

The background of the cover is a collage of steampunk elements. It features several large, ornate clock faces with Roman numerals, some of which are partially obscured by intricate mechanical gears. The gears are rendered in a reddish-brown, metallic style. In the lower right, there are stylized, swirling flames in shades of orange and yellow. Two men are the central figures. The man in the foreground is shown from the chest up, looking directly at the viewer with a neutral expression. He has short, light brown hair and is wearing a dark, high-collared jacket. The man in the background is also shown from the chest up, looking off to the side. He has short brown hair, blue eyes, and is wearing goggles on his forehead. He is shirtless, revealing a thin necklace. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones like gold, brown, and orange, creating a vintage, industrial feel.

Loose Id

FIREBUG

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Firebug

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www.loose-id.com

Firebug

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*This is the gift, it comes with a price
But which is the lamb and which is the knife?
Midas is King, he holds me so tight
And turns me to gold, in the sunlight*

—Florence and the Machine, “Rabbit Heart (Raise It Up)”

The Joker

“No no, never tell, never tell.” The skinny inventor rocked as he chanted. His eyes never strayed from the strange gray stonelike tiles of his laboratory floor. “Never tell.”

Behind him on a rough wooden workbench sat a Bunsen burner, the flame low and constant. Above it, liquid in a glass alembic bubbled, and steam curled above the vessel’s narrow mouth, taking on a bluish hue before disappearing into the frigid night air. An open notebook lay too close to the Bunsen burner for safety, with a fountain pen bleeding out slowly across its half-written page. A dusty tankard sat near the wall, and over everything lay a light dusting of iron filings.

The other occupant of the room stared for a long moment. *Saints preserve me from madmen and scientists.* In his career as a judge, he’d encountered plenty of both, but this specimen was undoubtedly the maddest—and possibly the most brilliant. That combination made for a useful, if unreliable, tool.

“I’m glad to hear that you understand the...stakes of this transaction. Remember, Theodore, the very fate of the colonies may well rest on your shoulders, as well as... the other matter we spoke of earlier. Of course, we will be expecting some demonstrations.”

“Never tell, never never tell...” With a start, Theodore stopped rocking and looked up. “Demonstrations?”

“We will need to know that your invention is both functional and improving, and these demonstrations will allow you to stay on schedule with the process. Really, they are for your benefit more than ours.” In the drafty attic, his voice was little more than a wheeze.

“But in order to prove the functionality, it would need to encounter a, well, an aggressor, is how we’d put it in alchemical terms. And the functionality you’re describing, well, requesting really—to see that functionality, we’d need...” Theodore’s eyes widened, and he stared off into space, blinking rapidly.

Judge Barrington pulled a folded piece of parchment from a deep, velvet-lined pocket. “These are the dates.”

“The what? Oh. If there are dates, that must mean you’re going to evacuate everyone before the—before, right? That must be what it means. Otherwise—”

“*Doctor Molen*, that is not your concern. You are

simply to make sure the product is in place before each new test run, so that the response will go just as smoothly as if this were the real heat of battle.”

“No one there, no one there,” Theodore chanted. He nodded, eyes going wide and glassy.

Barrington pulled his cloak close around him and peered out the high, narrow windows at the back of the attic. Snow was falling, and thick, fat flakes drifted past the dirty, smeared glass. Age and cold rattled in his chest as he coughed heavily, then spat into a linen handkerchief. Would that there had been anyone else who could have undertaken this errand on such a foully cold evening. “You understand, of course, how vital complete secrecy is to the success of our...endeavor. And the lengths necessary to ensure that secrecy. You yourself, for instance, must understand the importance of making sure certain peccadilloes...certain irregularities, shall we say, don’t come to light.”

Theodore focused, a hunted, scared look entering his eyes.

“I simply cannot guarantee that your *history* will remain a secret.”

Theodore’s gaze returned to the floor and stayed there.

Outside, the wind howled, rushing at the stones and finding a way to slip in through the chinks. This far

north the cold got in next to the skin, into the bones, stealing every last lick of warmth. There were no fires warm enough to push the chill away. Barrington peered anxiously back out through the dirty glass window. The snow fell faster and thicker. "So we have an agreement, then?"

Theodore started nodding, slowly at first, his movements gradually increasing until he was rocking again.

"I'll see myself out." The ill-fitting wooden door squeaked shut on Barrington's heels, and he swept the edges of his fur-lined cloak close about him as he negotiated the narrow, rickety staircase leading back down to the gritty, snow-benighted streets below. Leaning heavily into the wind, he made his way back up the hill toward the center of the city. For the hundredth time, he cursed the ill fortune that had landed him in this dismal, frozen outpost, so far from anything like civilization. Forced to take as an ally the sad, pathetic little inventor. Molen was just a pawn in the grand scheme of things, the lowest card in the deck and entirely dispensable—yet vital to the plan's success. Irony, it seemed, was the only substance in the colonies not in short supply.

Not much longer now, though. Judge Barrington smirked at the thought, then fought off another

coughing attack. The smirk faded, and he returned his attention to the icy cobblestones beneath his fine leather boots.

Not much longer.

Deal

Gareth Charles picked his way through the snowy streets of New Eddington. Anyone with a lick of sense or fortune had retired indoors, far from the prying wind and stinging snow that battered at him. On nights like these it felt as if he was once again back on the frozen steppes of Crimea, hunkered down in the frozen mud, ducking a hail of bullets.

The thatch of unruly dark hair, still thick and full in Gareth's fortieth year, combined with skin the color of a burnished penny, wide, thin lips, and deep-set hazel eyes had caused more than one man in the platoon to assume a traitor was in their midst. He might have been mistaken for foreign-born, it was true, but his heart beat for the commonwealth, and in more than one Black Sea barroom his fists had convinced anyone who thought otherwise.

With practiced ease, Gareth pushed his memories of the war back in the box where they belonged and crossed the deserted main thoroughfare, headed for a shortcut

through the park at the town's geographical heart. The once carefully trimmed shrubs thrust wild, bare branches toward the night sky, and the gravel pathways were worn and icy in patches. Only a statue of General Beaufort, New Eddington's storied founder, kept watch over the space now, staring down with what Gareth thought of as frank disappointment etched on his granite features. The park's upkeep had been cast aside with the government's increased focus on Crimea. A lot of things were being sacrificed for that war.

The wind died down as Gareth reached the general's side, and despite the cold, he paused for a moment and pulled out his cigarette case. Using the statue's stone bulk for shelter, he coaxed a weak flame into life and touched it to the fragrant, hand-rolled tobacco. Standing in the shadow of New Eddington's most decorated war hero, Gareth smoked quickly, enjoying the brief respite from the storm.

A little distance away at the edge of the park, several unfortunates hunched, rag-bound and shivering around a makeshift barrellfire. Gareth felt a pang of pity for them. New Eddington's finest would be along soon to remove them to the tender confines of the jail at city hall. The town had been plagued with a string of arsons recently, and where once the shivering vagrants would've been granted their paltry warmth, fires now made the citizenry nervous. And as proponents of

Reform so often touted, Distraction was the Enemy of Production.

The wind sprang back up, driving the snow before it, and with a last rueful glance at the overcast night sky, Gareth stubbed out his cigarette and left the general to his vigil.

He hurriedly crossed the road and reached for the door of Tom Moore's Pourhouse. Gaslight from the tiny kitchen spilled out onto the sidewalk through steam-clouded windows, and as Gareth entered, he was enveloped in a cloud of warmth and the smell of cooking meat. The Pourhouse did a brisk late-night trade in takeaway: lard-fried pockets of gravy with a few bits of animals no one looked too closely at and certainly never missed.

"Evening, Mr. Charles, sir. The usual, sir?"

"Evening, Tom." Gareth greeted the proprietor with a smile. "Depends what's in tonight's usual."

Tom Moore stood close to six feet tall and was easily half as wide again. His complexion, like that of butchers and pastrymongers everywhere, was ruddy; wide pink cheeks led down to a tiny, pinched mouth at odds with the rest of his appearance. "Oh, a bit of this and that, sir, and gravy."

One corner of Gareth's mouth turned up sardonically. "As usual."

Moore smiled and pulled a bowl down from the shelves behind him, filling it from a cast-iron tureen on the stove. The rest of the kitchen was deserted. "And would you be wanting anything else, sir?"

"Just put it on my tab, Tom."

"Very good, sir. I'll bring this down to you, shall I?" Moore wiped his hands on a filthy cloth hanging out of his apron pocket and pulled up one edge of a patriotic wallhanging. It bore a likeness of General Beaufort, mounted on a mustard-colored horse, his sword at the throat of an enemy in the shape of Crimea. The country had been given the requisite monocle and waxed moustache to help establish its villainous identity.

Behind the tapestry was a heavy wooden door. As Gareth depressed the latch, he caught sight of raw-looking wounds covering the butcher's hand and arm where it held back the wall hanging. "Tom, what happened?"

The butcher looked abashed. "That fire we had last week at the dance hall, sir. It were a bad one. But the ashes after... The missus and I—well, you know how it is, Mr. Charles, sir. We all must do as must be done, sir."

Gareth looked at the weeping blisters on Moore's arm and felt his breath catch. The arsons. New Eddington's wood-and-plaster edifices, huddling shoulder to narrow shoulder against the fierce winters, had proven

a ready feast for the flames. In their wake, piles of still-smoldering ashes rife with half-burned wood, bits of glass, and other trinkets too tempting for many of the town's poorer inhabitants.

Tom cleared his throat. "S'a good job those firewalkers drive their bugs like madmen. Get right up into the flames and get that blue goo right at the heart of it. Could've been a lot worse, by far. Could've lost the brewery and the tobacconist's to boot. Wouldn't that've been a fine mess, sir! All them smokeables gone up in an instant. I tell you, Governor Gray's a good-hearted man, sir, for sending up more bugs. Who knows what could've happened if we didn't have enough firewalkers to go around."

Gareth couldn't take his eyes off the wounds on Tom's arms as knowledge of his own part in letting the fires continue festered in his gut. *How many more must suffer before all is known?* "We're truly lucky to have such a wise and benevolent leader for our colony. Things could indeed be a lot worse."

If Tom noted the sarcasm in Gareth's voice, he made no sign and instead returned to his stoves. Gareth turned resolutely away and stepped behind the tapestry and into the bowels of the building.

Rough stone steps led sharply down, curving to the right. Gareth had to duck his head to avoid the effluent

pipe as it cut through the earth like a giant metal worm. At the foot of the steps lay his destination: a second door, heavier than the first and made of solid iron.

A hatch in the center of the doorway slid back, and an imperious voice asked, “Yes? What do you want?”

Gareth grinned widely. “Come on, Countess, you know who I am. You’ve known since I walked into the store upstairs.” Or, knowing New Eddington’s grande dame of the shadows, since before he’d known he was coming here himself.

A pair of baleful hazel eyes glared at him through the hatchway. “You’re late.”

Gareth shrugged. “I do what I can.”

The hatch slid closed with a sharp *snick*, and Gareth was glad he hadn’t been leaning closer. The door opened halfway, but a weathered blonde at least a decade older than himself barred the way. She wore a man’s suit and waistcoat and the same mean glare, which did nothing to disguise a proud beauty little diminished by middle age. Countess Harvill was a lot of things—shrewd businesswoman, purveyor of all things desired, and illicit, sharp-tongued harpy—but a pushover wasn’t among them. “Gareth Charles, I want no trouble here tonight; do you understand me? Keep it clean, and if you can’t keep it clean, at least keep it close. Cross me and I’ll deliver you to the devil himself on the end of my foot, so

help me.”

Gareth deposited a kiss on her wrinkled cheek. “I’m a gentleman, Countess. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’ll just bet.” She stood aside to let him enter.

The good-sized room beyond stood in stark contrast to the plain, homely kitchen on the ground floor. Men packed in around the small tables, some sitting, others standing to wait their turn, and tinny pre-war tunes came from a small hand-cranked phonograph, complete with a scrubbed-up urchin manning the crank. A long, low table stood at the room’s far end; well-dressed gentlemen wearing tartered-up laundry girls tossed dice and grumbled or patted each other in commiseration. The room stank of sweat, cheap cologne, and hair tonics. A haze of tobacco smoke hung over the tables as cards and coins both exchanged hands.

Nodding acquaintance, Gareth pulled out a chair at the closest table. Before he could even unbutton his greatcoat, however, a steely hand gripped his collar, pulling him in another direction.

“As much as I’d enjoy seeing you unleashed against Judge Barrington’s secretary, I think you’ll fare better with these gentlemen over here.” She sank Gareth into a chair at a table nearby with a little more force than necessary. “Gentlemen,” she announced, “Gareth

Charles. Mr. Charles, these are gentlemen. See if you can learn something from them.” With a painful squeeze of Gareth’s shoulder, she departed. The table’s occupants looked up with a minimum of interest.

Gareth rose and slipped out of his greatcoat as he was dealt into the game. He kept his eyes on the cards as they slid across the burnished wood tabletop, then sank into his chair and collected his hand with a contented sigh. It was time to put his troubles to one side, at least for a few hours.

The game on the table was Fetch and Carry. A trick-taking game of skill and one Gareth happened to excel at. With a quick look at the pot, he tossed some coins in, matching only the lowest bid.

A heavily sideburned older gentleman pursed his lips disapprovingly as his eyes tallied Gareth’s contribution. The banker, Gareth thought. Tight with his own money but hates to see other people tight with theirs. Gareth looked at his cards, his face a mask of unconcern for his surroundings.

