting the odds tonight and bringing the guards down here again. We want to eat from full plates next week.’

‘I won’t wake the guards,’ promised Purity. ‘My nightmares have nearly passed now.’

‘I was hoping the surgeon would have twigged that you’re not one of us,’ said Emily. ‘That it was all a big mistake you being in the house at all.’

The Rise of the Iron Moon

‘Mongrel peasant,’ called someone at the back. ‘Half-caste guard’s daughter!’

As Emily stood aside, Purity saw that the inmates of Dorm Seven had rolled the hard hemp blankets off their bunk beds and her heart sank in wretchedness.

‘The word of your sort doesn’t mean much to us, you understand.’ Emily pointed to their bunks lined up against the damp wall. ‘Time to walk the line, peasant.’

There were too many of them to fight back, and Purity knew it would only make things worse. The governor of the breeding house knew where collective punishment led: it led to the royalist prisoners keeping order among themselves – that was rather the point of it.

‘Walk the line. Walk the line,’ the chant began.

Purity sank to her knees and began to crawl under the line of bunks. A member of Dorm Seven stood at every gap and laid into her with knotted sheets as she emerged into the open, a few seconds of lashing pain before she dragged herself under the cover of the next bunk. Purity almost made it as far as the sixteenth bunk this time before the blackness of oblivion overtook her.

Kyorin leapt down the steps, the tranquilizer dart shattering above his head on the tavern sign swinging in the alley’s draught.

Damn this foul complex of garbage-littered rookeries. Middlesteel was confusing enough a city to those born and bred to its smog-ridden lanes, let alone to a visitor and his companion. A companion who seemed to be far fitter than Kyorin, far better able to leave their pursuers behind him.

The dart’s near miss gave Kyorin a second wind. His legs pumped harder and he nearly caught up with his companion, leaping over a couple of empty barrels tossed out of a jinn

Stephen Hunt

house, the smell of rancid water assailing his nostrils. Kyorin was about to wheeze something but an outburst of crude drinking songs from the tavern behind them put him off. His companion redoubled his own efforts to escape, as if realizing that if Kyorin could catch up with him, then their pursuers – who lived for the hunt and the kill – would be close behind.

Steps led down to a wider street, just behind the course of the great river Gambleflowers. His comrade cut left in front of him and Kyorin followed. They really should have split up; Kyorin could have sprinted off in the opposite direction, hoping that the pursuit would only go after one of them, but he sensed that this would be death for him. Of course, Kyorin didn't want to die, but he also suspected that of the two of them, it was he who had the best chance of making contact with those who could help their cause. This fast-footed ally of his was desert-born, wild, simple and able – unlike Kyorin – to put up a fight worthy of the name. Neither of them knew the other, but that was the way with a rebel cell structure, compartmentalized to minimize infiltration and betrayal. That they were both in the capital city of the Kingdom of Jackals and on the run from those that hunted them was commonality of cause enough.

The sound of pounding feet down the stairs behind him made Kyorin's eyes dance about for an escape route off the street – disgustingly well-lit by the iron gas lamps rising out of the gutter. There! A passage, the smell of river water strong on the wind.

Kyorin sprinted away down the pathway, his companion taking another turn ahead. So many scents in Middlesteel – puddles of rain, wet grass in the parks, the river's pollution – nothing at all like the odours back home. The silence of the docks was broken by the beat of machines from a tannery

The Rise of the Iron Moon

on the other side of the river. Kyorin could sense the stench of death, of rotting animal skins, even from this side of the water. Curse his luck. The great sage had to have chosen *him* to come to this city, this Middlesteel, this capital of the strange, rain-soaked nation of Jackals. But no other rebel had been in the right place to pose as a loyal servant joining the party scouting Jackals. And now someone or something had given Kyorin away. Was it the fact that he had allowed a stow-away to join their party, the desert nomad who seemed so eager to abandon his slow, unfit ally, now that their ruse had been rumbled? Has the fool forgotten to use his masking stick to disguise his scent? Perhaps Kyorin could ask his hunters what had given them away, before the monsters devoured him.

Out in the open, the nomad raced away, disappearing into the docks – past silent cranes and bundles of pulley ropes lying on the cobbles. Kyorin was about to follow after him, when a bright light shone in his face, destroying, as was intended, his night vision.

‘Aye, aye. What’s all this, then?’

Blinking away the dots of light dancing in front of his eyes, Kyorin saw it was a policeman. A *crusher*, as the locals called the enforcers of their law, his black uniform illuminated by the back spill from a bull’s-eye lamp. The crusher rested a hand on his belt, heavy with a police cutlass, a leather holster and a hulking cudgel.

‘You just off a boat, then?’

Taken for a foreigner. Well, that was true enough.

‘I have to get away,’ said Kyorin, ‘There—’

‘Like your mate who bolted off?’ said the crusher. ‘Them that runs away from a warehouse past midnight normally have their pockets full of something that doesn’t belong to them, in my experience.’

Stephen Hunt

It was dark enough that the policeman hadn't noticed that Kyorin was managing to talk without moving his lips.

'Please, you must help me—' Kyorin's plea was interrupted by a scream from the docks, the nomad breaking cover, a flaming comet with his clothes and body on fire. Not yet dead, Kyorin's companion launched himself into the river, dousing the flames – but of course, the desert-born could not swim, and as he realized that he had traded a death by fire for a death by water, the wounds of his incineration overcame him. The corpse swept past them face-down on the fast-moving currents. The river took everything, in Middlesteel.

'Bloody Nora,' said the policeman, his hand sweeping down towards his pistol as his lamp shone along the dock front. 'You lads been nicking oil?'

Kyorin's companion had put up a fight, then – enough of a fight that *they* hadn't taken him alive with a paralyzing dart, but burnt him to the ground with a lethal-force weapon. From behind the crates a couple of dark shapes shifted just out of sight, hissing in frustration that they hadn't been able to feed on their first victim. An eerie clicking sounded out of sight of Kyorin and the policeman, rising and falling in a rattlesnake rhythm.

'Just how many of you are there out thieving tonight?' asked the policeman, annoyed that one of the gangs of the flash mob had chosen his beat for their night's pilfering. He rested his lamp on a pulley block and aimed his pistol down the dock towards the crates. 'Out you come, you toe-rags. Step lively now.' His spare hand unclipped a Barnaby Blow from his belt. He flicked the trigger on the bronzed canister of compressed air and a banshee whistle splitting the night. Other whistles sounded as nearby crushers converged on the position of an officer in need.

The Rise of the Iron Moon

The hunters' lethal-force weapon would be recharging. Kyorin only had seconds left.

'No you don't, my old son.' The policeman's pistol swung towards Kyorin and he pointed to a pair of iron manacles he had laid next to the lamp. 'You slip those on, nice and easy, like.'

'Run, you fool,' Kyorin pleaded to the policeman. 'You can't—'

'Hey!' The Middlesteel constable had finally noticed that Kyorin was speaking without his lips moving. 'How—?'

The bolt of fire leapt out from the other end of the docks, striking the crusher on his chest. The black patent leather belt that crossed his tunic shredded as the uniform became a conflagration, the silver belt buckle bearing the arms of the Middlesteel police flying past Kyorin's face, tiny drops of molten metal splattering his brown hair.

Kyorin caught the burning police officer's body as he fell back, just enough life left in him to help Kyorin escape – to serve and protect, as the crusher's oath demanded. Resting his hand above the policeman's fluttering eyes, ignoring the smell of burning flesh – so repellent to a plant-eater – Kyorin made the connection to the crusher's forehead with his hand. *Swim. How to Swim? I must know!* Kyorin was flooded by images – visions that seemed to last hours rather than the solitary second that was passing: the chemical reek of the public baths along Brocroft Street, a stream in a small flint-walled village in Lightshire, fishing rods laid down in the grass while the policeman and his friends launched themselves into the water. The images grew angular and sharp, the constable's brain shutting down as the fatal burns worked their way through the beautiful system of cooperating organs that was his body.

Letting the dead policeman drop, Kyorin sprinted towards

Stephen Hunt

the river and launched himself into its cold, enveloping cover as the howl of his pursuers echoed around the docks. Holding his breath, Kyorin kicked under the surface, using his new-found swimming skills, allowing the current to sweep him away as the water boiled where the hunters' recharged weapon furiously steamed the river's surface. But the waters were deep and wide and the sky too dark for the hunters' killing lances of fire to find his heart this night. With the weapon drained, a hail of darts broke the surface, spiralling past Kyorin like stones dropped in the water. Their final act of desperation became a brief flash of elation for Kyorin. He had escaped! As he swam, his hand checked the carefully wrapped bulge in his pocket where the book was, brought from the stationer's cart on Burberry Corner with a coin so realistic the shop-keeper would never realize it had been perfectly counterfeited for the expeditionary party. Back home, that book would have been a death sentence. But here in Middlesteel, well, here it might just be a chance for life.