Per the custom, they played two hands up, building tricks in front of them on the table. Gareth opted for two midlevel bids, taking one and dropping the other. He kept his mind and his eyes on the cards. At the third hand, they estimated their tricks for the full game.

Gareth bet safe, in the middle. Eight tricks. Liking

to seem cocky but knowing he should drop the first game to win their confidence.

The banker bid nine with a glare in Gareth's direction, and a long-limbed redhead with an easy grin bet six. Interesting, Gareth thought. Probably a sly man hoping to pass himself off as an innocent.

A pug-nosed young man smelling oddly of mint bet five, then looked over at the redhead, who met his glance and looked away, gaze traveling like oil on water.

Which left the final occupant of the table.

Gareth looked up and found himself unable to move. The last member of their gambling party was about forty, with a shock of graying blond hair, a prominent, aristocratic chin, and slender, elegant hands that shook a little as they gripped the cards. Above bruise-colored hollows, his eyes were bright blue and scared.

He looked up and met Gareth's eyes, and it was like the whole world went suddenly, blessedly silent. Gareth froze in the power of that gaze, drinking it in like the finest whiskey. Then the man looked away, and the whiskey soured in his throat.

As Gareth watched, he downed a shot of clear rotgut and signaled for another. Gareth felt his stomach drop. This guy was in trouble. Gareth wondered how long he'd been at the table, how long he'd been losing, how many

shots he'd had, what his name was, where his people were, why he was here all alone...

Feeling eyes on him, Gareth looked up and caught the countess staring at him, cigar in hand. He shook off her heavy gaze and forced himself back to the game.

Play commenced, and Gareth focused on the flow of the cards, hand after hand, trick after trick, until he'd amassed the seven tricks he wanted. Staying competitive, just not cleaning up. Not yet.

At the end of the first game, the banker scooped the pot into his possession with a satisfied snort and made neat piles of the coins. Gareth rocked back in his chair and mentally tallied. The redhead made one over his bet, and the mint-smelling man one under, with a few covert glances throughout. Gareth mentally shook his head. *Amateurs*. The blond guy came three under but made up for it with two more shots of the hard stuff.

As if sensing Gareth's gaze, he looked up and scowled. "Does my display of ill luck displease you, friend?"

Gareth opened his mouth to reply, but the banker interrupted. "Another round, gentlemen?"

They all murmured agreement, and Gareth willed himself not to stare at his blue-eyed antagonist, who was shakily signaling for another drink. This was going to be a bloodbath.

An hour later, he was proved right. Gareth was ahead, leading neatly but not without the appearance of a struggle. The banker harumphed into his finely waxed mustache and restacked his earlier—now much smaller—winnings. Gareth's suspected pair of cardsharps were in the middle of a protracted eyebrow-driven conversation when the redhead caught Gareth's expression and blushed, the glow springing quickly up his cheeks. Gareth didn't look away.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me, I think I could use some fresh air." The blond pushed away from the table and headed unsteadily toward the cardroom's rear door. The way he looked around as he went, wide-eyed and unseeing, knocked about by pushed-back chairs and high-spirited patrons, knotted Gareth's stomach. He found himself on his feet before his brain could object. The others stared curiously.

"A smoke break sounds like just what I need right now." Gareth forced his voice to stay steady. He watched the door close behind the mysterious cardplayer's dispirited form. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he addressed the banker. "Be sure to keep those coins warm for me. I like my winnings like I like my women: willing and many."

The others chuckled dutifully.

Moving as quickly as was seemly, Gareth grabbed

up his greatcoat and made it to the back door and out, up a long, sloping dirt path to an enclosed courtyard nestled between the Pourhouse and its neighbor. Open to the night sky, the courtyard was sheltered by a latticed trellis wearing the frost-stung remnants of a climbing rose plant native to the colonies.

Gareth spotted his tablemate leaning up against the rough brick wall in the far corner of the courtyard, head back, eyes closed. His breath formed clouds in the cold night air, but there was no cigarette in his hands. Gareth stepped forward onto the hard-packed, icy dirt. He fumbled in one pocket for his cigarette case, gingerly crossing the small space.

His companion didn't open his eyes, so Gareth leaned forward and nudged him in the ribs with the closed case.

Gareth's companion jumped and pushed back into the corner, scanning the alley for escape. Gareth felt sick. He'd seen this before. This was the true cost of the Crimean Offensive.

"Easy, friend, easy," Gareth said softly. Up close, under the clean moonlight, Gareth realized that his tablemate was older than he'd first thought, gone forty by at least a year or two. Out here he could see sharp lines etched around the eyes, the planed cheeks a little too hollow to pass for a comfortable middle age. Still,

there was something in those wide, blue eyes. Something childlike and vulnerable. “How long were you over there?”

Panic flitted across the chiseled features, and Gareth quickly took a step back. “Relax, comrade. We’re just two old soldiers talking.” He withdrew a cigarette from the case and lit it, just to have something to do with his hands. “I spent three long years serving His Majesty belly-down in the frozen muck. Nights like these, snow on the ground, more coming, sometimes it feels like I never left, you know?”

His companion relaxed a little, sagging against the bricks at his back.

Gareth took a long pull on his cigarette and stuck out his hand. “Gareth. Gareth Charles.”

There was a few seconds’ pause before his hand was firmly grasped, the shake quick and tentative. “Thomas Cole. Cole, if you’re a friend.”

“I look forward to it,” Gareth answered. The minute their hands met, he felt like his whole body had been dipped in tallow and was slowly melting, despite the frost hanging round them in the air. He found himself unable to let go. And from the look on Cole’s face, the feeling was, if not reciprocated, then at least understood. And accepted.

The two men locked gazes.

“Gareth, I feel like I’ve met you before,” Cole began haltingly. “That’s not possible, is it?”

Gareth smirked around his cigarette. “I think I would have remembered.” One corner of Cole’s mouth lifted at the comment.

The two of them seemed to realize simultaneously that their hands were still joined, and each dropped the other’s quickly, looking away. Gareth thought he saw a hint of reluctance on Cole’s face. *Or maybe I just hope that’s what I saw.*

Despite the depths of winter, his new friend was dressed only in a yellowed linen shirt over the customary woolens and baggy wool trousers. Gareth could see threaded scars where the fine linen had been inexpertly repaired at the elbows and collar. The places that wore through easily.

Gareth walked over to lean next to Cole against the wall, offering what heat he could at the connection of shoulder and hip. His companion looked over curiously but made no attempt to pull away. Gareth offered Cole his lit cigarette; it was accepted eagerly this time. “How long have you been here? I mean, at the tables.”

Cole took a long drag and exhaled inexpertly before handing the cigarette back. “Too long, that’s how long. Sometimes I just don’t know when to quit. Think my luck will change and then...”

The wind picked up, and even in the sheltered courtyard, Gareth felt it make its icy presence known. Cole shivered next to him, and Gareth hazarded leaning in a little closer. This close, Cole smelled like shaving soap and scotch. *This is either the best idea I've ever had, or I couldn't care less that it's the worst.* "I've been waiting a long time for my luck to change, Cole."

"And here I was thinking you were one of the lucky ones." The words were soft in his ear, Cole's voice like beeswax on leather.

Gareth came to his senses, forced himself to listen to the words rather than the voice. *Keep it together. You don't need this distraction.*

But when Gareth looked at Cole's wide blue eyes, innocent and questioning, eyes he thought it wasn't possible for any Crimean veteran to possess, Gareth knew this was more than a distraction. Much more.

The pause between them lengthened until the cigarette, long forgotten in Cole's hands, burned to a stub. He dropped it with an oath, and the burning embers landed on Gareth's trousers, flaring slightly before dying without a sound.

Gareth reached for Cole's hand. "Let me see."

Cole gave his hand unhesitatingly. There was barely enough light in the courtyard for Gareth to see that the embers had blistered the fingers he held in his

own. He probed the pads of Cole's fingers and was startled by Cole's hiss of pain. He looked up sharply, meeting Cole's questioning gaze.

The two of them were silent, Cole's breath warm on Gareth's cheek. For the first time in a very long while, Gareth Charles was unsure of himself. They were both on fragile ground. Gareth searched for something to say, some way to express what—

An explosion ripped through the night air. The two men looked up in surprise, then at each other. Cole recovered first.

He ran to the edge of the courtyard, where the wooden latticework of the trellis rose in a deep bower, shielding the space from prying eyes. A dense orange glow lit the night; the explosion had been close by, and thick black smoke billowed up in a plume. Cole leaped onto the trellis, clawing frantically at the dead rose branches and wood. They held firm. He jumped down, dashing back to Gareth with an oath. "I've got to mount up and get going before the whole city burns! I've got to get my bug!"

From the other side of the latticework, shouting and rapid footsteps reached them as the explosion woke the slumbering neighborhood. With a last look at Gareth, Cole disappeared back through the door to the cardroom. Gareth could hear excited, concerned voices there too,

and the clink of coins. He looked down at his fingers, ungloved and starting to stiffen in the chill air.

A firewalker, huh. Just my luck.

Gareth took a deep breath, smoke and the promise of snow filling his lungs. The cigarette butt was still smoldering at his feet, a fierce orange eye watching him from the wet ground. Gareth stubbed it out viciously with the toe of one boot and headed back inside, hot on the heels of his new companion.

Two

By the time Gareth made it back out through the Pourhouse kitchen, the streets were thronged with people surging toward the fire. Gareth swore. The infernal curiosity of the average bystander tended to get them killed. And he knew all too well the world was dangerous enough without seeking more out. Moving quickly, he searched the faces of those he passed.

Cole was not among them.

As soon as Cole had mentioned “mounting up,” Gareth had realized he was a firewalker, one of the brave, foolhardy men who strapped themselves into the insectoid firefighting machines, risking life and limb getting close enough to the flames to cover them with the newly invented extinguishing foam. More often than not, they proved to be brave, foolhardy men with short life spans: the bugs had a tendency to jam up at the worst possible times, stranding the occupants too close to the blaze, leaving them trapped, roasting alive inside the rigid metal shells. Other times the strange, cog-driven

innards that gave the firebugs life turned on their riders, seemingly bent on taking life. Steel springs and levers shoved through soft skin, whiplike gear cables sliced limbs to the bone. It took a special type of man to become a firewalker. Usually one with a death wish.

Gareth thought again of Cole's wide, vulnerable blue eyes and broke into a run.

By the time he reached the corner of Cherry and Bank Streets, the heat pressed against him like a blanket, smothering him with its hunger. Flames extended from every window of the old stone library, grasping at the orange, gas-lit clouds. A citizens' bucket brigade was throwing dirty snow along a line toward the blaze, but each handful disappeared in midair with an angry hiss. This fire was far beyond buckets.

Nearby, a horse neighed in alarm before its hansom cab was pulled down the hill toward the lake and safety. Alarm bells mounted at the corner of each building and strung with wires rang urgently, a cacophony of tongues warning the night of a traitor in their midst.

Gareth spun, searching the assembled throng for Cole. The fire raged, and sparks jumped from the lost library to nearby roofs. People were already perched there, waiting with carpets and beaters to suffocate the invaders, but the crowd's mood was fearful, anticipating the spread of disaster.

And then a hydraulic gust rent the air, an unearthly blue cloud mingling with the thick black smoke. The crowd turned as one, and a huge, shining black bug crested the top of the street, antennae waving. It was shortly joined by two companions, surveying the scene with unblinking glass eyes.

The firewalkers had arrived.

Each brigade was a multiple of three. This fire had brought out a double: six fierce, efficient firebugs crawling up the hill, each tethered by a long umbilical hose to the foam wagon they dragged behind them. Their gleaming metal carapaces swayed above long, double-jointed legs, and each of their steps was accompanied by a mechanical *whir* and the grinding of metal gears.

A round of applause went up, and the bucket brigaders fell away from the fire, giving the bugs room. Gareth craned his neck, straining for a sight of Cole, but the glass eyes of the bugs reflected the fire. Gareth could barely make out the goggles of the operators within.

Gareth wondered for a moment why finding the soldier, who a scant hour ago was unknown to him, had taken on such vital importance.

The firebugs assembled in a semicircle around the flaming library, metal jaws screeching open. Then the telltale chundering grunt of foam production began.

There was a series of soft *whumps* as the six

firebugs each shot a jet of blue foam from their gaping jaws. The streams lanced toward the library, staining the stones with a slick, blue reflective slime. The foam found its target and clung like lichen, then seemed to mass of its own accord, bubbling across the edifice, rushing toward the flames at unseemly speed.

Gareth rubbed his eyes. No matter how many times he saw it, he refused to believe that the foam could move of its own volition. It fought fires. That was all. Wet and sticky and miraculous, it was an efficient modern answer to the age-old menace of fire.

The wagon rocked on its squeaking joists as it kept the firebugs' umbilical hoses taut and filled. As Gareth watched, a thick clot of foam slid over to the nearest bastion of flames and extinguished it with a wet hiss. The crowd voiced approval.

Excess foam dripped from the nearest firebug's belly like slime. It puddled underneath the machine, then pooled and began to move. A group of laundry girls, shivering in their skimpy outfits, stood huddled and pointing at the fire, whispering behind their hands. The castoff foam slid up the hill toward them.

Then a second explosion shook the earth, spewing flaming debris into the street. Shrieks and shouts of terror greeted the new development, and the knot of laundry girls retreated across the street, to the arms of

warm and not entirely chivalrous men lurking in the crowd. On the cobblestones near Gareth's feet, the cast-off foam slid toward the nearest piece of flaming wood.