Kyorin let the currents carry him after the corpse of his compatriot, the poor dead desert nomad, leaving hungry mouths behind on the docks; mouths that would now be considering how best to evade the call of compressed air whistles converging on their position on the docks.

The river took everything, in Middlesteel.

Warder Twelve looked at the new boy, hiding his deep reservations about the quality and judgement of the lad. Why, wondered Warder Twelve, when analysts in the great transaction-engine chambers did not live up to their potential, did the Court of the Air's ruling council always judge that their next career move should be across to the spheres of the aerial city where the Court held its prisoners? Surely the dangerous breed that the Court of the Air removed from circulation in

The Rise of the Iron Moon

the Kingdom of Jackals warranted more respect than the bored attitude of this new greenhorn. A greenhorn who judged – quite rightly – that duty minding the cells was something of a demotion from modelling the plays and flows of their civilization in the great transaction-engine chambers.

‘So, these colours,’ said the boy, tapping the card slotted above the armoured cell door. ‘They indicate the potential of the prisoner to make trouble?’

‘Aye,’ said the warden, ‘and the care you need to take when interacting with the prisoner. The likelihood they might escape.’

‘Escape?’ The lad laughed. ‘There has never been an escape from the Court of the Air. Not once in five hundred years.’

Warder Twelve winced. This young buck didn’t see all the work that went into keeping things that way: the effort, the foiled escapes – many of them just mind games to keep hope alive in the prisoners, to keep their wickedness and ingenuity flowing in streams the Court could control and curtail. It was the curse of being a warder. Nobody noticed when you did your job well; nobody thanked you for decades of trouble-free internment. But let just one rascal escape, why then the rest of the aerial city would be complaining for months about how many staff it took to man the cells, how they did nothing but sit around and play cards out on the prison spheres.

‘This is a green-ten,’ said the warder, laying a hand on the cell door. ‘Green is the lowest level of threat and ten is the lowest level of prisoner intelligence.’

‘Ah,’ said the lad. ‘A politician, then.’

The warder opened a small slot in the door, a slit of one-way glass revealing a man in a faded waistcoat sitting by a desk before a sheaf of papers, reaching over to dip his metal stylus in a pot of ink. Writing memoirs that nobody would

Stephen Hunt

ever read – well, nobody except the Court’s alienists, as the surgeons of the mind perfected their understanding of the criminal soul.

‘Crimes against democracy. This flash fellow used to represent a district down in Middlesteel, until he started using his street gangs to intimidate voters on election day. We disappeared him after he made contact with the flash mob to arrange to have two of his opponents poisoned.’

‘He hardly seems worth the effort,’ said the boy.

‘You think so?’ The warder shook his head. Underestimating an opponent. Shocking. Hadn’t his tutors knocked *any* sense into him when he had first been apprenticed into the Court of the Air’s service?

The lad fingered the red lever to the left of the door, a wax seal protecting the metal switch, proving it was unbroken and had never been used. ‘Decompression throw for the cell?’

‘Yes.’ Warder Twelve pointed to a bigger lever at the end of the corridor. ‘That one up there will flush the whole level, in case there’s a mass breakout attempt. Back in the control room we can blow the entire aerosphere and disconnect all corridors into the rest of the city if it cuts up really rough across here.’

‘Have you ever had to blow a cell?’

‘On my watch?’ said the warder. ‘Once, seven years back. The science pirate Krook. He had decrypted the transaction-engine lock on his cell and was working on the last of his door bolts. He was a master of mesmerism and had hypnotized the warder walking his level. We killed Krook from upstairs. He left us no choice in the matter.’

The lad nodded. Explosive decompression, a couple of seconds choking in the slipstream of the troposphere, then unconsciousness long before the impact of a mile-high fall

The Rise of the Iron Moon

from the dizzying height of the Court's levitating city removed his mischief from the face of the world. A fitting fate for an enemy of the state.

The lad looked up at the card above the next armoured door. It was purple, with the numeral *one* stencilled across it. 'That's the first time I've seen that colour over here.'

'A P1. So, you've a taste for the strong stuff?' noted the warder. 'Do you really want to see who's inside this cell?'

'I—' he hesitated. 'I think so.'

Warder Twelve laid his hand on the viewing slit. 'Then gaze upon *Timlar Preston!*'

Timlar Preston? But this was just a man, not an ogre. Old and thin, in a cell wallpapered by white sheets, every inch thickly pencilled with formulae and diagrams. He was standing pushed up against a wall – so close you'd think he was trying to draw warmth from the riveted metal, his pencil scratching in ever smaller circles, the writing increasingly tiny now there was hardly any space on the papers left. He turned around to gaze at the viewing slit, a flash of wild eyes and wispy silver hair, then returned to his scribbling.

'He can see us?' asked the lad. 'I was told that the door's cursewalls allowed one-way viewing only?'

'He always knows when we're watching him,' said Warder Twelve. 'Don't ask me how. There's a touch of the fey about him, if you ask me.'

The greenhorn gazed into the cell again. Timlar Preston didn't seem like much, certainly not the man who had nearly destroyed the Kingdom of Jackals during the Two-Year War, the *Great War*, the foreigner whose weapons had propelled the hell of conflict deep into the Jackelian counties. He was from Quatérshift, that much you could see, a dirty shiftie, no honest, round jowls of the Jackelian yeoman for this one; no honest fat from a diet of roast beef, beer and jinn. Thin,

Stephen Hunt

wiry, with a proud nose that leant him a hauteur distinctly lacking in his mad scratchings.

‘You still think you have what it takes to keep such as he away from our shores?’ asked Warder Twelve.

The lad held his tongue. Inside the cell, Timlar Preston was turning in a circle, waving his pencil. Conducting an imaginary symphony of madness.

‘You want to keep him dancing for us, rather than inventing bloody great devices of war for the shifties to use against your fellow Jackelians? Men like him aren’t controlled by this—’ the warden slapped the transaction-engine drum turning on the armoured lock. ‘They are controlled up here!’ He tapped his skull. ‘Walking the cells with a toxin club swinging from your hand won’t be your vocation in the prison spheres, any more than tapping the ivories on your key-writer was your job when you worked over in analysis. Getting into the minds of people like Timlar Preston, that’s the task for you and me. We drug his food once a week; change his pencil for one slightly fatter, slightly longer, a different shade. To keep him off balance, you see? Then we take his sketches, the ones we can understand, and change some of the formulae. Forgery section uses his handwriting to do it for us. Just enough to keep him wondering if it was he who wrote the maths or one of us. Just enough to keep him wondering if he’s going mad. And while he’s doing that, he’s not trying to break the hex we’ve got laid around his cell. He’s not thinking of creating weapons that could lay waste to our country.’

Timlar Preston’s mad dance in the centre of the cell had ended, the genius arriving at the other side of the viewing slit in three long, low strides. His shriek was relayed by the voicebox next to the cell door, the piece of paper he had been writing pushed up against the viewing slit, full of spirals, a

The Rise of the Iron Moon

procession of seashell-like geometries drafted with insane precision. ‘They’re coming! They’re coming!’

The lad looked at Warder Twelve. ‘What is he talking about?’

‘Something new,’ said Warder Twelve. ‘He’s been ranting about it for days. He’s due for the old sleepy soup and a few mind games at the end of this week. When we search his cell, we’ll probably find the notes on whatever his latest obsession is.’

‘I can hear him!’ Preston yelled. ‘Talking to me. Telling me what to do. What we need to do to survive.’

Warden Twelve flicked the sound off the voicebox and closed the viewing slit. ‘Back to the lifting room; the next level down is where we keep the prisoners with special powers – all the fey ones, the sorcerers and witches. You’re going to *love* them.’

They walked away, oblivious to the muffled banging on the other side of the cell door. Timlar Preston howling and throwing his papers around the cell.

Commodore Black looked over at his friend Coppertracks. It would take someone very used to steammen ways to tell that the scientist was nervous. But then, the commodore had lived with the steamman under the roof of Tock House for long enough that he could read the patterns of energy that danced under his iron friend’s transparent crystal skull like other men could read furrows in a brow or the nervous drum of fingers on a desk. And it took a lot to make one of the metal creatures nervous.

The patter of polite applause from the direction of the stage indicated that the previous presentation in front of the massed ranks of the Royal Society was going well. Well for the presenter, but not so well for Coppertracks’ chances of

Stephen Hunt

extracting the full financial and intellectual backing of the society if they squandered their time and resources on too many of his rivals' proposed projects. It was a competitive business, this society of ideas, mused the commodore – as if the Kingdom of Jackals only had so much deck space for what its people thought about, and the pondering of one belief – one truth – left less room for any others to thrive.

'You are sure you have all of my slides in the correct order?' asked Coppertracks.

'You know that I do,' said the commodore. 'Haven't I practiced enough on your blessed magic lantern back at the house? You keep your attention on the audience, I shall give your scientist friends a visual display of your genius that would put to shame the lantern operators of the theatres along Lump Street.'

'There is really no need for you to assist me, dear mammal,' said Coppertracks. 'I could have brought one of my mubodies to operate the projection apparatus.'

Commodore Black nodded, but didn't point out that having one of the steamman's metal drones capering about the stage would only serve to remind the mainly warm-blooded races sitting in the auditorium that Coppertracks was a slipthinker – his genius so large he had to distribute his consciousness among multiple iron bodies. Back home in the Steammen Free State, they treated Coppertracks as royalty. Here in the Kingdom of Jackals, he was just a metal clever clogs who constantly reminded the members of the Royal Society how dim most of them were in comparison.

'Now,' said Coppertracks, rubbing nervously at his metal hull, polishing it to a high, gleaming sheen, 'where is Molly softbody? She must have picked up that slide I changed by now.'

'I have,' said a voice behind them. It was Molly Templar,

The Rise of the Iron Moon

the third member of the trio that shared the comforts inside Tock House's walls. Molly was sweating slightly under her long red hair – she had obviously been straining to get to the presentation in time. 'It turned out the chemist finishing off your last slide was one of the more persistent devotees of my writing. He wouldn't hand over the damn thing until I had signed at least two of my novels for him.' She produced a little glass square, chemically etched with one of the steamman's images.

Molly peered round the curtain to see how well the current presenter's talk was going, then ducked back and lifted a copy of the *Middlesteel Illustrated News* out of her coat pocket, passing it to Coppertracks. 'Read the cover story. It's a pity your presentation isn't proposing a superior design for airship engines. The merchant marine has grounded all its flights – apparently dust from the wake of Ashby's Comet has fouled the fleet's motors. While they're being checked and cleaned out on the airship fields, the cost of narrowboat berths and stagecoach tickets is rising in every county.'

Coppertracks showed the commodore the newspaper's cover illustration, a swarthy canal boat owner with a long queue of Jackelian citizenry alongside his narrowboat and his oversized cupped hands full of coins. The speech bubble read: '*A ride, good damsons and sirs? I think I may yet take you for a ride.*'

'Lucky then, that the three of us have no mortal plans for travelling beyond the capital,' said the commodore. 'Let them jack their prices up to a guinea a ticket. We can warm ourselves by the fire in Tock House and wait for winter to come while Coppertracks tinkers with his science, you pen your novels, and I take my well-earned rest from the trials and tribulations fate has sent nipping at my heels.'

One of the society administrators slipped behind the crimson

Stephen Hunt

curtain. ‘Aliquot Coppertracks, you are on, sir. If you don’t mind keeping your presentation to ten minutes, with five for questions, we are running a little behind at the moment.’

‘Ten minutes, lad?’ interjected the commodore. ‘If we can’t make the members of your fine society see the bright fury of Coppertracks’ brilliance in half that time, then they haven’t half the wits they were born with.’

The administrator moved aside so that the commodore and Molly could pass by to the table where their magic lantern was burning oil in front of an array of mirrors. Coppertracks rolled carefully to the lectern, staring out at the sea of faces – sombre stovepipe hats and conservative dress the order of the day among the race of man. A few thinkers of the Kingdom of Jackals’ other races were present too: steammen, graspers, a handful of lashlites – lizard-winged sages whose adherence to their aural teachings had driven them to seek wider learning when the sagas of their gods had been mastered and exhausted.

Coppertracks motioned to the commodore to project the first slide onto the white screen behind him, when a buzz of excitement arose from the audience, interrupting the start of the steamman’s presentation. Molly nudged the commodore.

Commodore Black looked around to see the source of the commotion and groaned. It was *him*. Making a fashionably flamboyant late entrance – no doubt perfectly timed to put Coppertracks off. Behind the lectern, the energy swirl under Coppertracks’ crystal skull had turned spiky. The steamman equivalent of a back arching as he recognized the face of his rowdy adversary. For every academic paper Coppertracks published, Lord Rooksby could be sure to make it into the journals with a contrarian view. While Coppertracks shared his metal race’s methodical, steady brilliance – progress cautiously but steadily advanced over a lifetime of many centuries – Lord Rooksby was the exemplar of the race of

The Rise of the Iron Moon

man's short-burn approach to science. Erratic leaps of faith and intuitive gambling that sometimes paid off, but often floundered with a heavy landing. Of *course* Lord Rooksby would be here at the Royal Society meeting. He couldn't resist the opportunity for a little mischief at the expense of his steamman rival. Rooksby believed that Jackals did best when it was the hand of mankind that ruled it, and that the place of steammen, graspers, craynarbians, lashlites and the other creatures of the nation was walking two steps well behind his race's polished calf-leather boots.

'Don't mind me,' said Lord Rooksby, sweeping back his velvet-lined cloak with a flourish. The two women he had brought along sat down on either side of him and looked up adoringly at the slim, elfin-chested scientist, as if his every aristocratic word contained a new insight into the nature of the universe. 'No, really, don't look at me. I am fascinated to hear what we're being asked to support this year.'

At this, his escort broke into giggles and he rested his polished boots up on the seat in front, prompting an angry glance back from its occupant.

'Go on, man,' whispered the commodore, willing his friend to ignore the most persistent of his scientific antagonists.

Coppertracks began. 'I am before you, seeking your indulgence to reveal the findings of my latest research. Research that had been aided by my fellows back in the Steammen Free State.'

That drew a murmur of appreciation from the assembled scientists. If King Steam was backing Coppertracks' endeavours, then there was as like to be something of note to be heard here this day. The people of the Steammen Free State held to their secrets fast, and getting direct aid from the monarch of the kingdom of the metal was often like pulling teeth.

Stephen Hunt

‘As you may be aware,’ said Coppertracks, ‘the home of my people in the mountains of the Mechancian Spine is both cold and high, constructed at an altitude beyond that of any Jackelian city.’

‘A geography lesson,’ interrupted Lord Rooksby, his voice carrying from the back of the hall. ‘Capital stuff.’

‘A *geography*,’ explained Coppertracks, ‘which means the procession of the stars and bodies celestial above us can be viewed without hindrance, without the smogs and rains of Jackals. A geography most conducive to astronomical observation, which is why—’ Coppertracks paused to wave his iron hands excitedly, ‘King Steam sponsored the construction of a new observatory in my homeland, equipped with the latest astronomical apparatus, some of which I myself had the honour of designing.’

Commodore Black grinned to himself and nudged Molly back. So, the old steamer had made good use of his visit to the Free State last summer after all. Lord Rooksby was frowning in his seat. This wasn’t the way things were meant to be going at all. It was all running far too smoothly for his adversary.

‘This apparatus has allowed my people to peer deeper into the celestial void than ever before,’ said Coppertracks. ‘To observe the celestial bodies that accompany our own world’s procession around the sun at greater clarities than previously thought possible.’

That drew a few dark mutters from the crowd. Coppertracks was taking the side of the radical argument that said that the Earth orbited the sun, rather than the sun and other bodies paying due homage to their home by orbiting the Earth at the centre of all things.

‘Not decided, not decided,’ grouched a few dissenters.

‘Well,’ called out Lord Rooksby. ‘It appears you’ve already

The Rise of the Iron Moon

got the support of your great King Steam, so what do you need the aid of *mere* softbodies like us for?’

‘Dear mammal,’ said Coppertracks, raising the amplification on his voicebox, ‘I am here, among other things, to share the wonders of the universe with you. For instance, many of us have speculated that the number of celestial bodies that share our world’s procession around the sun is uncommonly high at forty-six. This new apparatus will help us discover—’

‘Discover what?’ boomed Lord Rooksby. ‘Are we mere astrologers now, or noble leaders of science? Have you, sir, uncovered any new comets with which to unsettle the great unwashed masses?’

This drew a peel of laughter from the crowd. Ashby’s Comet just two months gone, had left a trail of broken-in windows and broken-up riots when various factions in the capital had sought to make mischief out of the auguries of ill fortune said to arrive with the crimson harbinger of doom.

Lord Rooksby nodded sagely, as if he exposed a great truth this day. ‘If I wish my fortune to be read in the stars, I have a gypsy caravan that calls at my house in the shires each summer. Maybe the gypsies can sharpen your wits while they sharpen my knives, old steamer!’

‘This *is* science,’ protested Coppertracks. ‘Science of the deepest sort. There is much our neighbouring celestial bodies have to teach us about our own home.’ He motioned to the commodore and the hulking u-boatman advanced to the next slide, an image of a fiery red circle captured bright against the darkness of the face of night.

‘Behold, Celibra, a world – I believe – of inferno temperatures. This is a celestial body fixed at a distance from the sun almost identical to that of our own world, yet in composition and temperament it seems to be radically different from the systems of life we are familiar with here on Earth, a world

Stephen Hunt

that is almost certainly uninhabitable.’ The next slide in the rotation clicked forward. ‘Now this is an image of our moon: observe the tinges of green we have picked up beneath the cloud cover – could it be that the lunar surface has forests as dense as any found in the jungles of Liongeli?’

‘Cheese!’ laughed Lord Rooksby. ‘Obviously it is nothing but green gas rising from the finest cheese.’

There was more laughter from the audience.