The sick grind of shearing metal rent the air. One of the firebugs was enveloped in a cloud of boiling steam, and the screams of its walker carried through the night, growing louder and higher until Gareth felt dizzy, tasting bile in his throat. He froze at the sound. How many times had he lain fetal and terrified in a rainwater-filled trench as that scream answered each sally of the rifles?

Gareth pushed away a dozen nightmare images, his stomach sour and cold. The screams of the driver died away, replaced by a saturnine hiss and the smell of charred meat.

The other firebugs continued their assault on the flames, seemingly oblivious to their fallen comrade.

Gareth felt sick. His mind returned to the wounds on Tom Moore's arms, pain stamped on his face as he moved around the tiny kitchen. *What have I done? What the hell have I done?*

The insect closest to him emitted a shriek like the devil's laughter. As Gareth watched, horrified, it shook on its slim metal legs and then toppled to the frosty ground with an awesome thud. The gathered crowd looked on in horror.

“No more. Oh God in heaven, no more of this!” Gareth rushed forward, arms outstretched toward the molded steel carapace. The firebug’s legs kicked weakly, sending up a shower of sparks.

Gareth paid them no heed. He hammered on the carapace, barely noticing the scalding heat against his fists. Behind him, the crowd had grown restive, distracted from the fire. Some yelled encouragement, others jeered. None made a move to help.

The bug shuddered, sending up fresh fireworks as one leg failed entirely. The mounting came loose, and the leg dangled limply from its wires.

Then the sparks ignited.

Flames leaped up from the firebug’s rear end and crept toward the carapace. Gareth ran his hands along the seams of the body, searching for the hinges, ignoring the intense heat against his fingertips. He could hear the firewalker groaning inside. Finally, his burned fingers found purchase on the raised hinges holding the giant insect’s body together.

Gareth swore, bringing his fingers to his lips in frustration. The heat had welded the doors shut.

The groaning inside ceased.

Gareth drew his pistol from the pocket of his pants and shot first one hinge, then the other. The two halves of the carapace separated with a tortured whine. The gap

between them was only a few inches wide, and thick gray smoke spiraled weakly from the fissure. Gareth dropped the gun and pulled at the sides of the fissure, feeling long-dormant muscles in his arms and shoulders come alive with the effort. But the metal shell remained obstinate. A sudden rush of sparks from the remaining back leg took him by surprise, knocking him backward, away from the fallen bug.

Gareth lay on the frost-hardened ground, eyes stinging with sweat. This wasn't supposed to happen.

A weak voice issued from the fallen bug. "Help... Please...help!"

Gareth's eyes widened in surprise; then he leaped on the steaming metal with a snarl. Grabbing a chunk of the bug's snapped-off leg, he used it to pry at the wound in the insect's back, opening it to the point where he could reach inside. His scalded fingers encountered soft linen and hard shoulders below. He slid his hands underneath the walker's shoulders and pulled with everything he had until the machine finally disgorged its operator. Wrapping an arm around the man's back, Gareth tugged and kicked at the useless machine until he popped free, sending them both tumbling to the cold wet street.

Gareth looked at the face against his shoulder, soot-smearred and slick with sweat. He tenderly lifted the

goggles from the rider's face.

Thomas Cole looked back, eyes more exhausted now than frightened.

"Come on"—Gareth panted—"let's get out of here."

Cole allowed Gareth to tug him upright. He wavered on his feet, and Gareth slipped an arm around his waist, pulling him close, taking his weight. Together, they turned and headed down the hill, away from the fire and into the darkness.

Behind them, the downed firebug let off a fresh stream of sparks, eliciting a fresh round of cheering from the crowd.

* * *

Gareth ushered Cole into the study of his well-appointed town house far from the smoking remnants of the library. He turned to the manservant hovering in the doorway. "Hindle, bring me a bowl of hot water, some towels, and a samovar filled with coffee, as strong and as hot as you can make it. Then you may go. I won't be needing you again tonight."

"Sir!" The young man snapped to attention and dashed back out, his footsteps quick and light across the polished wood floor.

Gareth reentered the room and found Cole perched on the edge of an armchair before the hearth, arms

crossed over his chest, staring into the leaping flames.

Gareth shivered. He crossed to his desk and extracted the medical kit, laying it out neatly on the bare mahogany surface: gauze, scissors, ether, catgut. Four small jars of salve and two bottles filled with brandy and whiskey—the battlefield’s more traditional painkillers.

He turned the gaslights up high—wanting bright light to check his companion for burns or wounds—and crossed the room to the fireplace.

There was a clatter behind them as Hindle set a tray with the requested supplies on the desk next to the medical kit. Cole jumped, and Gareth glared at Hindle in annoyance as he clumsily finished his task and went out.

Once the study was quiet again, Gareth knelt by the side of the hearth and reached for his companion’s hand. “Cole?” Gareth’s stomach clenched at the unfocused gaze, the fear still looming large in the injured man’s eyes. “All will be well. I promise you.”

Cole didn’t answer, but he didn’t protest either as Gareth stripped off the scorched and tattered shirt. He’d gotten off lightly, Gareth reflected, bathing Cole’s worst injury—a deep and nasty scratch running down his left side. For the rest, he’d suffered no more than light burns and a few angry-looking welts.

“Cole? Come on, Cole. I need you to answer. Talk to me.” Gareth wrapped ether-soaked gauze around his

companion's solid, lightly furred torso. The preparation would stave off infection and numb the pain. He draped a soft cotton dressing gown around the firewalker's shoulders, and got to work applying a mixture of camphor and menthol to the cigarette burns on Cole's fingertips from earlier.

When he reached for the belt of the woolen pants, Cole faltered and grasped Gareth's hand. "I thought..." Cole's voice was little more than a strangled whisper. "I thought—I never had a bug seize on me before—" He stopped and turned away. "I've seen it happen before. I know"—he swallowed hard—"that other bug, the one who-who, that..."

The silence between them lengthened, punctuated only by the popping of the fire in the grate and the strange, throaty breath of the gaslights at full illumination. Gareth looked into the flames and held his tongue. The study, at once familiar and comforting, had taken on a stifling air.

"His name was Livingston," Cole said finally.

Gareth tried a comforting hand on the old soldier's arm. "Looking death in the face never gets easy."

"No, it never does." Abruptly, Cole shrugged off Gareth's hand and stood, only to waver on his feet, reaching for the mantelpiece. The open sides of the dressing gown hung limply to either side of his bare

chest and stomach.

Gareth's arm was around him in an instant. "Rest easy, soldier. You've been through a lot this night. More than many a strong man could have weathered unscathed. Certainly more than you deserved. Rest, now."

Clutching the dressing gown tightly, Cole nodded and let Gareth ease him back into the chair. He even accepted a cup of the strong black coffee Gareth favored, liberally sweetened with the colony's finest honey.

Gareth took a matching cup from the ornate silver pot on the desk and dropped heavily into the armchair on the other side of the fire, his eyes on the man opposite him. Cole was lost in rapt contemplation of the contents of his cup. Bathed in the warm glow of the hearth, he was even more handsome than he'd seemed earlier, with strong cheekbones and a hint of gold stubble catching the firelight. Gareth looked away nervously and gulped his own drink. He couldn't help but remember the way he'd felt in the courtyard and the nervous questions in Cole's eyes. Questions he wasn't sure he could answer.

"This is excellent coffee," Cole said suddenly, his voice stronger.

Gareth realized he'd been staring at Cole's fingers as they restlessly fidgeted with the bathrobe's hem. "It's the only kind I drink: black as the ace of spades, thick as

treacle, sweet as first love. Only remotely worth its salt if
—”

“The spoon dissolves before the sugar.” Cole chuckled, and the two men’s eyes met. Camp coffee had been one of the few perks of the Crimean, and its status was legendary. “The stuff they serve in town, it tastes like muddy rainwater.” Cole placed his empty cup on the hearth. He looked at Gareth shyly and tried a small smile.

“I’d have to agree.” Some of his companion’s fear had receded, it was clear, and Gareth could see now how exhausted he was. “Cole, I could sure use some sleep. How are you feeling?”

“I’m tired,” the firewalker admitted slowly. “I should get on my way. There’ll be work to do at the firehouse, getting the bugs settled and supplies restocked. Perhaps
—”

“No.” Gareth cut him off. “Stay here tonight. Please? You’re hurt, and...”

Cole looked at him hard, lips pressed together, then sat back in his chair, exhaustion clearly winning. “It’s a long walk back to the station,” he said, nodding. “And there are memories there I’d prefer to leave for another day.” His voice softened. “Thanks.”

* * *

Gareth slept fitfully, as he did most nights, fighting against the soft sheets and sumptuous blankets clothing his bed. His mind was a continent and two decades away, where such luxuries were unheard of, idle fantasies to while away the days spent huddled in the frozen mud of the trenches.

He curled up tight against the cold dirt wall, turning his back on the screams of the horses, the dying cries of men he'd called friends, and the dragonbreath of the flamethrowers overlaying it all.

Gareth's younger, terrified self pulled his knees against his chest and wept, tears mingling with sweat and pooling in the goggles at the top of his gas mask. Standard issue, they were never far from anyone's reach, but it still came as a shock to be wearing it rather than hanging it from his belt on patrol, or tossing it into a pile with the others while he and his comrades played a few hands of cards. Against a chorus of unearthly whistles, slick tendrils of gas crawled around him, prying at the seal, sliding up his sleeves and down his collar, sticky on his skin. Gareth clutched at the rubber contraption, holding it hard against his face, his breath echoing unnaturally loud in his ears, adding to the cacophony.

Gareth moaned in his bed, watching his younger self recoil as one of his companions crawled along the trench toward him. He was powerless, both then and now,

to stop the wide wound that opened the man's belly like a smile, spilling his steaming intestines onto the ground for him to crawl over. Gareth sobbed as the doomed soldier clawed at his mask, close enough now for his anguished cries to be audible.

The mask popped off, and a shock of sweat-soaked blond hair appeared—the face contorted with pain. Gareth's dream self reached for him even as the other man collapsed, bleeding and retching in his arms. Unbound by dream logic, the ace of spades appeared in midair, floating slowly down to settle on the bottom of the cracked, frozen trench.

The soldier opened his eyes, and Gareth sat up in bed with a shout.

He panted as the dream dissolved in stages until it finally resolved into his room in the New Eddington town house, twenty years away from the demons that pursued him. Kicking the sweat-soaked sheets from his legs, Gareth fought against the visions that pursued him to the present. Shaking, he set both feet on the lushly carpeted floor, tracing the pattern of vines woven there, his standard cure for the night visions.

Then he realized the screams hadn't stopped.

Gareth turned his head sharply, tuning in to the here and now. *Cole*.

He came out of bed in a second, threw his bedroom

door wide, and crossed the narrow hallway to the guestroom. He didn't bother knocking.

Cole thrashed in the wide, full bed just as Gareth had. Without hesitation, Gareth ran to the soldier's bedside, reaching for him, knowing those anguished cries like he knew his own heartbeat. His hand landed on Cole's shoulder, and Gareth felt muscles contract. He ducked, just in time for Cole's swung fist to go wide, then pulled him close, whispering into his skin. He rocked the both of them, riding out Cole's confused, instinctual violence.

Gradually, Cole stilled, his muscles going slack, his breathing slowing against Gareth's chest. They sat together, rocking gently in the night, the soft, asynchronous exhalations of the gaslamps the only noise besides their combined breathing.

Gareth stared at the carpet, afraid to move. He sleeps with the lights on too, Gareth thought, continuing the gentle rocking, Cole warm and gradually heavier against him.

With Cole in his arms, Gareth ceased to hear the screams, the fire, the horses—all of it vanished, unimaginable while Cole's hands were soft on his arm, chin resting sharply in the hollow where Gareth's arm met his shoulder.

Minutes passed—thick post-midnight minutes—

until the air around them grew suddenly cold, bereft of all its previous meaning. Gareth raised his head off Cole's neck with a start, suddenly wondering how this must look to his guest: charging in, in the middle of the night, no warning, grabbing him.

"Thank you," Cole whispered.

Problem solved. Gareth didn't know what to say next; moreover, he didn't know if he should let go. The smell of shaving soap was stronger now, citrus and spice, and Gareth took a deep breath just as Cole gently pulled away.

"I'm sorry about this," Cole said. "It doesn't happen very often, but sometimes it's, uh, sometimes it's—"

"Yes," Gareth replied. "Sometimes it's exactly like that."

Cole met his eyes briefly, and an unspoken message passed between them. Cole pulled away until only their shoulders touched. Eventually it was Gareth who broke the silence. "I think I'll just..." He took a deep breath. "I'll just sleep on that settee—"

"No, Gareth, that's not—"

"No no, it's fine, it's—"

"I'm all right really—"

"No, it's nothing, it's..." Gareth broke off with a look at Cole's lined, worried face. Wild horses couldn't have

dragged him away, despite the awkwardness that had overtaken their earlier camaraderie. Gareth retreated quickly across the hall, then returned with a wool blanket tossed over one arm. He stood at the foot of the bed, captivated by the vulnerability in Cole's eyes. Wrenching his gaze away, Gareth threw the blanket on the blue velvet chaise longue, then sank down next to it, making a great show of settling in for the rest of the night. He lay back against the pillow, feeling the soft nap give where his skin made contact. His gaze returned to Cole.