The commodore shook his head in annoyance. Coppertracks was leading the audience in too fast – ploughing ahead at ramming speed. He should have been revealing his findings at a rate of knots the scientists’ conservative bent could more readily absorb and adjust to. The crowd were not, for the main, steammens who could share new information between themselves with a joining of cables and the implicit trust that came from such networking. They were minds of slow meat that needed wheedling and convincing.

‘Let us gaze next, my colleagues in science, towards our world’s nearest neighbour in the dark, cold void: Kaliban.’

The red world came onto the screen, the light from the magic lantern catching the swirl of smoke from mumbleweed pipes as several of the assembly lit up. Coppertracks waved an iron hand at the screen. ‘Long linked in song and saga to various gods of war, instead, in reality we find a dead, dry world of crimson dunes and – perhaps – something else.’

The commodore advanced to the next slide, a high-magnification view of the celestial body.

‘The shooting stars lighting up our skies of late have not all been debris from the tail of Ashby’s Comet. I have traced some of the rocky projectiles back to what I think must be volcanic eruptions on the surface of Kaliban. And see what else I discovered during my explorations. Observe the fine splintering of lines you can see across the celestial sphere’s

The Rise of the Iron Moon

surface. I have analysed the geometry of these lines and come to the conclusion that they are artificial in nature.'

A hush fell over the crowd.

'Yes, artificial. I believe these lines are a series of canals, vaster and far more sophisticated than the waterways of our own Jackals. A universal transport system that may once have rivalled the timetables of the merchant marine of the Royal Aerostatical Navy in its ability to transport cargoes and people around their world.'

'Poppycock,' said Lord Rooksby. 'You see a splintering of rock fissures and detect the hand of intelligence behind it! I have never heard such errant nonsense. It is well known that you share the roof of your home with an author of celestial fiction, one Molly Templar, whom I see has accompanied you here tonight. I believe you have spent too much time pondering her last tome of facile writings rather than upon serious scientific investigations.'

Molly made to leap up from their projecting lantern, but the commodore pulled her back.

'I'm going to go up there and shove my last tome of facile writings down his smug, grinning—'

'Leave him be, lass,' whispered the commodore. 'Or at least, let's be leaving the long-haired popinjay until later. A fight in here is what he wants, anything to embarrass our old steamer in front of his fellow scientists.'

She saw enough reason in the commodore's words to shrug off his hands and sit down.

'Nonsense is it?' retorted Coppertracks, pointing an iron hand at Lord Rooksby. 'Then by my cogs, how do you explain this?' Commodore Black advanced to the next slide, an amorphous grey mass whose peripheries were tinged with red.

'Sir, I do not even know what that unsightly mess you have so kindly brought before us is.'

Stephen Hunt

‘That is because you do not have access to the transaction engines of the Steammen Free State,’ said Coppertracks. ‘Some of the most advanced thinking engines of their kind in the world. When the geometries and shadow lines are resolved and cleaned using the power of our transaction engines, we see instead . . .’

The commodore shook his head. That was a terrible mistake, reminding the Jackelian audience that their civil service’s great engine rooms beneath Greenhall had a rival high in the mountains of Mechancia – a rival with steam-driven thinking machines that made their own transaction engines look like wind-up toys sold over the counter at Gattie and Pierce.

‘. . . this!’

The commodore advanced to the next slide, the image of a stone-carved face filling the screen, a scale written across it indicating that the face was three hundred miles across in width, four hundred from neck to skullcap.

Coppertracks continued over the hush of the crowd. ‘This incredible carving is clearly humanoid – the features of the race of man, or something close to it. An artefact on a scale more massive than any we have attempted here on Earth.’

‘Clearly, sir,’ shouted Lord Rooksby, ‘you have taken leave of your senses. Give me but a lump of coal from your boiler’s furnace and I will whittle you a shape as pleasing to the eye with my penknife.’ Another member of the audience lifted a piece of coke from the boiler bin of the steamman sitting next to him and tossed it towards Lord Rooksby. The aristocratic scientist seized it and raised it towards the ceiling. ‘Behold, damsons and gentlemen of the Royal Society – I give you the miraculous face of the great Pharaoh of Kaliban. Give me but a hundred years of erosion, a real-box camera and the poorly written plot of a penny dreadful, and I shall carve for

The Rise of the Iron Moon

you an entirely new branch of science – and for my next trick I will find you the face of the Man on the moon and send an airship to converse with the ice angels of the coldtime.’

The crowd followed Lord Rooksby’s lead and began to bray Coppertracks down in annoyance.

‘You fools,’ cried Coppertracks, pointing to the image of the screen. ‘Can you not see the evidence before your eyes? There was once life on Kaliban, life capable of constructing canal works and carving vast effigies from their mountains.’

‘Celestial fiction, sir,’ hooted Lord Rooksby, sensing that now was the time to steer events towards the projects favoured by his own lickspittles. ‘This is pure celestial fiction.’

‘Life!’ called Coppertracks, beseeching the massed ranks of the Royal Society. ‘Life that might be able to converse with us, if we would but make the effort.’

A low wailing echoed about the assembly chamber now, Coppertracks struggling to be heard over the eerie heckling. ‘My proposal is to build a colossal transmitter capable of receiving and generating vibrations across the void. We have already seen that the vicinity of our sun is blessed with an uncommonly large quantity of celestial bodies, many that would appear to be candidates for bearing life.’

The commodore dropped the next slide down in front of the assembly, but it was too late, the scientists had become a mob. A piece of coal was thrown towards the screen, an explosion of black soot impacting the image of Coppertracks’ proposed large-scale transmitter schematics.

‘Give him the shoulder,’ someone hissed.

‘Ah, no,’ wheezed the commodore behind his magic lantern. ‘Not the high shoulder. Not poor Coppertracks.’ He glanced around the room, trying to see who would do it first.

Would they?

It was too late. The mob of scientists had eagerly taken up

Stephen Hunt

the cry and at the other end of the hall the first boffin was already being boosted onto the shoulders of a colleague. Across the seats, the smaller, lighter members of the Royal Society were mounting the shoulders of their fellows, pointing and shaking their fists angrily at the steamman presenter. The energy under Coppertracks' skull fizzed in disappointment and shame. In all the years of his long scientific career in Jackals he had never been given the high shoulder before. All scientists stood on the shoulders of giants when they undertook their solemn investigations, but now they were doing it to *him*, standing on the shoulders of those more worthy than the steamman, looking beyond his work. Coppertracks' proposal had not even been judged valuable enough to come under the gaze of his colleagues' scrutiny.

Commodore Black glanced furiously up towards the smirking Lord Rooksby, who was now pretending to pay attention to his two blonde dollymops rather than enjoying the moment of his adversary's discomfort.

By Lord Tridentscale's beard, thought the commodore, it didn't take too much to work out who had prepared the others in the assembly to arrange this ritual howling down of his friend. Well, two could play at ambushes. The commodore's eyes narrowed. There were a lot of dark lanes in the capital where an alley cat of Lord Rooksby's reputation could run into a masked thug and come away from the fisticuffs with a few lumps and bruises and the silk shirt ripped off his blessed back.

Coppertracks was collecting his papers and speaking notes, gathering them up before the light hail of garbage being tossed in his direction grew into a storm. Commodore Black swept up the slides into the pocket of his greatcoat then sprinted up onto the stage with Molly and helped hustle the steamman off.

The Rise of the Iron Moon

‘This is an outrage,’ spluttered Coppertracks, his voicebox a-tremble. ‘I show them hard scientific proof and they dare to throw coal at me! I should call on the Steamo Loas and ask Zaka of the Cylinders to shake the walls of this assembly down upon them.’

‘Let the spirits of your blessed ancestors rest in peace,’ said the commodore. ‘Those rascals and stuffed shirts are not worth the oil you’d need to shed to call your gods down. You’ve got all the discoveries of your people’s new observatory to take up your time, and you secured that without this crew of scoundrels’ help.’

‘Let’s get off the stage,’ said Molly, ducking a projectile, ‘Quick.’

They disappeared behind the curtain, a soggy ham roll bouncing off the back of the commodore’s naval greatcoat.

‘I simply don’t believe it,’ said Coppertracks. ‘If I had not seen the evidence of their disgraceful misbehaviour with my own vision plate. . .’

Commodore Black led the two of them along a corridor and to the exit, ignoring the jeers of the crowd from the other side of the curtain. The commodore closed the door to the stage, cutting off the din of the mob. ‘Ah, your science is a fine thing indeed, but for all your years living in Jackals, your understanding of the nature of a hall full of your rivals is still a little shaky.’

The Royal Society organizer came up to them, leading the next presenter who was pushing a handcart stacked high with chemical spheres. ‘Well, that went, umm, well.’

Commodore Black smiled at the organizer, then slapped the chemist on the back of his tweed waistcoat. ‘Hear them cheering, lad? We’ve warmed them up for you good and proper. But no thanks now, we must be on our way.’

Molly didn’t look as if she was finding it as easy to put

Stephen Hunt

on a brave face. ‘All that time you spent putting your presentation together, old steamer, I’m so sorry.’

‘It is not beholden upon you to apologize for those louts’ behaviour,’ said Coppertracks. ‘The Jackelian Royal Society is obviously not the institution it once was.’

‘I’m going to wait here for Lord Rooksby to leave,’ growled Molly, ‘and when he stumbles out into the street with those two dollymops he had hanging off his arm, they can watch me break his fingers and—’

‘I really would not see you sink to the level of that soft-body scoundrel on my account,’ interrupted Coppertracks. ‘And I believe the police still have a caution outstanding against your citizen record from your altercation with the last poor author you believed was plagiarizing your work. Please, let us retreat without creating any more gossip for the news sheets.’

Outside, the thick, marble-clad walls of the society’s headquarters muffled the noise of the harsh reception they had been given. There was a lone hansom cab waiting up the street, a single dark horse clicking its hooves in boredom. Commodore Black waved his swagger stick towards the cabbie and the driver flicked the reins to start the two-wheeled carriage rattling forward.

Coppertracks’ twin treads carried him towards the lane, every movement of his polished silver plates heavy with dejection. The commodore didn’t add to the steamman’s woes by referring to the proving tower Coppertracks had already constructed inside the orchard back at Tock House. That had already diverted enough of the coins from their finances without any degree of success being returned in the steamman’s direction.

A thin slick of rain had fallen during the presentation, the drizzle still tinged crimson even now, weeks after Ashby’s Comet had passed through the wet Jackelian skies. Also

The Rise of the Iron Moon

braving the day's showers was a Broken Circle cultist labouring under the weight of a wooden placard proclaiming the final hours of the world. He was from a splinter group of the mainstream church that believed the cycle of existence could be broken, a belief that, in the commodore's humble opinion, rather went against the central thrust of their church-without-gods. There had been many more of his ilk parading the streets as the comet passed; but they had thankfully grown scarce when, as usual, the world had not ended. What did they do, the commodore wondered, in the years between centennial celebrations, the years that were dry of comets and dark signs in the sky? Why, they bothered him and his friends, of course. As usual, the cultist seemed curiously attracted by the pull of Molly's gravity.

'It's not too late,' cried the would-be prophet, his beard tinged crimson from standing in the rain too long.

'It is for you, lad,' said Commodore Black. 'Your boat sailed from port a long time ago, I think.'

The madman ignored the aging u-boat officer and reserved his spittle for Molly. It was as if he understood there was something special about her. 'The portents, are you blind to the portents in the heavens? A rain of blood on the blessed land of Jackals, our green hills and valleys soaked with it. It is the age of the Broken Circle.'

'The comet's gone, old timer,' Molly said kindly. 'It passed us by.'

Commodore Black muttered a sailor's curse and waved his cane – a spring-loaded swordstick concealed inside, in the event this lunatic turned violent – motioning their hansom cab to make haste.

'Gone?' moaned the cultist, as if the news was a revelation to him. 'It is gone? No. It will come back to us. Make a furnace of destruction of Jackals and all who live in our

Stephen Hunt

land. We must meditate now for salvation. Come with me and meditate in my lodgings, lady. Come meditate with me before the world ends.'

'I hardly think so,' said Coppertracks. 'Ashby's Comet is heading towards the sun, I have been following its passage with my own telescope from the top of Tock House.'

'The portents!' wailed the cultist, trying to infect them with the deep despair he obviously felt. 'The Broken Circle.'

'I am afraid it is your logic that is broken,' explained Coppertracks. 'In my experience, the great pattern of existence carries a substantial weight with it. More than enough to survive a few knocks and jolts of celestial mechanics. Now be a good mammal and run along, I rather fear your proximity to us is putting off the driver of the licensed carriage we have hailed.'

Molly watched the man shamle off, his wooden placard swaying above his shoulders, and she smiled as she noticed the sudden distractions that seemed to engage everyone else walking along the street as the cultist approached them.

'In the desert,' noted Molly, 'there are nomads who believe people like him are holy, connected to a deeper truth through their affliction.'

'And in the lanes of Middlesteel there are people like me who believe he has been connecting with a pint too many and an ounce of mumbleweed smoked on the top of it,' said the commodore. 'Don't you go paying any attention to his ramblings, lass.'

With the placard waver now sermonizing his beliefs further down the street, the hansom cab pulled up before them. Commodore Black opened the door and Molly stepped around a pile of manure that a previous cab's horse had deposited on the cobbles.

The Rise of the Iron Moon

It was then that then the vision struck Molly's skull, entering it like a spear. The layers of the capital peeled back to be replaced by a white, featureless vista. Of her friends from Tock House there was no sign. Breaking the dimensionless purity, the only landmark in this strange new realm was a brilliantly glowing sphere hovering above the ground. It was the size of a bathysphere, with a single silver eye sitting on its top. Molly picked herself up off her knees, her skin tingling with the familiar presence of the thing. The Hexmachina! Sometime saviour of the Kingdom of Jackals – of the entire world.

'Operator,' said the Hexmachina, a gentle child's face forming across its surface. 'You can hear my words?'

'Yes,' said Molly, stumbling through the white void, trying to reach the safety of the Hexmachina. Of course she could hear its words. She could wield the machine like a god-slaying sword if she could only get close enough to pilot it.

'This realm is not real,' warned the Hexmachina, sensing her intentions. 'You cannot pilot me here. This is a construct, a simulation I am using to communicate with your mind.'

Molly stopped trying to navigate the featureless realm. 'Where are you, then? Are you still riding the currents of magma under the earth?'

'No. I am fleeing, operator,' said the Hexmachina, the child's face assuming a look of desperation. 'My lover the Earth is trying to protect me, but her warmth and the life of our world is no longer enough. Her powers are being subverted and with them the powers that I can draw upon in turn. I need you . . .'

Already giddy in the dimensionless white space, Molly was left reeling by the unsettling implications of the Hexmachina's plea for help. This was the machine that had once helped her defeat a slaving army of mad demon revolutionaries and

Stephen Hunt

their allies from the nation of Quatérshift. What could possibly overwhelm something as powerful as the Hexmachina?

‘Are the ancient enemy trying to breach the walls of the world again?’

The Hexmachina’s voice carried as an echo across the space. ‘No, Molly, this threat is not something that I was designed to defend against. My pursuers are operating firmly across our level of reality, and they know the fabric of the world as well as I do myself. This is a force manipulating the channels of earthflow, sabotaging the leylines, turning my own techniques and cunning against me. They are masters at it.’

‘But you must be close,’ pleaded Molly, ‘I can see you, hear you. Rise to the surface and I can pilot you. Together we can—’

‘No, I am far from your location. I created a channel between us within your mind, Molly, before we took our leave of each other after the last war. When you were the only operator left alive in Jackals.’

‘There are others born with the gift now, operators other than me?’

Hovering above the shiny material of the sphere, the child’s face nodded in confirmation. ‘Hundreds have passed though their age of puberty in the years that have passed, those who share the blood of your distant kin. But while the blood of those that can pilot me is carried by a new generation, they may soon not have a craft left to direct.’

The white expanse trembled, distortions washing through it like waves. Molly fell over. As she picked herself up, she saw that the facsimile of the Hexmachina was being absorbed slowly into the ground, the featureless white plain that bore their weight becoming an albino quicksand.

‘Stay back,’ shouted the Hexmachina as Molly ran towards the god-machine. ‘The purpose of this mental construct is to

The Rise of the Iron Moon

allow us to communicate without your position being traced. Do not touch my avatar's skin, or my attackers will be able to mark your position.'

'What is happening to you?'

'I am being frozen,' cried the Hexmachina, its female voice growing fainter. 'Sealed within the heart of the Earth inside a tomb of modified diamond-lattice carbons. I have never seen the building blocks of matter being manipulated so adroitly, my own powers leeches, vampirized, to strengthen the bonds of my captivity.'

'But you must be able to escape,' pleaded Molly. 'In the name of the Circle, you're *the* Hexmachina. Who has the might to trap you?'

'Locusts, despoilers. What are they, indeed? It is almost as if they understand the principles of my construction, but that would mean . . . no, no it cannot be . . .'

'Please!' Molly tried to scabble around the featureless floor, searching for a way to stop the Hexmachina from disappearing.

'You must stop them, Molly, my beautiful young operator,' whispered the child's face, rising up the side of the Hexmachina's hull as the god-machine was submerged. 'You alone, this time. I cannot help you in this struggle. Seek out the scheme of defence: together you may be able to save Jackals.'

'I haven't seen Oliver Brooks for years,' said Molly. 'Not since he started wearing that stupid hood and scaring the constabulary out in the shires.'

The child's face, the Hexmachina's body, had almost disappeared. 'You – this – the comet, it is the—'

With a snap reality returned to normal and Molly found herself lying in the gutter in the shadow of the hansom cab, Commodore Black splashing crimson-tinged rainwater over her face.