They watched each other for a long moment; then Cole lay down. Gareth waited until the jaundiced yellow gaslight showed Cole's eyelids sinking closed, one last battle lost, before he relaxed.

Even then, sleep was slow in coming.

Three

When Gareth next awoke, it was with a shiver. One of the french doors opening onto the meager balcony was ajar, and the dawn had crept in to pry its fingers under his eyelids, cold and wind at its heels. Gareth pushed himself to a sitting position on the velvet chaise and blinked in confusion.

Cole was gone.

With an oath, Gareth sprang from the couch, fighting for alertness. Cole was in no shape to have gone anywhere; in his condition and with this weather, he wouldn't make it far. Gareth rang for Hindle, then loosed a string of obscenities when his manservant was slow to appear.

He ran down the stairs, the glossed wood stairs slick and hard beneath his woolen socks. Gareth had half-carried Cole up these same stairs only a few hours ago, the wounded firewalker leaning heavily against him, face lined with pain and exhaustion. Gareth remembered the faraway look in Cole's eyes as he had bandaged his

wounds. Gareth had seen that look on too many faces around him in the Crimea. It was a despair that had gone past fear and encountered only resignation. Roaring for his servant again, Gareth threw wide the doors of the garderobe standing in the entranceway and pulled on his black military boots out of panicked habit.

Hindle appeared at his side, blinking and dazed, shirt only half tucked into trousers, hair wild and sleep-matted. "Sir?" he managed, stifling a yawn.

"My greatcoat, Hindle. Where is it?"

Hindle scrubbed sleep from his eyes. "The...wool one? You were wearing last night?"

Gareth glared. "I have others? Dammit, this is an emergency. Where is it? Quick!"

At Hindle's shocked expression, Gareth felt a pang of regret. Taking a deep breath, he tried again. "Yes. My greatcoat. Please."

Hindle disappeared into the gloom of the ground floor corridor, and Gareth fought his mounting panic. Cole was a grown man, perfectly entitled to leave for his home or for the firehouse without Gareth's knowledge or permission, but he was injured, and the temperature was once again below freezing. Gareth tore into the mahogany wardrobe, but there was no suitable substitute for his coat. He debated going without, but in this weather, that would be suicide.

Hindle shuffled back down the corridor, the coat hanging over one arm. "But I haven't finished cleaning it. There's ashes and this sticky blue stuff and—"

"Thank you, Hindle," Gareth responded, shrugging into it with unseemly haste. "It's perfect as is." Gareth added a thick muffler and, with a final nod, shouldered through the heavy oak front door, springing down the steps without a backward glance. He had no idea where Cole lived or where he would have gone.

Gareth scanned the slumbering streetscape. To his right, he could make out the silent smokestacks of the quartz-rendering plant halfway down St. Paul Street. On his other side was the park—stark and lonely under General Beaufort's command. And straight ahead, the pale lemon sky bled crimson where it met the mountains on the other side of the vast and frozen lake. There was no sign of Cole.

Gareth shook his head, gazing at the dormant buildings squatting solid and silent along the quiet streets. He was almost confident the tired old soldier could take care of any trouble that came his way, but that was only half his worry. It was true New Eddington had its share of petty crime; yet despite rumors of strange tentacled beasts in the sewer pipes—the ignorant superstitions of a populace who feared the land they were invading—the most dangerous thing here was

the cold. *He's an adult; he can go wherever he wants.* Hell, this time yesterday, Gareth had never even met the man.

He had no idea why Cole meant so much to him, why this one veteran had gotten to him so quickly. He met hard-luck veterans all the time, begging in the streets or at the charity functions his publishing position demanded. *Why this one?*

Then he remembered Cole's scared blue eyes, his voice cracking as he called to Gareth from the overturned firebug, and had his answer.

A soft touch on his arm made Gareth jump. At his side, a tiny figure clothed entirely in rags jumped likewise.

"Theodore, don't do that. I've warned you about sneaking up on people."

His companion raised the tinted lenses shielding his goggles from the weak dawn light. Curious brown eyes blinked unsteadily. "Sorry," he said in a high, reedy voice. "It's just that I never know if you'll recognize me."

"You, Theodore? Trust me, you're one of a kind." Gareth pulled out his cigarette case, hoping a smoke would calm his sparking nerves.

Theodore tugged Gareth's sleeve, pulling him into the shadow of a nearby doorway, despite being the only two people out on the street. "Gareth, I have news!"

“You do?”

“Yes! Well—news and kind of a request. See, I’ve got this problem that I was hoping you’d—you’d give me a hand with?”

Gareth looked at Theodore not unkindly. “I’d love to, but I need to find this—”

“Wait!” Theodore waved his hands in consternation. “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. I-I really need your—I’m in some—well, it’s hard to explain.”

Gareth took a deep breath. He’d been friends with the eccentric inventor for a couple of years now, and he still couldn’t tell whether a request for help meant paying Theodore’s rent or serving as a test subject in one of his wilder experiments. Gareth had made that mistake exactly once, and sooner or later, he was sure, he’d get full feeling back in those toes. Still, Theodore never asked without good reason. He was secretive and a little paranoid, but Gareth firmly believed the little man was good at heart. Just incredibly difficult to understand most of the time, if not especially first thing in the morning while searching for a missing and injured houseguest.

A sharp wind whipped along St. Paul, straight up from the still-frozen lake, and despite being huddled in the shelter of the stoop, the two of them shivered in tandem.

The wind died away with a soft murmur, leaving the morning even colder than before. Gareth huddled back against the door. "I'll do it. What d'you need?"

All the breath whooshed out of the tiny inventor in a rush. "Thanks, Gareth. I really appreciate it. I really, really—I'm scared. I didn't know who else to turn to."

"What on earth have you gotten yourself into?"

"It's kind of a funny story. Oh! But by funny I mean, uh, sad and kind of scary—but I'm sure it'll be funny later. At least, I'm mostly sure. The odds point that way, certainly—it may be too early to tell."

Gareth took another long puff on his cigarette. Even though he was accustomed to the inventor's scattered way of speaking, this morning it was taking an effort of will for Gareth to stand and listen. Cole remained lost, and Gareth felt his absence like an ache.

"I'm just not sure what I'm being told is right. I think they maybe, maybe they just want the..."

"The what, Theodore?"

Theodore didn't answer. Instead, he scowled off in the direction of the park, then pulled the cigarette from between Gareth's lips and ground it underfoot.

Gareth frowned.

"Sssh!" Theodore sniffed the air like a bloodhound, then stared over Gareth's shoulder, back in the direction

of the town house.

Gareth turned to look. "What is it? What's wrong?" He saw nothing save wraiths of ice mist curling up from the sewer drains. "Theodore?" Gareth spun back around.

The skinny inventor was gone.

Gareth stared. There was no sign of his friend, nor whatever had spooked him. Gareth shook his head and pulled another cigarette from the sterling case, tapping the end sharply on the lid. Theodore had spent too much time huddled over his bubbling mixtures without the windows open, that was all. Gareth's thoughts returned to Cole: his wide blue eyes and the feel of him, shaking off his nightmare in Gareth's arms. Panic for his safety returned, and the cigarette dropped into the dirty slush at the foot of the steps, still unlit.

"Well, well, well. Looks like at the very least I'll be hanging a littering charge on one of New Eddington's upstanding citizens."

Gareth closed his eyes. That rough tar-and-whiskey voice could belong to only one person. Possibly the one person he didn't want to meet this morning. Or ever, if he could help it. Gareth plastered on a cordial smile and turned to greet its owner. "Lieutenant Kint, what brings you out on such a cold morning?"

Stubbly, wizened Lieutenant Inspector Archibald Kint, one of New Eddington's finest, stepped in close,

narrowing bloodshot eyes. "Oh you know me, Charles. I like to get an early start on catching all the maggot lowlifes infesting our fair colonies. Turns out I have to get up pretty damned early to catch 'em all."

"Doesn't explain what you're doing here."

"Oh it doesn't? Tell me, Charles, where were you yesterday, between the hours of, say, four and six p.m., when the explosive charges were being oh so carefully placed all over the library?"

Gareth fought to stay calm. "Who's asking?"

"Just interested, is all. Your name crops up a mighty lot in connection with these arsons, and that makes a man like me take an interest, you understand?"

"I should hope it does. I'm a newspaperman. Where there's a story, you'll find me right behind."

"Let me tell you 'bout the story I'm working on right now. It concerns a certain newspaperman who seems to know more than he prints and consistently fails to share that information with the righteous, upstanding police forces. I think you're hiding something, and I'm not about to let you get away with it. Policing in the colonies is more than catching miscreants in the act. It's also about finding potential sources of information that get those miscreants before they act."

"You're calling me a miscreant, Lieutenant? I should bring you up before Judge Barrington for libel."

Kint snatched a fistful of the greatcoat's collar, dropped a calloused hand on Gareth's wrist, and twisted it smartly behind his back. "All right Mr. Charles, let's see how funny you feel like being over at city hall."

Gareth struggled free from Kint's grip and held his hands up in surrender. "Look, Lieutenant, we're both on the same side here. A little faith, please."

"My faith tells me you're up to your fine and fancy collar in this mess, and not telling half the things you know. Give me one good reason I shouldn't haul you in. I've a feeling some time in a cell alone with a portrait of the king might bring you to your senses."

Gareth knew part of that statement was true: there was no way he could tell Kint even a quarter of what he'd been up to the past few weeks and expect to stay a free man. But if he was taken down to city hall this morning, he knew the other half would hold true: he'd be locked up at Kint's mercy, and Cole might be lost to him forever. Gareth tried a different track. "Can we not work together on these arsons? Play with open hands in front of us on the table?"

"I'm not a gambling man. And besides, from what I've heard, you gamble too often and well. I'm not about to share my cards with a disreputable snipe like yourself. Now, we can do this just one way and that's mine. Where were you between the hours of four and six p.m.?"

“Working on the pedal mechanism for the rollers. The chain had rusted out, and it was only a matter of time before that link snapped and took out my whole operation. If it went with a press run on it, someone could’ve been killed.”

Kint’s eyes flashed with anger. “Spare me the Good Samaritan routine; someone was killed! A custodian, man by the name of Gilman. He left a wife and three children, all under the age of six. Whyn’t you try explaining to them all about your precious rollers?”

Gareth felt sick. That was two men dead, then: Gilman and the unlucky firewalker. Livingston—that was what Cole had said his name was. The memory of Cole’s near escape flashed over Gareth in a rush. So much needless death, and he was still no closer to finding out the truth, despite his investigations and the anonymous “help” he was beginning to think was anything but. “Ridley, my typesetter, helped me with the repairs. He’ll vouch for me.”

“I’ll just bet he will, Charles. I’ll just bet he will.”

Gareth’s temper flared. “Oh come on! Surely not every man in New Eddington is in league with me against you! Even you must admit a conspiracy like that is beyond imagining!”

“Funny, then, the way I keep imagining it.” Kint stepped closer, and his gravelly voice dropped to a growl.

“The way I see it, a man like you has the money and the influence to make any man in the city do his bidding. Every man has his price, and I’ll just bet you know how much it costs to buy an alibi.”

“You’re wrong. Not every man has a price. Not everything can be bought. What if I was to tell you—” Gareth cursed his tongue to stillness, regretting once again the temper that had loosened it.

“I’m guessing I’d like it very much if you were to start telling me things. In fact, feel free to start right away.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Kint scruffed him again, this time slamming him back against the rough brick of his town house. “For what? To set a few more fires? To buy a few more alibis? Tell me, damn it! Two men are dead!” The lieutenant inspector’s strength belied his age, and he shook Gareth like a rat.

“Kint, you have my word, as a gentlem—as a man who’s seen enough death in the Crimean to last a lifetime, you have my word that if I knew anything that could be of use to you, I’d tell it.”

Kint’s lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl, but he held Gareth still, as if deciding. Gareth struggled to breathe, crushed against the stones. He’d spoken true; there was no way he could voice his suspicions about the

arsons to Kint and not get them both in a great deal of danger. More danger, possibly, than that posed by the basement of city hall.

“You know what, Charles? I believe you,” Kint said finally. “But only ’cause you’re too stupid to find out anything I couldn’t read in that so-called broadsheet of yours. ’Course, that changes, I’d better see you march into city hall in full colonial army regalia, ready to sing the anthem, recite the pledge of the Reformation, and tell me absolutely everything, starting with the day you were born, you hear me?”

Gareth met Kint’s gaze steadily. “You have my word. If there is anything I could do to stop these fires—”

“Then I’d be the first one to know, right? Even before your precious readers.” The lieutenant collected himself and released his grip on the collar of the greatcoat, with quick glances in either direction along the street.

Gareth straightened his coat and pushed himself away from the wall. “Got it, sir.”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me, Charles. Save it for the officers.”

Gareth sketched something like a grin and made to turn away, back in the direction of his town house.

“Oh, and Charles?”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“You wouldn’t happen to know the location of a certain Thomas Cole, would you?” Kint waited expectantly.

Gareth fought to remain calm. “Who?”

“Thomas Cole. Goes by Cole. That firewalker you rescued last night. They’re looking for him for questioning. Standard procedure in the case of a blown bug. I guess the geniuses who build those things think they can learn something from the ones who have ’em go down in action.”

“Funny. Don’t think they’ll learn much from Livingston. Why don’t they ask before the bugs blow up?”

“I’m just a poor civil servant like yourself, doing my duty.”

Gareth forced himself to nod.

“Now, about this Cole. Any ideas? Last time anybody saw him, the two of you were headed down the hill toward the lake.”

Gareth’s heart hammered in his chest. “He, uh, he disappeared on me. A firm handshake and then he slipped into the darkness and away.” *At least that much was true.* “I haven’t the first idea where to find him.” An unnameable ache swelled within him at the thought.

“That so?”

Gareth forced another nod.

“Guess I’ll just have to keep looking, then. Keep asking questions.” Kint paused. “You know how it is with firewalkers. You never know where they might turn up. Y’ever wonder what makes a man want to crawl inside one of those metal contraptions? I do. I wonder that a lot. And you know what I think, Charles?” Before Gareth could answer, he went on. “I think those men like fire. I think they like it a lot.”

Gareth didn’t have an answer for that.

“Be seeing you around, citizen.” Kint grinned, the seamed face crinkling into a rictus of a smile that went nowhere near his eyes. “Definitely be keeping my eye on you.” He pulled a coin from his pocket and tossed it in his hand. It caught the morning sun on each rotation. “Sooner or later, we’ll be having this conversation downtown.” He slapped a hand over the coin and leaned forward conspiratorially. Gareth fought the urge to lean away. “Even if you aren’t behind these fires, I’ll bet you know who is.”

“You said you weren’t a betting man.”

“Yeah, well. I lied.” Kint returned the coin to his pocket and, with a mock salute, headed across the street toward the park, in the direction of city hall. He stopped and leaned against a granite pillar at the park’s entrance. Waiting.

Gareth fought down a rising panic and turned his

feet in the direction of the *Chronicle*. *The trick now is to act like nothing's wrong.* Like he was, in fact, a newspaperman with a story to put out this morning and not like he'd dashed out the door desperate to locate the same man Kint was after.

Cole.

Feeling Kint's eyes on him, Gareth made himself turn resolutely up the hill in the direction of the paper. Even if he knew where to look for Cole, there was no way he'd chance landing his friend in the same dank city hall cell Kint had threatened him with. He truly wanted to help the lieutenant inspector, but in his heart, he couldn't overcome a deep-seated distrust of the government Kint represented, the one that had betrayed him and sixty thousand other soldiers on the frozen shores of the Black Sea, half a world away.

He'd be damned if he'd give that government Cole on a platter. No matter what the reason.

No matter if Cole turned out to be the firebug himself.

Hunched against the winter morning, Gareth headed up the side street to the *Chronicle's* offices. In case Kint still lurked in the shadows, he made himself stop by the Sino-Russian bakery on the corner, as was his wont. Today, though, as the plump and smiling proprietress handed over two bean-paste buns, all

Gareth could think was whether Cole had eaten yet that day, or if he would at all.

Cole, you're going to need to take care of yourself a little longer. Hang in there, friend.

With a heavy heart, Gareth resumed his journey up the hill.

* * *

The *Chronicle* was successful enough that it took up most of a two-story building high on the hill overlooking the lake. The ground floor was given over to Weatherwater and Sons—a marine insurance firm whose carriers seemed never to be in residence and hence seldom complained about the noise. The top floor was for the offices of the editorial staff and belowground were the presses.

Now, deep in the bowels of the *Chronicle's* production center, Gareth felt a twinge of uneasiness as he cast a practiced eye over the story in front of him. His lead reporter, Barlowe, had written an impassioned and exacting account of the library fire, as far as Gareth could tell, but unfortunately, his draft bore the telltale marks of a thorough vetting by the king's Minister for the People's Truth. Poor Barlowe must've been up all night reading each page into the wireless interrupt. And this was his reward.

Gareth could see under the obscuring black bars where Barlowe had tried to include mention of the dead firewalker. A full page was missing near the end, containing, Gareth assumed, the account of his rescue of Cole. All of it stamped with the black diamond under a crown, official seal of His Majesty, King of the Commonwealth and His Colonies.

Gareth knew only too well what would happen if he tried to thwart that seal. His predecessor at the *Chronicle* was never referred to by name, and all mention of him had been stricken from the official records both at the paper and down at city hall. Besides, Gareth had more to worry about than the gullibility of the people of New Eddington.

He scrawled his approval across the markup. Successfully negotiating the politics of the Reformist government was a game of greater skill and chance than even Fetch and Carry.

Gareth caught Ridley's eye and waved the story to print.

Ridley nodded in return and began pedaling on his perch, dropping the brass letters into their trays with practiced ease.

Gareth looked around the production center as his staff sprang into action, and clenched his jaw in frustration. He had no idea why there'd been a fire last

night; there wasn't one scheduled for another two days, and the library hadn't been mentioned as one of the targets. He was no closer to discovering the purpose of the fires, and in his mind, he kept hearing the anguished screams of Livingston, the dying firewalker. Now there was blood on Gareth's hands. Livingston's blood and very nearly Cole's too.

"I know, but he's just so handsome and dashing," said a young female voice nearby. "And Cole's at the age where a man must be thinking of a wife to warm his hearth."

Gareth looked up with interest.

Two of the roller girls stood shoulder to shoulder at their appointed station. The speaker had the high, songlike vowels characteristic of the rocky, desolate eastern counties, up in the mountains, and she and her friend were both stained finger to elbows with coal black ink.

"Hush your mouth," said the other girl. "Firewalkers don't live long enough to marry, let alone afford a hearth. You should be looking in the skilled trades. Someone like—"

"Like your Dennis, perhaps?" the first girl said teasingly.

"He's a fine lad, and he makes a good—"

"He's decent for a man, but he's no Thomas Cole, I'll

tell you that.”

The two of them paused in silence as the huge roller arced over the press toward them. As it swung slowly past, the first one held a tarp wet with ink along its length, and the second spun the roller on its bearing. After a few scant seconds, it swung away, leaving them to their gossip.

“I was talking to Laurent, you know—the redhead with the freckles? And he said Cole was wounded in the Crimea. Said he’d even been awarded the Crimson Heart for bravery due to things he did in some big battle or other, Kraska-some’t or other. Anyway, apparently he saved a whole battalion of men, carried them to safety in an icy pond with the Crimbles in hot pursuit, gas trumpets blaring. Hid them under the ice, then when the Crimbles came back a-calling, decoyed them away, getting blasted in the process.”

“Oh hush. La, he did. I’ll tell you what my Dennis did. Over at the bank one time, the vault door jammed like, and he put his shoulder to it and just in the nick of time, managed to pry it open for the night deposit. Think how many businesses he saved in just that one evening!”

Her friend tittered, light and high, while Gareth gripped the sides of his desk with inhuman fierceness. The Krasnodan Siege. Veterans, Gareth among them, had all heard tales of the cruelty of the Crimeans and

the sacrifices made by the colonials that day. The Black Army had taken them by surprise, rising up out of the hills, gas horns blaring. The colonials had lost close to five thousand men in just under three hours. For Cole to have been there, to have survived it... Gareth had no doubt the girl's story lay perilously close to the truth. He knew the man he'd pulled from the flames last night, the one who'd made sure Gareth knew Livingston's name before he'd allow himself to be helped to bed, burned and broken.

Gareth felt his stomach knot, vying for attention with the confusion in his brain. He stalked out of the room, fighting his way free of the too-moist air that signaled the press awakened from its slumber, ready to hiss out a stream of new words for the eagerly waiting, easily misled, masses.

I'm coming, Cole. I'll not rest till I find you. You'll not be alone any longer.

He stalked through the town for hours, refusing to give up. He stopped in at every tavern, every tiny hole-in-the-wall vendor he could think of. Well knowing he was on a fool's errand, Gareth kept at it as the weak sun crawled across the sky, headed out toward the lake and the forbidding purple mountains beyond it, ready to leave New Eddington to another night alone with its sins.

Gareth huddled deeper into his greatcoat as he headed down Butcher Street in the direction of the waterfront. The pier was farther north, closer to the shipyards, but he was headed in the opposite direction, to a secluded finger of land that jutted into the water. Undeveloped and largely ignored, it was Gareth's favorite place to collect his thoughts. He'd spent hours there, just staring out at the silvered surface of the lake, watching the gentle play of the whitecaps and the pale gray gulls gliding high above, calling to each other. He often wondered what they talked about, their calls sounding to his untrained ears like warnings or declarations of war.

His steps slowed as he approached the corner, crossing the ice-rimed cobblestones to where the quay disappeared, ceding dominance back to the wild land. In summer, the wild rosebushes down here were a riot of color, heavy perfume and bees—right up until all the hips and flowers were harvested by New Eddington's entreprenuring urchins. Now, in the heart of winter, they were simply a tangle of naked branches and thorns. Gareth picked his way carefully around them, watching his steps on the frozen mud. He found his way easily enough and took a deep breath, his eyes seeking solace from the water.

A lone figure huddled by the shore, shivering in a thin linen shirt.

Gareth's breath caught in his throat; then he ran.

He crossed the remaining distance in seconds and sank ungracefully down onto the mud next to Cole. He pulled him close, unmindful of the consequences. Cole's skin was frighteningly cold, coated with a thin sheen of ice wherever it had been exposed to the elements, and his eyes had a terrible, faraway look in them. Gareth shook him roughly. "Cole! How long have you been out here?"

Cole stirred slightly in Gareth's grip but didn't answer.

Gareth felt for a heartbeat at his wrist. Impossibly, it remained strong but slow. The damned old soldier was too tough to die from the elements alone. Gareth chafed Cole's wrists, then covered the slender hands with his own. There were deep pockets of white on the pads of Cole's fingers where frostbite had started to take hold. Gareth gently tugged Cole's chin until his companion faced him. "Cole, you can't do this!"

There was no response.

Gareth registered the too-pale lips and bruised hollows of Cole's eyes, the angry red of his ears where the cold day had pinched them. He tried again. "Cole," Gareth said more calmly, "you can't do this to me."

The fragile moment hung between them like a coin on a silk thread. At his back, Gareth heard the lake speak words of encouragement, the ice cracking hollowly.

He didn't dare take his gaze off Cole.

At last, Cole seemed to collect himself, focusing on Gareth, his eyes asking questions they both wanted answered.

Gareth grinned sardonically. "Welcome back, soldier."

Cole started to respond but was overtaken by shivering. Gareth tugged him to his feet and half carried him back from the water's edge, up to where a stand of trees stood sentinel against the shoreline. Cole leaned hard into Gareth, and when Gareth stopped to offer his greatcoat, Cole collapsed onto the gritty sand.

He tugged Cole back upright and pulled him toward a huge maple. The trunk was easily a foot around, and a profusion of bare, twisted branches extended in all directions. Gareth leaned against its massive trunk and unbuttoned his greatcoat awkwardly, one arm still around Cole's waist. He pulled Cole inside the garment, pulled him flush against his own warm body beneath. Cole's mouth opened, but no words came out. Gareth stopped, waiting. Cole lowered his gaze, then slid his freezing arms around Gareth's solid body. With difficulty, Gareth refastened the buttons around both of them, Cole sliding closer against and around him, to make the job easier.

A gust of wind sprang up suddenly, racing across

the lake to poke and pry at them. Cole shivered, and Gareth tightened his grip. "I've got you," he said softly. "Relax. I've got you."

Cole did just that, softening into Gareth's embrace, his breath becoming deep and slow. He opened his eyes and met Gareth's inquiring look with a pleased half smile. The two of them stood against the tree, listening to nightfall, living in each other's gaze, recognizing the connection between them. Two weary veterans each in search of what they saw in the other, needing the shelter of each other from the world. Decades of understanding passed between them.

And as warmth slowly flowed from Gareth's body to Cole's, a different fire was lit in both. Cole tilted his head and pressed his lips surely against Gareth's—the kiss certain and filled with need.

Gareth realized he had wanted nothing in his life so badly as the feel of Cole's mouth on his, the bruising, sweet pressure of Cole's lips, Cole's tongue seeking and gaining entrance. Gareth kissed him back hard, all the places their bodies touched aflame with desire. Cole's response was vigorous and thorough until the two of them broke for air, chests heaving against one another.

Gareth smiled and stole a soft follow-up kiss, not wanting to give up any of the closeness they'd found, and Cole silently echoed the emotion. They nuzzled each

other gently, sheltered by the tree's spread boughs.

Eventually, Gareth broke the silence. "Feeling better?"

Cole laughed. "Like all the gold in Fort Brixby."

Stealing a look around, Gareth said, "We should probably take this somewhere else. New Eddington's not the safest place at night, to start with."

Cole nodded. "Ever feel like you're being watched?"

"All the time, friend. All the time. Now, though, now I've got something to hide. You better plan on sticking around."

The smile in Cole's eyes was answer enough. Gareth stole one last kiss, and then he and Cole began the arduous but entirely pleasurable process of detangling themselves from the greatcoat.

The two of them made their way back along the deserted waterfront, huddled together at shoulder and hip, hunched in close against the darkness that had fallen around them. The night was crisp, and the infrequent gusts of wind still whispered of the coming snowstorm.

A few blocks from the lake, the sky finally opened, sending down a gentle flurry of soft, fat snowflakes that melted nearly as soon as they hit the ground. Cole wore the greatcoat, still trying to warm up. Gareth would

swear later he'd never felt warmer in simple shirtsleeves, woolens, and trousers.

Four

Gareth's town house sat at the end of its row on the corner of Bank and Baker Streets, halfway up the hill. The buildings here were fairly modern by colonial standards, perching at the edge of the park, overlooking General Beaufort's eternally thwarted charge toward the lake. A reminder that New Eddington had been established by force, not by treaty. Gareth pulled the long brass front door key from his coat pocket and resisted the urge to kiss Cole again. But he did take the opportunity to lean in close, savoring the feel of Cole's lean body against him, the shivers dying away. Cole smiled in the dim light, and Gareth felt his heart leap in response.