Stephen Hunt

‘Ah, lass, I told you that you’ve been working too hard on your novels, too much time spent crouching over a writing table, knocking around the dusty corridors of Tock House with the likes of Coppertracks and myself, rather than accepting the invitations of those gentlemen callers whose cards pile up unanswered in our hall.’

Blood was running down Molly’s face, her nose leaking a stream of it. ‘The Hood-o’the-marsh, Oliver Brooks.’

‘That dark fey lad?’ The commodore helped lift Molly to her feet, passing her across to Coppertracks, the steamman already inside the carriage. ‘Let’s not talk of that wicked lad, Molly Templar. We’re well shot of him. Oliver’s good for a tale of highwaymanship in one of your penny dreadfuls, but let’s not have him hiding out in the warmth of Tock House again. No, one outlaw on the run from the cruel House of Guardians is enough sheltering under our fine roof.’

‘I fear you have struck your head, Molly softbody,’ said Coppertracks. ‘One of your fastblood fevers, perhaps? Shall I send for a doctor of medicine?’

Molly shook her head. The fever was in her veins, blood that still fizzed with the tiny symbiote machines of the Hexmachina. The Kingdom of Jackals was threatened once more.

But threatened by what?

Opening the curtains wide enough to see the drops of red rain rolling down the windows, the woman gripped the threadbare fabric nervously and tutted in disgust. She hated the bleeding stuff, filthy red rain that would stain your dress – the normal variety was bad enough. Rain, bringing the risk of fevers and time spent off the job. Time not earning money. And here it was again. Rain that might wake up her mark if it drummed down too hard on the roof above. She glanced

The Rise of the Iron Moon

back inside the bedroom. Thank the Circle, he was still snoring. Down in the lane outside a figure moved from the shadows and crossed to her side of the street, stepping over a gutter quickly filling with a torrent from the crimson downpour. There weren't many people out late enough to witness what the two of them were about to do, which was just peachy by her. She slipped out of the bedroom and into the corridor, stepping lightly so the floorboards wouldn't squeak.

She always murdered her victims on her second visit, the first being a sizing-up – so to speak – of the mark's valuables. Although in this instance there almost hadn't been a second visit from her; the Circle knows, the absence of anything of value and the dilapidated state of the apartment had given the lie to all the tales she had heard about the apartment's owner from the tavern's drinkers. That her mark came from a wealthy upland family, that they had purchased him a commission in the regiments down on the southern border. That he was some sort of war hero. Connor of Cassarabia, that's what the others called him, half-jokingly, as he drank himself into oblivion. The great Duncan bloody Connor getting bladdered in the corner of their jinn house every night.

Well, all that family money had to have gone somewhere. Yes, she had nearly dismissed her scheme of murder when the bailiffs had arrived during her first visit to the hero's home, banging on the door of the lodgings and shouting through the letterbox about the unpaid bills at the butcher's, the tailor's, the vintner's. She had been witness to enough similar scenes from her own life to know that the embrace of the debtors' prison – the dreaded sponging house – wasn't too far off for this so-called war hero. But *then* she had seen the ex-soldier hide his little travel case, the hard leather shell not much of a treasure chest, but never kept too far away from him when he was at home. There had to be valuables inside the case,

Stephen Hunt

she could feel it with every iota of her street-sharp senses. A man with a suitcase, living alone and half-mad, he was almost begging to be robbed and murdered.

A gust of rain blew in from outside as she opened the front door. Her thug glanced up the empty stairs. ‘He asleep then?’

‘Five pints of jinn and an hour biting the pillow with me, what do you think?’

The thug pulled a garrotte out of his heavily patched coat, a thin, rusty hang of wire between two wooden handles. ‘I think you should find that suitcase you were so full of yourself about.’

‘It’s in the cupboard in his bedroom.’

‘Right,’ whispered the thug, taking his not inconsiderable bulk up the stairs. ‘After I’ve done him, I’ll take him down to the waters of the Gambleflowers and toss him in. By the time the river crabs and eels have had their meal, his own mother wouldn’t know him – or want to.’

She felt a little shiver of excitement. The murder was always exciting, that little tug of power over life and death. It was a power she lacked in almost every other area of her life. Swinging open the bedroom door, there was enough light from the oil lamp’s dwindling reservoir to see her thug moving across to the ex-soldier’s bed. She levered open the cupboard and, finding the suitcase, lifted it out and placed it on the floor. It certainly felt heavy enough. Family silver? Gold gewgaws looted from one of the battlefields down south? Enough to keep her from the company of the other working girls down in the jinn house for a good few months, hopefully.

Her man was about to slip the wire around the uplander’s neck and send him along the Circle when she opened the suitcase. And saw what was inside. And screamed.

Duncan Connor was up and out of the thug’s grasp far

The Rise of the Iron Moon

quicker than anyone with five pints of jinn sloshing around their body had a right to be. Her thug kept a long knife for the difficult ones, the ones who wouldn't go quickly, but the ex-soldier's sheet was off the bed, turned into a matador's cloak, concealing him from her man's blade, before becoming a whip, wrapping around the thug's arm, yanking him off balance and into the ex-soldier's reach. There was a crack as a kick shattered the thug's kneecap and a louder snap as the collapsing man's neck was twisted at an angle his spine could not survive – at least, not while still attached to his head.

Duncan Connor rose up from the floor as a breeze from the corridor outside lifted the papers pinned across the wall. The lassie was gone. She wouldn't be surfacing at the old tavern on the street corner again, but then Middlesteel had a thousand more taverns like it scattered across its rookeries in the shadows of its pneumatic towers, and a thousand more like her, no doubt, too.

Lifting the suitcase up carefully, the lid still open, Duncan Connor placed it on top of the mattress of his bed. 'I'm sorry you had to see that wee barnie. Are you all right?'

<I think so. Who was that woman?>

'Nobody you need to worry about.' He turned the suitcase away from the direction of the thug's corpse, hiding the sight of his dead would-be assassin.

<It's nighttime, isn't it? I should away and sleep some more.>

'Aye, you should.' He shut the suitcase gently and placed it back inside the cupboard, making sure to hide it properly under the threadbare blankets this time.

Duncan Connor looked at the corpse. No doubt the thug would be known to the Middlesteel constabulary, his blood code turning on the drums of their transaction engines, a

Stephen Hunt

Ham Yard arrest record linked to his citizen file. But if he involved the police in this hubbub, one of them would only leak the tale to the news sheets and Connor of Cassarabia's name would be linked to yet another horror. It was hard enough finding work as it was, and he had the promise of a little job coming his way from the circus that might vanish if he was dragged along to listen to a coroner pontificate and call witnesses from the jinn house. No, the wee waters of the Gambleflowers would do for this one.

The river took everything, in Middlesteel.

Kyorin departed the perfumery shop along Penny Street leaving an assistant looking in surprise at the silver coin in her hand – not because she had seen through the counterfeit, but wondering how someone as dishevelled as Kyorin actually had the money to buy an expensive bottle of scent for his beloved in the first place. The last couple of days hadn't been kind to Kyorin, harried and hunted across the streets and slums of Middlesteel by the monsters, staying only in cheap, anonymous dosshouses. He stopped in an alley and squeezed the scent bulb, spraying his clothes and exposed skin, even his hair. Watching the carts and carriages rattle past and praying that the stench of this perfume would be enough to mask him from his hunters for a while.

One of the residual thoughts of the policeman whose mind he had joined with floated up unbidden. *<You smell like a whore's handkerchief.>*

'Shut up,' Kyorin muttered. 'When I want your advice, I'll ask for it.' He had grown uncharacteristically cantankerous with hunger and desperation.

A vagrant stumbled past, his clothes so frayed and ancient they were almost black. He stopped when he saw Kyorin slumped against the wall, muttering to himself. Taking him

The Rise of the Iron Moon

for one of Middlesteel's own, obviously. Two friends together, living low on Jinn Lane.

'Penny for an old soldier? Fought at the Battle of Clawfoot Moor, I did.'

'What's a soldier?' asked Kyorin.

Laughing, the vagrant raised a bottle of cheap grain whisky to his lips and stumbled deeper into the rookeries.

The dead policeman's residual pattern jumped out unbidden again. *<Lying old rascal.>*

There it was. Soldier, like a keeper of the peace – *<I was a bloody crusher.>* – but they acted in rituals of mass aggression between societies, formalized right down to the different colours of the tunics the opposing sides wore to mark their allegiance. *<War, it's called bloody war.>* Ah, Clawfoot Moor was the final battle of the Kingdom of Jackals' civil war between its monarchy and parliament, some six hundred years before. Kyorin's hunters would appreciate this, although he could thank all that was holy that they were not here to do so. The vagrant's memory was so raddled the only battle he could dredge up for his beggary was something he had been taught long ago in school.

So many voices in his mind. Too many voices. Kyorin rubbed his head frantically. 'I just wanted to learn to swim.'

'I can swim,' the vagrant called out from further down the alley.