The door opened before Gareth had a chance to get the key in the lock. Hindle stood aside with a deferential nod, but his eyes remained watchful.

Gareth eyed his servant with disfavor. Right now, the last thing he wanted was attentive staff. Hindle stepped toward Cole, but Gareth preempted him with an

upraised hand. "Mr. Cole has met with an accident," he said crisply. "Have a bath prepared, then fetch two bowls of broth with bread and bring them up to the guest bedchamber."

"Yes, sir." Hindle departed at speed.

Gareth turned back to Cole. "You'll come upstairs?" he asked. An unfamiliar heat warmed his cheeks.

"Thank you," Cole said, nodding. Even though they were inside, he still stood huddled and shivering inside the greatcoat.

Arm around Cole's shoulders, Gareth guided him up the stairs and into the guest bedroom, then helped him out of the thick coat. Cole's skin was still cold to the touch, and Gareth looked at him in concern. "My God, man, how long were you out there?"

"I walked some." Cole shrugged in response, and Gareth had to look away from the pain and confusion in Cole's eyes.

They were interrupted by Hindle's knock announcing the readiness of the bath. Gareth dismissed the servant and ushered Cole to the bathroom himself.

A steam-powered geyser burbled quietly to itself in the corner, ready to provide hot water at the turn of a tap. Steam and the aroma of witch hazel rose from the huge enameled bath. A thick towel, a nightshirt, and a padded robe hung on an iron stand beside the tub.

Gareth turned to Cole. "Take your shirt off. Let me see that cut I bandaged for you yesterday."

Cole unbuttoned the stained linen shirt, his eyes on Gareth.

Gareth stepped close and raised a hand to Cole's face, shivering with desire.

The chill of Cole's skin recalled Gareth's attention to the matter at hand, and he forced himself to look away. He slowly unwound the bandage from around the old soldier's torso.

The cut underneath looked clean, and Gareth exhaled with relief. "The witch hazel might sting a little," he said, looking at the bath, "but it'll do good."

"Thank you." Cole started unbuttoning his pants. As he slid the waistband down his hips, a band of scar tissue came into view, wrapping around one of his slim hips.

Gareth caught his breath.

"Sir!" Hindle's voice came plaintively from the corridor, accompanied by a sharp rap on the door.

Gareth cursed under his breath. He caught the rueful edge of a smile on Cole's lips before he turned to answer the door. "Hindle! What on earth is the matter?" With a backward glance at Cole, Gareth slipped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

Hindle stood in the gaslit hallway looking uneasy. "This came for you, sir, and the boy that brought it said it was important. Matter of life and death." He proffered a small package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Frowning, Gareth took the packet. It was tied with frayed and dirty string, and the salutation was inscribed in smudged pencil. *Captain Charles, Esquire. Private, Confidential, and Urgent*, the spiderish copperplate proclaimed.

"Who brought this?" Gareth snapped. Unlike many, he refused to use his military title in civilian life. His rank had begun and ended with the men he'd commanded in battle. There was no place for it in the drawing rooms of the gentry.

Hindle stepped back, regarding his master warily. "Uh, some unwashed child, sir. I-I didn't pay attention."

"Never mind." Gareth waved a hand in irritated dismissal. "Bring the soup and then retire for the evening. Don't disturb me again until morning, yes?"

"Yes, sir!" Hindle saluted smartly and marched quickly down the hall.

With a shake of his head, Gareth headed for the master bedroom. He slit the package with his penknife and spilled the contents out onto his dresser. Three iron spheres rolled out, each the diameter of a thumbnail. Gareth put out a hand to stop them rolling off the edge of

the dresser—then withdrew it in amazement. Seemingly of their own volition, each ball stopped its progress toward the dresser edge, instead rolling in a small circle. Gradually, their paths converged until all three came together and slowed to a halt.

Gareth looked at the balls in disbelief. Were they magnets? He looked back at the wrapping and saw a note tucked inside.

Gareth, I had to leave you today, but I still need your help. I have discovered something vital, and I may be in danger. What I have sent you is in the way of evidence. Don't worry; it cannot be traced and is not dangerous in its current form. Please place it in your safe for me, and burn this letter.

Visit me in the laboratory tomorrow if you would be so kind.

Theodore.

Gareth groaned. Trust Theodore to involve him in a cloak-and-dagger plot now of all times. He tossed the letter into the fire and gingerly picked up the three iron balls. Surely he was imagining the slight vibration of the trio in his hand. Surely. A long day and, hopefully, a longer evening, he thought with a hurried glance toward the door. Gareth knelt and pulled back one corner of the luxurious, patterned carpet, revealing a safe recessed into the floorboards. He opened it and pushed the

unnerving balls into the farthest corner, then returned the carpet to its place.

Back out in the hallway, Gareth hesitated, standing uncertainly outside the bathroom door. He swallowed hard, imagining Cole's naked body in the warm water, muscles wet and glossy in the gaslight. It took an effort to turn away. Cole needed the bath, needed time sitting in the warm water to counteract the effects of his lengthy exposure to the elements. Gareth turned away and went downstairs to fetch the medical kit from his study. Cole's wound would need rebandaging soon.

Medical kit under his arm, Gareth entered the guestroom. He nodded in approval at the two bowls of steaming soup—mutton, by the smell of it—and the plate of crusty bread laid out on a tray on the side table.

Gareth stowed the medical kit in the nightstand. The bed was already turned down, but he fluffed the pillows anyway, then respread the feather comforter with care. He hesitated, then dashed back across the hallway to the master bedroom and took the comforter from the foot of his bed. Cole's need of warmth was greater than his own.

He laid the second comforter on the bed and jumped at a voice from behind him. "You don't need to go to so much trouble."

Gareth spun around. Cole stood in the doorway,

wearing the padded robe. His hair, wet and tousled, clung to his forehead.

“I didn’t hear you,” Gareth said. His heart rate slowly returned to normal. “And this is no trouble. None at all.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Guess I’ve just gotten used to being quiet.”

Gareth took his arm. “You just surprised me, that’s all. It’s me. I’m not used to having company.” Gareth met the frank, teasing look in Cole’s eyes and looked down, finding ease in the intricate patterns woven in the carpet. “Now, please, eat.”

Cole hesitated again, looking into Gareth’s eyes.

“Please,” Gareth repeated quietly.

Cole smiled. “Thanks.” He allowed Gareth to draw him to the wing chair next to the fireplace and accepted the tray of food. After the first tentative sip, he drank the soup hungrily.

Gareth picked up a piece of bread and took a small bite, more satisfied by watching Cole eat. The firewalker had stopped shivering but was applying himself to the soup as though it was the first meal he’d had in days.

When Cole laid down his spoon, Gareth picked up the empty bowl and wordlessly replaced it with his own, untouched.

Cole looked at him in surprise. "I can't eat your supper."

"This is all I need." Gareth held up the bread in his hand. "How long since you ate?"

Cole colored. "I had a meat pie yesterday."

"Eat the soup," Gareth said firmly. He picked up another piece of bread. The meat pies sold on the streets of New Eddington were small, stodgy lumps containing only gristle and watery gravy. The pastry resembled cardboard. He sat on the blue chaise longue at the end of the bed and consumed his bread in small, well-chewed bites.

Cole looked at him for a minute, expression unreadable, then picked up his spoon. "It is very good broth."

By the time he'd finished the second bowl of soup, Cole's eyes were heavy. He stood and took a step toward the bed but wavered unsteadily.

Gareth leaped up, caught him before he fell, and half carried him to the bed. He helped him out of the borrowed robe and tried not to stare at the lean, defined body beneath. The scar he'd noticed earlier was much larger than he'd thought, a band of puckered white skin, well healed but still starkly noticeable, running down around one hip, stretching toward Cole's groin.

"Thanks," Cole murmured. He blinked slowly, gaze

unfocused.

Gareth pulled the covers close around him, then sat down on the bed and took the old soldier's hand. He warmed it between his own. He'd seen this reaction before in soldiers during a hard campaign. For Cole, the day in the freezing temperatures on top of last night's ordeal in the fallen firebug had been too much. Now warmed and fed, his body needed to rest.

When Cole's eyes finally closed, Gareth folded the hand he'd been holding underneath the covers. He tucked the comforter closely around Cole's neck and got stiffly to his feet. He turned the gaslights down to a dim glow. "I won't leave you in the dark, friend. Count on that." He picked the tray up off the side table and removed it to the hallway. Hindle could collect it from there in the morning. There was no use letting his fool servant bother Cole.

A muffled utterance recalled him to the room. Unsure, Gareth lingered in the doorway, staring at the lump under the comforters, topped with a shock of still-damp hair, darker under the gaslights than it had seemed by the lake. The day had been long, and the bed, for its company, was especially enticing. Still, Gareth hesitated. "Cole?"

The comforters shifted, and Cole sat up, his bare chest catching the light. "I said," he announced sleepily,

“that I appear to have brought the winter into your house with me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Gareth tried not to stare at Cole’s body. “I can bring another blanket and a warming pan.”

Cole sagged a little, and Gareth saw fatigue overtake his playful facade. “Come lie next to me,” he said softly. “Gareth, please.”

Gareth needed no real urging. He stepped quickly back inside the room and closed the carved oak door firmly behind him. He struggled out of his outerwear on the way to the bed, longing for Cole in his arms.

He pulled back a corner of the bedclothes and slipped beneath, wearing only his woolens. Cole rolled tiredly into his arms, skin still warm from the bath, and Gareth twined their limbs until he was certain they could be no closer.

Cole murmured softly, and despite the warmth of bed, bath, and gaslight, minute shivers still shook his frame. Shock, Gareth thought in frustration. *He’s not of an age to spend the day despairing by the side of a frozen lake.* He placed a kiss in the hollow under Cole’s ear, letting his lips linger, pressing close against the skin. *May you never know this hardship again.*

Cole responded by twining his fingers through Gareth’s and guiding them to the spaces underneath his

ribs. Then it was Gareth's turn to murmur, a string of wordless syllables escaping from his lips at the feel of Cole's body against his. Here, in the warmth and safety of his home, in this wide, soft bed, the two of them could surely begin to explore what had arisen by the lakefront. Gareth pressed his groin closer against Cole's warm, bare buttocks.

The tension eased from Cole's body, and his fingers grew limp in Gareth's.

After a few seconds, he emitted a soft snore.

Gareth lay back against the pillow with a sigh.

* * *

Hours passed before either of them stirred again. The household had retired, and by dint of squinting at the owl-shaped clock mounted above the wardrobe, Gareth could just make out the time: *1:00 a.m.* Cole stretched in Gareth's arms, then rolled over until the two men were facing each other, still comfortably entwined. *And all's well.*

Cole blinked sleepily in the dim light, but a glint in his eyes betrayed his waking enthusiasm.

Gareth opened his mouth to speak but stopped when Cole leaned in and kissed him, slow and light at first but with a quickly growing intensity. Gareth hadn't imagined the sweet hunger he'd tasted earlier, and as

Cole's tongue became more clever and bold, he moaned again, cock filling against his thigh. Cole's cock twitched in response, and it was as if something inside Cole was loosed and set free between them.

He thrust his groin rhythmically against Gareth, and his kiss became fiercer, hot with need. Gareth allowed his hands to ghost down Cole's back, fingertips lightly brushing the scar at his hip. Then Cole raised up just enough to slip his own hand between them, urgent and questing. He found an opening in Gareth's woolens and fumbled with the button there before widening the opening and pushing his hand inside.

Gareth gasped as Cole's hand unerringly found his throbbing cock, running his fingers along the length, exploring and teasing his way from head to root. Gareth shivered at the feel of Cole's hand on his bare skin. It had been so long since Gareth had allowed someone to touch him this way.

Gareth arched against Cole, need building at the base of his spine and rolling through his body in waves. He ran his hands up Cole's back, avoiding the healing cut, feeling muscles taut and strong under his hands.

Cole groaned and tore at Gareth's woolens, widening the opening until it ran the full length of Gareth's torso, baring his skin. The two men parted just long enough for Gareth to slip his arms out of the

sleeves, and Cole helped tug the garment down off his hips and legs until Gareth too, lay bare against the sheets.

Cole grinned appreciatively and rolled back on top of him.

Gareth panted desperately at the feel of skin on skin, at having Cole in his arms with no boundaries between them. Cole's mouth on Gareth's was lewd and knowing, and his kisses grew ever wilder with each movement of his hips.

Gareth managed to get a hand between them, exploring until his fingers encountered Cole's thick pubic bush and the hot, thrusting cock below.

Cole whimpered, and Gareth felt precum slick the pad of his thumb. He slid his hand down over the proud crest, exploring the thickly veined shaft and savoring the helpless whimper Cole made against the side of Gareth's neck.

Cole thrust into Gareth's hand, and Gareth guided Cole's body over his, angling his own cock into the action. He grunted as Cole's hand found him again, cradling him, before setting a fierce pace.

Their hands bumped a few times before their cocks aligned, sliding over and against each other. Cole thrust against him at a fierce and desperate pace, but Gareth matched it stroke for stroke, panting into each

movement. The heat of Cole's body, the soft sound of his uneven breathing, and most of all the pleasurable agony of Cole's hand and cock against him was too much, and Gareth knew he couldn't hold on.

With a muffled sob, he bucked hard against Cole and felt a spurt of heat over his hand and stomach.

Cole's grunt of pleasure followed in his ears, and the blond collapsed on Gareth's chest, panting.

Gareth searched for words, wanting to speak but not knowing what he wanted to say. He lay beneath Cole for a while longer, struggling for breath. "Feeling any warmer?" he asked finally.

Cole chuckled. "I fear I may survive after all." He raised his head off Gareth's chest, blue eyes gleaming softly in the dim light. "That felt so damned good." All teasing had gone from his voice.

Gareth managed a nod, then pulled Cole back down for another kiss, sweet and lingering this time. He knew, finally, what he'd wanted to say, what he'd wanted to ask Cole, but now the words had appeared, he didn't want to break the kiss to let them out, to risk this fragile, fleeting moment.

Cole's kisses grew slower and more gentle until, with the words still unsaid on his tongue, Gareth toppled into an exhausted slumber. Stay this time, he thought. Please. Stay forever.

When Gareth next awoke, the pale light of dawn was creeping through the chinks in the curtains, turning the gaslight yellow. He blinked in surprise. A dreamless night was, for him, a rare and pleasant occurrence.

Cole still rested on his chest, his body warm and welcome against Gareth's.

Gareth smiled to himself, thinking of the night and what they'd shared. How right it had felt. How his troubles with the fires, the notes, Kint's scrutiny—how far away it all felt when Cole was in his arms. Slowly, almost shyly, he ran his hands over Cole's back. Through the wall, he could hear the muted sounds of his household waking up: Hindle's tuneless whistle down the hall and the lyrical burble of the steam boiler firing up the heating pipes. Tradesmen's singsong cries were carried on the same gusting wind that caused the balcony door to rattle.

Cole tensed and lifted his head, wary eyes going to the door.

"Easy, friend," Gareth murmured softly. His hand soothed Cole's shoulders in recognition: sleep anywhere but stay alert; filter out the harmless sounds but come awake in an instant at the sound of any threat. "It's just the wind."

“Huh.” Cole lowered his head slowly, then hissed through his teeth, freezing.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” Cole cautiously moved to sit up. “I hope this hasn’t started bleeding again.” He craned his neck, trying to see the cut on his side.

“No.” Gareth looked at it carefully, then gently traced the red line across Cole’s ribs. Low down, he felt a hot patch of skin. “There might be a little infection starting here,” he warned and sat up in turn. “Let me get it covered for you again, all right?”

“All right,” Cole agreed. He lay back down, and Gareth reached into the ornate nightstand for the medical kit. The scratch looked dry and clean, but Gareth washed it with ether again to be on the safe side. The heat he’d felt was where the cut went deepest, at the very edge of Cole’s ribs. Cole hissed again, and Gareth peered closely at the cut, plying the ether thoroughly. Another good dose of the antiseptic now would hopefully hold any possible infection at bay. He soaked another rag in ether, folded it into a pad, and bandaged it in place over the cut. Raising his head, he found Cole watching him, a half smile on his face, a question in his eyes.

“What?” Gareth asked softly, smiling back.

“You’re taking a lot of trouble for a no-account old soldier,” Cole replied. “I appreciate it.”

Gareth shook his head. "I'm just a no-account old soldier myself. It's no trouble." He watched the smile take hold in Cole's eyes, then slowly leaned forward. Gareth kissed Cole gently, letting his eyes close and falling into the sensation of the other man's mouth, hot and eager and inviting. He let Cole pull him down to the bed.

Cole bit gently at Gareth's lower lip as Gareth slid his hands down over warm, bare skin, avoiding Cole's newly bandaged cut. Cole moaned and parted his legs as Gareth ran a hand lightly over his swollen cock. Gareth took his time. He cradled Cole's length, stroking him gently, watching each reaction to his touch. Gareth caressed the spongy tip and in the next breath felt the slick silk of precum beneath his fingers. He traced it upward along the slit. Cole gave a strangled whimper and spread his legs wider as Gareth cupped his sac, rolling the firm mounds between his fingers. "Gareth," he whimpered, and rolled his hips back.

Sitting up a little, Gareth slid his other hand down the inside of Cole's thigh. Cole moaned and drew his legs up, baring his cleft and entrance.

Gareth's cock, already hard, twitched heavily against his thigh. Cautiously, watching Cole's face, he eased a probing finger down below his balls.

Cole closed his eyes and moaned. Gareth felt the tightness of the ring of muscle beneath his finger and

moaned in return.

With his other hand, Gareth fumbled in the medical kit, searching for the jar of coconut oil he kept there. More of a cream than an oil, it was ostensibly for treating his occasional leg cramps. It was efficacious against the cramp, but the real reason Gareth kept a stock of the exotic potion was because of its lubricating properties.

Gareth scooped up a gob of oily cream and rubbed it over Cole's hole. Cole moaned again, drawing his knees up higher. About to reach back into the jar for more lube, Gareth had to stop, gripping the base of his cock, forcing his load back.

When he'd regained control, he dunked his fingers in the jar again and crawled between Cole's legs. "Please, Gareth," Cole groaned, half opening his eyes. "Please."

Gareth pushed back, circling his finger in the slippery oil, not seeking entrance yet. He groaned in anticipation as Cole's hole spasmed under his touch.

Cole's cock was full against his belly, the crown dark with his pulsing blood. Gareth lowered his head, inhaling Cole's musk, then took Cole in his hand.

Cole gasped as Gareth tasted him, tongue sliding around his ridge. As he mouthed Cole, Gareth pushed gently at the center of his hole. The tip of his middle finger slid in without resistance, and he eased it slowly in and out.

Cole panted softly with desire, then rolled his hips back farther, drawing Gareth deeper. Gareth groaned, the heat of Cole around his finger intoxicatingly good. Nearly as good as the hot cock under his tongue. Holding Cole steady, Gareth took the whole head in his mouth as he pressed the finger of his other hand deeper.

Cole yelped and jerked as Gareth's finger found his pleasure spot, thrusting into Gareth's mouth. Gareth rubbed the place, Cole's sobs of pleasure echoing in the tingling down his spine. Gareth took him deep and added a second finger.

Cole whined wordlessly and Gareth pushed forward, in deep, thrusting into him with his fingers. Cole bucked again as Gareth hit his prostate.

Gareth turned his fingers, working Cole's entrance. Cole moaned, and Gareth raised his head, panting with desire. The tight, slick grip of Cole's passage on his fingers was nearly overwhelming, yet he knew he wanted more. Much more. He slid his fingers out and, with one hand, guided his throbbing cock to Cole's entrance.

Cole gasped as Gareth pressed his cock against him. Eyes closed, he flung his head back on the pillow as Gareth passed his ring, slowly sliding deeper.

Gareth eased in, watching Cole's face. The effort it took to go slowly sent hot and cold needles racing up and down Gareth's spine. Cole shuddered helplessly,

whimpering, and Gareth was drawn in deeper. He groaned and finally let go, letting himself fall until his body was pressed against Cole's.

"Cole," Gareth whispered. He claimed Cole's mouth, hard and sudden, and felt Cole's hands grip his hips as he started to move.

Gareth groaned, the movement of Cole around him sending him to the edge in seconds. He moved more slowly, longer strokes, holding back, fighting for control. It had been so long, and Cole was so perfect beneath him. He kissed Cole's neck, feeling Cole's lips against his cheek. "Gareth," Cole whispered. "Gareth, oh yes." Gareth found Cole's mouth, kissing him long, lightly, nearly losing himself in the softness of his lips and the sweet flicker of his tongue.

Gareth rocked his hips, hardly moving inside Cole now, reveling in the perfection of the moment. Cole closed his arms around him, moaning softly in his ear, moving his hips in time with Gareth's gentle thrusts.

Cole touched Gareth's cheek, then kissed him again, hard this time, and Gareth tasted his own years of loneliness and longing in the hungry urgency of Cole's mouth. He sped up his stroke as Cole writhed underneath him, driving him faster, asking for more.

Hands hard and desperate on Gareth's back, Cole rolled his hips up, and Gareth moaned as he felt his

passage contract around him. His balls throbbed, tightening as his load rose.

Gareth thrust harder, helplessly, given over to pleasure. His orgasm washed over him in waves, blinding and intense, leaving him shaking and helpless on Cole's chest. He whimpered softly.

Cole's hands clawed Gareth's back; then he felt the hot wet warmth of Cole's juice sandwiched between them. "Cole..."

Cole moved beneath him, stretching, and Gareth shuddered as his softening cock slid free. He raised his head enough to drop a light kiss on Cole's lips. Cole grinned, and Gareth felt something flutter deep inside him. Something he'd thought was gone for good.

"You're—" Gareth stopped, choking off the words that meant too much. He hesitated. "You'll stay?"

"Yes." Cole's blue eyes were warm and sincere, with only a trace of wariness remaining. "I—" He broke off, and Gareth saw his own uncertainty mirrored in Cole's eyes.

"This feels good," Gareth said softly, suddenly finding words, his smile widening to a grin. "Cole, this is right."

Cole grinned back, relief flooding his eyes. "Yes. It is."

Five

Cole's worn and filthy clothing had been sent out to the laundry with the dawn, and as the two men sat for breakfast, he was clad in a pair of Gareth's fine wool pants and a linen shirt. He was taller and more lightly built than Gareth, and the drape of the unfamiliar clothing over his slim frame was tantalizing. Gareth licked his lips as he watched Cole hitch the trousers up over his thighs to sit. The old soldier chose the seat nearest Gareth, at his right hand, rather than facing him across the expanse of oak table. Gareth approved. He approved a lot.

To Gareth's relief, his guest seemed to be suffering no lingering effects from the previous day's exposure. As Cole helped himself to a small portion of kippers and bread, Gareth fought the urge to add more to his plate, to feed him and fill out the angles he'd felt against him the previous evening. His cock rose at the memory, and Gareth squirmed, unaccustomed to the pull of need.

Cole caught his eye and scooped another smoked

fillet onto his plate. "I hope my...wanderings yesterday didn't cause you too much difficulty. I realize you must be a busy man."

"There was nothing on my plate more urgent than seeing to your needs. I'm simply glad I was fortunate enough to find you." Gareth watched Cole eat with gusto, and it filled him with satisfaction. "New Eddington's a difficult city to find someone if they truly wish to stay hidden. Especially in the winter, when the whole populace goes to ground."

Cole raised an eyebrow and wiped his mouth with the linen napkin at his place. "It's possible that I'm the gladder of us two. If you hadn't arrived when you did..."

Gareth hazarded stretching a hand across the table, letting his fingers graze Cole's.

Cole grinned and returned to his breakfast, attacking the fish as if they'd done him a personal injury. "I regret to say I allowed my melancholy to get the better of me. Although I can safely say it's been banished by your hospitality."

Gareth grinned back and picked up his coffee. "In that case, I encourage you to partake of as much of my hospitality as you can stand. It's had an invigorating effect on me as well and—" He faltered.

"Yes?"

Gareth took a long swallow of the hot coffee,

fortifying himself. *I'd like it if you'd stay*, he wanted to say. *For the rest of our lives*. Instead, he said, "Do you have any plans for the day?"

"I should return to the firehouse and see if my bug's been fixed, see if there's any help I can give. I promise you, though, I'll stay out of your way. You have no need to put off any further business on my account. Whatever plans you had, I urge you to keep. Unless...I can be of any assistance with them."

The moment drew out between them as Gareth struggled for an answer. He rose and refreshed Cole's coffee from the silver samovar in the middle of the table before pouring himself another cup he suddenly had no stomach for. Retaking his seat, Gareth said carefully, "I appreciate your offer, but I think we should be sure you've sustained no lasting injury. The cold here is a beast not to be trifled with lightly. Plus, that cut on your side could turn nasty if you don't rest and let it heal."

Cole finished his plate and aligned his utensils neatly in the center. "In your presence, Gareth, I feel neither cold nor pain. Simply a consciousness of my debt to you." He held up a hand as Gareth started to object. "Hear me out. Earlier...last night...and this morning, I know you noticed the marking on my person. Where Crimea sank its claws in and did its level best to end my existence."

"I make it a point," Gareth said slowly, "never to inquire about old wounds without invitation. You owe me no explanation."

"I owe you my life."

Gareth had no answer to that.

"I bring up the scar not just to assuage your curiosity, but also because I want you to know. I'll tell you anything. I have nothing to hide from you, Gareth. You're...you're unlike anyone I've ever met before, and I want to be a worthy companion to you. I want to help you with your burdens and thus lighten them. Every man needs his other half."

Gareth looked into Cole's eyes and longed to make a declaration in kind. He knew he'd fallen for Cole the minute he saw him across the card table. And for that reason alone, he couldn't drag the old soldier into his troubles with the arsons. Claspings Cole's hand more tightly, he said, "Every man has his secrets. I desire your company and hope one day I may be worthy of your honesty."

Hindle chose that moment to enter with a fresh platter of fish. The two of them sprang apart guiltily, and Cole snatched his hand back as Gareth jumped to his feet. "Hindle!" Gareth snapped to cover his confusion. "Has the mail come?"

"Yes, sir." The servant placed the platter on the

table. "And there's another package for you, like the one that came last night." He withdrew a thin, brown paper parcel from his vest and placed it on the table next to the fish.