Kyorin had to focus. Two days of adrenalin-fuelled near escapes, low on sleep, nearly out of counterfeit currency to exchange for fruit from the sellers who wandered the streets of the capital with their trays. He pulled out the book from his pocket, the pages still damp from his escape down the River Gambleflowers. *Velocities and Trajectories of Science* by Timlar Preston. It had originally been written in Quatérshiftian, then translated into Jackelian; not that the language it was

Stephen Hunt

written in would have mattered to Kyorin. There was enough detail in the book that he could model the mind of the individual who had written it, feel its uniqueness. Resting his palm on the pages, he reached out.

<Timlar, can you hear me?>

Far above in the holding spheres of the Court of the Air, Kyorin sensed one of the cells of the aerial city filled with a screech of recognition, the noise muffled from the warders patrolling outside by riveted armour and pulsing curse walls. <You have been gone for so long, what happened to you?>

<I haven't been able to contact you. It hasn't been easy for me,> Kyorin was burning up, running a fever from too much time exposed to the near constant drizzle of the Kingdom of Jackals' capital city. <The things I told you about have been hunting me, the masters' servants. My scent is unique in this city and they are nipping at my heels. I can sense them getting closer, even as we speak.>

<I'm not going mad, am I? You aren't a figment of my id, you're real?>

<You'll find that out soon enough,> said Kyorin. <I wish I were a figment of your imagination, Timlar, I truly do; that all I have warned you about was a fiction.>

<I thought you might be my own genius, broken free of my imprisonment up here. Coming to remind me of who I was, what I once achieved . . .>

<You have a little more to achieve yet, I think,> said Kyorin.

<I am very nearly finished,> said Timlar Preston.

Kyorin received an image of the Quatérshiftian prisoner brandishing his pencil like a sword, ready to sketch out the few missing pieces of the mechanics he needed for his device.

<The help you have given me, it is amazing. Concepts that I could never—>

<Merely knowing something is possible, that is often enough

The Rise of the Iron Moon

to begin the journey,> said Kyorin. <And you had been working along the right lines long before I contacted you.>

<I still have not find a way to stabilise the wave front, though. That is where we always failed back in Quatérshift, we always lost focus during the test firings . . .>

Kyorin listened and began to fill in the gaps. Thank the stars it was he who had survived the masters' hunters, rather than his ignorant desert-born friend swept away by the river. Half an hour later Kyorin was finished, the voice of the man held captive by the Court of the Air fading as the power of Kyorin's weakened body began to wane.

<That's everything I need. But how will you get me out of here?> Timlar Preston's anxiety was almost overwhelming. <No one has ever escaped from the Court of the Air.>

<I don't know. I will find a way. I must, or we are all finished.>

<I never wanted to use my skills for war, you know,> sobbed Preston. <I nearly became a priest of the Child of Light, once, taking vows for the seminary. I was a pacifist, but the revolutionary government took my wife hostage, my three children. They said I was to dedicate my work to serving the Committee of War or we would all be banished to an organized community.>

<You deserve better than what happened to you,> said Kyorin.

<No, the devices I built were used to slaughter countless thousands of innocents during the Two-Year War,' said Preston. 'Children no different from mine, who just happened to have been born inside the Kingdom of Jackals' borders. I do deserve this. I sacrificed my principles for a mean, personal thing. And what good has it done me? My family have no doubt starved on a widow's pension during my years as a prisoner. Even before the Court of the Air's agents seized me,

Stephen Hunt

Quatérshift's streets were full of soldier's wives begging in the streets for food, their children in their laps, baby's arms as thin as shoelaces. The gratitude of our glorious revolution. I helped murder thousands of Jackelians in the Two-Year War and what has happened to my dreams, my nation, my family, as I rot away up here?>

<Your designs must be used as you once intended,> said Kyorin. <And if you once killed thousands, you can now save millions. I must go, we have been in communication with each other for too long. Your mind was not born to safely receive my thoughts over such a duration.>

Far above, Kyorin sensed the Quatérshiftian prisoner finally lying down exhausted on his bunk, left to wonder if the voice in his head was indeed his madness snapped free.

Kyorin rested the book down by his side and glanced miserably towards the strip of sky above the alley. He couldn't see the Court of the Air from the ground, so high was the aerial city's station. Wrapped in clouds generated by its steam-driven transaction engines as they modelled the ebb and flow of Jackelian society, in as perfect a simulation as such primitive technology allowed. 'I'll get you out, my new friend. I must, or we are all dead.'

The chequerboard hull of a Royal Aerostatical Navy airship went past, a brief thrum from its engine and then it was gone. For a moment, Kyorin thought its shadow had remained, but it was the shadow of the vagrant looming large above him.

'I'll trade you.'

'Trade me what?' asked Kyorin.

The vagrant pulled out a book from his own jacket pocket, in a better state than the clothes from which it had emerged. 'Lifted this from the stationer's stall at the Guardian Fairfax atmospheric. Finished it now.' He pointed at Kyorin's damp book. 'You finished with that?'

The Rise of the Iron Moon

‘Yes,’ sighed Kyorin. ‘I believe I have.’

Kyorin received the book from the vagrant and passed up his own. A sudden suspicion struck him as he saw how the vagrant was looking at the cover of his new book. ‘You can’t read, can you?’

‘No, squire. But there’s plenty on the streets around here that can, and they read them for me – Old Man Pew, Barking Billy. The words don’t make sense to my eyes, see. Got the reading sickness.’ The vagrant sipped another swig from his upland firewater. ‘This book any good?’

‘It’s a philosophical treatise on velocity science and its practical applications as related to gunnery and celestial mechanics. Royal Society Press edition as translated from the original Quatérshiftian.’

Belching, the vagrant felt the smog-damp wall of the alley for support. ‘Sweet as a nut.’

Kyorin glanced down at the cover of his new book. *The Moon Pirates of Trell* by Molly Templar. There was a lurid illustration on the front: three explorers in pith helmets clutching lethal-force weapons as they stepped out of a crashed high-altitude airship onto a desert-like moon. Now this was really very promising.

In the road outside the alley a hansom cab had collided with a brewer’s wagon and an argument was about to boil over into violence. The crushers would be here any minute. Time to be off before the first police arrived.

As Kyorin walked past the vagrant he quickly stooped down and laid his palm flat on the man’s forehead. The vagrant yelled at the terrible flare of burning in his skull as his brain reworked itself into a new pattern.

‘Ask Old Man Pew to teach you to read,’ said Kyorin. ‘I don’t think you’ll have problems interpreting written words any more.’

Stephen Hunt

Groaning, the vagrant reached for his bottle, trying to gulp the pain away. With an obscene gargle he spat the whisky down onto the mud.

Kyorin smiled, disappearing into the labyrinth of the rookeries. ‘Unfortunately, intoxicants will no longer taste quite as appealing as they did to you before your healing.’

There was a Pentshire moon outside the farmer’s window. Round. Full. Easily enough light for the farmer to see by as the squire’s thug took his hand and raised it slowly up in front of his face.

‘Now, imagine your fingers are voters,’ said the thug. He gave the farmer’s fingers a little wiggle.

‘Pay attention!’ hissed one of the other two men pinning down the farmer’s body. ‘This is important.’

‘Nice, fat, plump little voters. Contented,’ explained the ringleader. ‘They know who to vote for. They know who owns the tenancy on their farms and crofts. But—’ his voice turned ugly ‘—now someone else comes along to stand for parliament, and look, they’re all confused.’ He wiggled the farmer’s fingers in a sad little dance.

‘Someone who’s not been paid off to throw the election for you in your rotten little borough,’ spat the farmer, spots of blood from his smashed face landing on his bedroom floor as he spoke.

‘That’s a terrible accusation to make,’ said the ringleader. ‘You see, when the voters are confused, they just need straightening out.’

The ringleader took one of the farmer’s fingers and pushed it back, the snap of bone nearly making him faint.

‘That’s a lot of work for us,’ observed one of the thugs behind him, hissing the words into his ear. ‘And the Circle knows, you’ve kept us busy enough this year already, organ-

The Rise of the Iron Moon

izing every labourer whose ear you could grab to pour your poison into their thick heads, setting up a damn tenants' union.'

Another finger snapped and the farmer desperately tried to stop himself screaming so he didn't wake up the others in the farmhouse, trying to keep his family out of this.

'And you wouldn't like parliament,' added the second of the thugs behind him. 'All those long airship trips down to Middlesteel, and the prices in the capital are diabolical.'

A third finger snapped and all the farmer could think of was how he was going to walk the shirehorse and the plough across his fields next week in this mangled state.

'Don't get me wrong, now,' continued the ringleader, 'but I just can't see you sitting in the House of Guardians. They're carriage folk, mostly, and there's you with no carriage at all – why, I wager you wouldn't even know which spoon to pick up from the table to use for your soup. You would just embarrass us all if you got elected.'

The ringleader made to break the farmer's last finger, but then shook his head as if changing his mind. 'And here's something I bet you haven't considered. If you're down in Middlesteel, hobnobbing with all the quality and listening to all those boring bills being read in parliament, then who's going to be looking after your family?'

The farmer's heart leapt. Even *they* wouldn't? A fourth thug emerged into the room with the farmer's son struggling in his grip, one hand covering the boy's mouth, the other clutching a pheasant-skinning knife.

'Please!' the farmer begged.

'What, you thought we were joking?' said the ringleader. 'Thought we'd come a-visiting your home at night for a bit of sport, did you?'

'Please!'

Stephen Hunt

The shadows in the room were growing longer, thicker. Like mist. But no one noticed. The farmer was struggling desperately under the weight of the thugs holding him down, the others were too giddy with the excitement of the kill.

‘*Shut up*, you’ve got another two lads, you’re not even going to miss one of them.’

‘You can’t do this!’

‘I feel your pain,’ laughed the ringleader.

‘And I feel your evil,’ hissed another voice, as the thug holding the farmer’s son stumbled back into the shadows of the room. They were both enveloped and disappeared, a second before the grip holding the farmer fast seemed to slip away and he was free.

The farmer backed away as the ringleader and the remaining thug glanced hastily around at the shadows of the room, hundreds of them, swelling and moving like the surf on the sea. Solid. Black. Laughter seemed to bubble out of those shadows, but there was no happiness in it. It was a pit to hell opened in that room, the echo of a fallen soul rising out of the depths. But where was his lad, and where was the thug who had been holding him?

Twisting a knife around in his hand, the ringleader seemed to be trying to locate the sound of the terrible laughter. There was an explosion of light from one corner, blinding the farmer, then a series of wet slaps. As the dots cleared from the farmer’s eyes, he realized the only other person left in the room was the ringleader, the shadows twisting and circling around him.

‘You’ve carried your squire’s message for him this night,’ laughed a dark voice. ‘I have one for you to take back to him.’

There was a snap-snap-snap of light – like the powder flash on a camera – the shadows and the light merging to become

The Rise of the Iron Moon

an angular figure striking at the gang's ringleader. The farmer turned his head to avoid the shower of splintering glass as the thug was forced to leave by the window.

The room seemed to return to normal, the intense light diminishing to a sparkle on the handle of a pistol – one of a pair – holstered on a figure wearing a jet-black riding coat, his face covered with a dark executioner's hood.

'My son?' trembled the farmer, looking mesmerized at the three corpses lying on the floor of his bedroom.

'Back in his room,' said the figure. 'A child's mind is a very flexible thing. He'll remember nothing of this night.'

'Dear Circle,' said the farmer, 'what have you done, man? There's three dead here. The squire has the county constabulary in his pocket, they'll—'

'The county magistrate is due a visit from me, as, I believe, is the squire.'

'You can't interfere with justice!'

The terrible laughter returned to the room. 'They only know about the law; *I* shall explain what justice is.'

'You're him, aren't you. The one they talk about.'

'Look out of the window,' said the hooded figure. 'What do you see?'

The farmer stood in front of his shattered window. There was the gang's ringleader, crawling across the glass on a broken leg, moaning, trying to reach his horse. And a dense fog was forming – seeping out of the woods, fingers of it probing along the ground like the legs of a curious spider. It was a *marsh* fog. The farmer looked around, but the three corpses had disappeared.

Vanished too was the Hood-o'the-marsh. Only the broken window remained as evidence the farmer hadn't dreamt the whole break-in.

* * *

Stephen Hunt

Walking into the woods, the Hood-o'the-marsh allowed himself a smile, shouts from the squire's mansion echoing behind him as the great house's retainers spilled into the night, waving their blunderbusses and birding rifles. Someone was yelling to douse the lanterns, more of a hindrance than help on a nighttime pursuit. Not that it would do them any good, any more than cavalry redcoats would be able to help the bloody figure of a county magistrate in a dressing gown, stumbling towards town and the garrison. *He* owned the night. Not much of a recompense for losing the ability to sleep, to dream.

Which was why the silhouette of the woman waiting at the top of the hill took him by surprise. Nobody could sneak up on him. Nobody. Not since he had found . . . both pistols were suddenly in his hands as he advanced, treading silently towards the woman. After all these years, could it really be her?

'Mother, is that you?'

There was no answer. He could feel nothing from her, as if she had no weight on the world. No evil. No goodness either. And there was only one person – if you could call her a person – who had ever registered on the Hood's senses like that.

'Mother, if—'

'I am not the Lady of the Lights,' said the silhouette. 'But perhaps you should recognize me anyway, Oliver Brooks?'

He moved closer. There was just enough moonlight to see that the silhouette was wearing what looked like leather armour covered by bronze chainmail – archaic, the very picture of a warrior maiden from the cheap woodcuts of a child's novel.

'Enough of this.' Oliver pointed his two pistols at her but they vanished from his hands, reappearing in her own. The

The Rise of the Iron Moon

light reflecting from the pistols became twin suns, blinding him. As the light dwindled he saw that the pistols had changed form, one becoming a trident, the other an oblong shield with the crude face of a lion cast on it. The lion of Jackals.

Oliver gaped. 'They're mine.'

'No,' said the woman. 'They are *mine*. As are you, Hood-o'the-marsh.'

'You *are* an Observer then,' said Oliver.

'No, I'm not one of them,' said the woman. 'I'm a local girl. Did you never wonder where those two pistols of yours, so carefully passed down the ages from master to master, actually came from? It is my work you are about, Oliver Brooks.'

'Is it, indeed?' said Oliver. 'Then return those two pistols and I'll be about it once more.'

'Time enough for that,' said the woman. 'There are more important matters to attend to than corrupt guardians and local magistrates. Have you not felt the wrongness in our land?'

Oliver gazed down at his empty hands. She knew that he had.

'There is an ache in my bones,' continued the woman, 'and I fear what it augurs.'

'Your bones?'

'The bones of the land, Oliver Brooks of the race of man,' said the woman. 'The bones of the Kingdom of Jackals.'

'Jackals is a country, not a person,' said Oliver. 'It's my country.'

'You are half-right,' said the woman. 'Jackals is an idea, a dream of freedom that is dreamt by all those who live in the forests and glades of this green land. That is why you can dream no longer, Hood-o'the-marsh. Your job is to protect those who do dream, those who still believe in me.'

Stephen Hunt

‘Are you certain that you’re not an Observer?’ said Oliver. ‘You surely sound like one to my thick ears.’

‘I’m not one of the grand system’s angels, I have already told you that. I’m the god of details. I’m the rustle of the wind in the oaks, the splash of a stone rolling into a loch, the mountains that stood against the glaciers and the spirit that won’t be crushed.’

‘Why are you here?’ asked Oliver.

‘Do you not remember the tales of battle your uncle told you sitting around the fire grate of Seventy Star Hall?’ said the woman. ‘Of a time when Jackals would be threatened and of what would arise once again from a circle of ancient standing stones?’

‘He told me a lot of things about the war,’ said Oliver. And so his uncle had. The mud-drenched fields of the east, Jackelian troops in trenches, wiping the smoke of battle from their gas masks’ visors. The visions they sometimes saw in the sky, the product of chemical leakage through their suits or a by-product of the earthflow particles and mage-war. Lions running through the sky. Strange angels clashing in the heavens. ‘Are the first kings really about to return from their slumber? There’s no danger of war between Jackals and the Commonshare now. Quatérshift can barely feed its own people, let alone mount another invasion.’

‘No, the threat is not from the east this time.’

‘Where, then? Cassarabia? The regiments saw off the last bandit army that came up from the desert. The caliph fears the high fleet and the wrath of the Royal Aerostatical Navy too much to make a more direct intervention.’

‘There is an old saying in the Jackelian regiments,’ said the woman. ‘It is always the bullet you don’t see that gets you.’

‘I repeat my question: are the first kings about to return?’

‘Right idea,’ said the woman. ‘Wrong gender. You are the

The Rise of the Iron Moon

key, Oliver. You will need to reunite with the scheme of offence to defeat that which is coming.'

'You mean Molly Templar?' Oliver laughed. 'You're a little out of touch. Molly is a famous author now, her celestial fiction the toast of the publishing houses along Dock Street. If you want someone to fill five pages in a penny dreadful with a story of derring-do, then she's definitely your woman. But this—' Oliver gestured around the woods '—running around the night, getting shot at. I don't think so. Not anymore.'

'Her path is still bound to yours,' said the woman. 'I need both of you together again, though far more than the pair of you will be required for the conflict that is bearing down upon us. Even together, the two of you are not enough to defeat that which you will face . . .'

'Yes, the enemy. I was hoping you could be a little less obscure on the nature of the enemy, given how you're definitely not an Observer, but the goddess of details and all that.'

A fog was rising around the warrior woman's body, a marsh mist. An hour ago Oliver would have said it was one of his mists, but now he knew better. The mist belonged to the land. It was the Kingdom of Jackals'.

'You are the key, Oliver; you will know when the time comes. Remember, you wear my favours, young man. Wear them proudly.'

With a burst of light, the familiar, comforting weight of the two pistols was back in his hands. The mist had enveloped the warrior woman, returning her essence to the soil of their land.