"Package?" Gareth remembered the strange iron spheres Theodore had sent and groaned, waving a dismissive hand. "Oh, that's right. Now I remember." He saw a flash of curiosity in his manservant's eyes before professional disinterest chased it back into place. "If any further messages or packages arrive..." *Then what?* It seemed Gareth had no choice but to pay a visit to Theodore this very morning, before the inventor's gifts grew any stranger or his messages more desperate. Still, that would leave precious little time to arrange to meet his informant before prudent industry demanded he put in an appearance at the paper. Today of all days too, when all he wanted was to take Cole back upstairs, the two of them safe behind a thick oak door.

"Sir?"

Gareth curtailed his woolgathering with a start. Hindle's mask of courtesy was slipping again, and he was staring at Gareth a little too intently for comfort. "Then send word to the countess. Now leave us."

"Very good, sir." Hindle retreated from the room.

"What is it?" Cole asked, rising from the table.

"I fear it bodes trouble not for me but for a friend of

mine.” Gareth used a bread knife to slit the string holding the wrapping closed and carefully withdrew the contents. Inside, the package contained a creased and much-folded sheet of parchment and the small, stiff body of a dead mouse.

“Gareth.” Cole was at his elbow in an instant. “What joke is this? I confess I don’t like your friend’s sense of humor.”

“No joke, I fear, but an omen.” Gareth gingerly scooted the rodent’s corpse to the table’s edge and unfolded the paper. It was covered in strange and cryptic symbols, eerily familiar, and embellished with ink swirls and an official seal of some kind. “It’s in Crimean,” Gareth said wonderingly. “I don’t suppose you can read it?”

“Not well. But it looks like some type of government document. Look. Dates here and here”—Cole pointed, finger hovering above the page—“and these look like names. Annalinda, or Azalinda, maybe. The figures are smudged. And here, Zmolensky. A place, maybe, but... it’s been a long time since I saw letters like these.” He dropped his hand to his side. “What kind of trouble are you in? Please, tell me.”

Gareth shrugged, his gaze going from the page to the dead courier it had arrived with. “It’s from my friend Theodore. He’s mad as a box of frogs but otherwise

harmless and occasionally brilliant. There's usually a method to his madness, but I confess, in this case he's lost me entirely." He folded the page in thirds and used it to scoop the mouse back into the brown paper with only a cursory glance at the lifeless body. "He ambushed me yesterday, insisting he's in some kind of trouble. And last night he sent over a similar package, that time with iron globes that behaved very strangely."

"They behaved strangely? You speak of them as if they were alive."

"Nothing so far-fetched as that, but still. I fear I must go to Theodore and find out whether he's in as much trouble as he thinks he is or whether he's spent too long sniffing bubbling glass beakers."

Cole stepped closer, his shoulder bumping Gareth's. "I'll go with you."

Gareth closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the simple contact and something much more besides. "I can't ask that of you. That page, the one in Crimean. I'm afraid it means Theodore's troubles are all too real and as dangerous as he fears. You know as well as I do how the Reform feels about anything hinting at involvement with enemies of the commonwealth."

"Exactly. And that's why I want to be by your side while you investigate. You're not asking; I'm offering."

Gareth took a deep breath and stared down at the

intricately patterned carpet. His tongue felt nearly as twisted and tangled as the profusion of vines and branches woven into the fabric. "In that case, on our return we could go to your lodgings and pick up your things. You should stay—at least until your wound has healed." And then forever after that, Gareth mentally amended.

"Or at least until we determine that your mad friend's troubles will not become your own." Cole's voice grew soft. "But I don't want to impose on your hospitality. I enjoy your presence far too much for that."

"Stay," Gareth whispered. "Please. I promise—I can explain." His cheeks flamed, and he came perilously close to spilling the whole story then and there. Only the thought of Cole imprisoned in the basement of city hall stilled his tongue.

"I'll hold you to that. But in your own time." His breath was warm on Gareth's neck. "Now, how about you show me these iron balls of yours."

Gareth snorted with laughter, the tension of the moment quickly dispelled. "With pleasure." He folded the brown paper package as best he was able and carried it upstairs to the master bedroom, Cole hard on his heels.

Upstairs in the master bedroom, Gareth knelt and pulled back the carpet, exposing the floor safe.

Inside, the three iron globes were clustered in the

center, directly beneath the dial in the safe's door. Gareth could've sworn he'd tossed them into one corner the previous evening. With a muttered oath, Gareth pulled two of them out and stood up.

"What is it?" Cole came to his shoulder.

"These things. They move of their own volition," Gareth said, regarding them with distaste. "See?" Gingerly, Gareth placed them on the dresser, about a foot apart. Each ball wobbled for a moment, then set off at a determined steady roll until they came together with a soft *thwock* of iron on iron.

"Magnets?" Cole asked. He peered at them suspiciously.

"If so, they attract nothing but each other." Gareth shrugged. "I do not know what manner of weapon they can be, but all this talk of spies and treason makes them dangerous, whatever their payload."

Gareth knelt and dropped the balls in his hand back into the safe with a feeling of relief. The sphere in the safe vibrated and wheeled around its missing brethren.

"They are strange indeed," Cole said slowly.

Gareth placed the second package inside the safe, then locked it and returned the carpet to its place. "I'd be pleased if I'd never heard of them. Though I know not what they are, I fear no good comes in their wake."

Cole looked appreciatively around the comfortable master bedroom with its imposing four-poster. "Sorry to have kept you from your bed these past two nights," he muttered.

"Don't be." Gareth grinned. "Tonight, if you wish, I will keep you from yours, and you can decide which mattress you prefer."

Cole gave a short laugh. "I'm not choosy about what I sleep on. The company, now...that's another matter."

Gareth pulled Cole close for a brief, passionate kiss. Cole returned it with fervor, blue eyes blazing. "Soon," Gareth murmured regretfully and pulled away. He glanced anxiously at the open bedroom door. Homosexuality was considered a fundamental vice since the Reform, punishable by imprisonment and torture.

"Do you trust your servants?" Cole asked, following his glance.

Gareth shrugged. He was well aware that were he accused, his staff would be bribed or threatened—or duped—into telling what they knew. "Not enough," he said. "I do not believe Hindle would knowingly betray me, but he's not alert enough to guard his tongue. Until now there's never been the need to hide."

"What do you mean? You have been more discreet?"

"There has been nothing to hide," Gareth said

simply. “Unloving pleasure is, for me, no pleasure at all.”

Cole’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, eyes fixed on Gareth’s. “I...I have found the same, of late,” he said unsteadily.

Gareth turned abruptly and went to the door, closed it silently, and turned the key in the lock. “A measure of privacy,” he said, turning back. “But we must be silent...”

Cole nodded and pulled his shirt over his head. “Silence is a small price to pay.”

Gareth hesitated only an instant, eyes on Cole’s lean, wiry body as he stepped out of his trousers. Then he followed suit, stripping naked, then hurrying to join Cole on the wide four-poster bed.

Cole had pulled the coverlet back, and Gareth sank down willingly against the cool sheet, swallowing a moan as Cole scrambled on top of him.

Then Cole’s hand slid down his body to caress his hardening cock. Cole’s touch was searing and perfect, and Gareth fell back against the pillow, swallowing the noises he longed to make. He couldn’t find the words to tell Cole how this felt, and as Cole’s mouth engulfed his cock, a muffled cry escaped his lips.

“Shh.” Cole raised his head with a wicked grin.

Gareth tried to grin in return, but as Cole went back to work, he felt his senses spinning. Cole seemed to

know exactly what he needed, sucking hard and rough, taking Gareth deep and hard, grip strong on Gareth's hips.

Gareth clasped his hands in Cole's hair, writhing and bucking. His load was rising fast and hard, and he couldn't think, could barely breathe.

Cole shifted his grip, reaching down between Gareth's thighs, cupping his balls in one calloused palm. Biting the inside of his cheek to stifle the cries he longed to make, Gareth came off the bed, thrashing beneath Cole as his orgasm tore through him with the power of a steam explosion. It was pleasure and agony; it consumed him entirely until his world was lost and all that remained was Cole.

Unable to speak, Gareth clung to Cole desperately as the aftershocks rolled through him.

Cole nestled close, his manhood thrusting hard and proud against Gareth's hip, and Gareth sighed with pleasure. Theodore, he reflected, would simply have to wait.

It was nearly two hours later before they were ready to leave the house.

* * *

Theodore's laboratory was located down by the lake—the converted second floor of what had been a Crimean

noble's house before the Reform. The old stone building stood stately and oblivious, its ornate carved embellishments a reminder of a gentler time, when a stonemason's pride was in the beauty of his buildings.

Snow had gathered in the curves and whorls of the proud crest carved above the grand main door of the building, nearly obscuring the granite arms. Whoever had caused its creation had believed it meant something, lineage or family or tradition, but now all that was swept away before the tide of Reform.

Cole bumped Gareth's shoulder gently, half question, half reassurance, and Gareth shot him a sideways grin as he took another drag of his cigarette. As they'd made their way across the city, Gareth had realized how right Cole felt beside him, his very presence filling the fearful, echoing emptiness Gareth had carried with him for more years than he could count. Cole's blue eyes gleamed, full of the same knowledge, relieved and shyly hopeful, and Gareth's grin widened. "Thanks, partner," he muttered, and Cole chuckled, face lighting up.

"Theodore works upstairs," Gareth continued, gesturing at the building with his head. "He's secretive and kinda mad, but when you take it all together, he's cut from the right cloth."

"No problem here, friend."

“Anything you see, just—try not to look surprised, all right? Theodore gets flustered easily. And when he gets like that, he makes no sense at all.”

“I’ll do my best.” Cole shifted slightly, moving a little closer to Gareth, and Gareth shivered as Cole pressed one shoulder against his own.

They stopped on the cobblestones outside the warehouse, and Gareth ground the remains of his cigarette underfoot, taking pleased note of the attentive, amused look in Cole’s eyes. “Yeah. I’ll bet you will too, huh, soldier?”

“Mr. Paper! Mr. Paper!”

The two of them were interrupted by a small, insistent voice and a smaller, more insistent tug on Gareth’s greatcoat. One of the city’s throng of anonymous urchins stood hopping from foot to foot, clad in rags and covered with grime. Gareth wasn’t even sure he could determine the gender of the speaker, but he put the age somewhere around nine, judging by size alone. “Are you looking for me?”

“You Gaweth Chahles?” There were several teeth missing from the urchin’s mouth.

“Sort of.”

“Message. Secretlike.” A grubby square of paper appeared in a grubbier hand. The moment Gareth reached for it, it disappeared, quick as lightning. Eyes

blinked expectantly from the dirty face.

Sighing, Gareth retrieved his purse from an inside pocket of his greatcoat. He supposed he should be grateful the child had taken the direct approach rather than aiming to cut the lining of his jacket and determine its own fee. He counted out three shining silver coins embossed with the king's profile. Under the expectant gaze of both Cole and the urchin, he added two more, then held them out in an invisible middle ground between the messenger and himself.

If Gareth had not been used to the ways of New Eddington's unofficial courier system, the speed at which the coins were replaced with paper would have astounded him.

The child tested two of the coins with its remaining teeth, nodded solemnly and vanished, darting away and into the shadowed space between two tenements which Gareth would've sworn was not wide enough to admit a beetle or a fly. He stared dumbly, and Cole chuckled at his shoulder. "You're a pretty popular guy, Mr. Paper."

"I do what I can," Gareth said. He unfolded the slip of paper.

Most displeased with last night's departure from the plan. Will expect you at the cardroom this evening. Seven sharp. Explanations are vital.

The note was unsigned, but Gareth had no doubts

as to its origin. He hastily crumpled it and shoved it in his pocket.

Cole's cheerful grin faded. "Bad news?"

Gareth shrugged, hoping it looked careless. "Nothing of any import. Business. Nothing more."

Cole's eyes held a pain Gareth hoped never to see again. "Of course."

The ground floor of Theodore's building was currently occupied by Smoke and Mirrors—New Eddington's own newsagents-cum-tobacconists. Despite the near-constant flow of trade from the docks, Gareth doubted anyone had cause to look twice at the shabby, nondescript door to the left of the newsagent's storefront. The odors of the various tobacco products too, he figured, masked any odd or unusual smells that might filter down from Theodore's laboratory on the second floor. Gareth led the way down the hall to a wide, grand staircase made of the same gray stone as the floor. A strip of faded, threadbare carpet that had once been red covered the center of the stairs.

Gareth took Cole's arm, drew him to the side of the staircase as they started to climb. "The carpet's not well fixed," he explained at Cole's curious look. "The first time I came, I caught my foot and nearly fell."

At the top of the stairs, Gareth released Cole's arm reluctantly but gestured for him to stay close. Cole

nodded his understanding, looking around him curiously. They stood in an antechamber with a tall vaulted ceiling, lit by high narrow windows whose panes were streaked with grime. Weak winter sunlight struggled fitfully through, rendering it difficult to see the three heavy oak doors that led from the chamber. All were closed.

Gareth headed for the one directly ahead. He felt rather than heard Cole beside him—the old soldier's tread as light as his own—and he was once again struck with the rightness of Cole at his side. Gareth moved his arm a fraction of an inch and gently connected his elbow with Cole's. He grinned at the soft pressure he felt in return.

The door swung open on silent hinges as they approached, and as they stepped through the doorway, Gareth heard Cole's surprised hiss, quickly quelled. He stifled a grin. Theodore's laboratory was certainly surprising.

The attic ran the length of the building, extending to their left and right, and was cluttered with workbenches, test tubes, and weird, tall contraptions with protruding pipes like strangely jointed beasts. A few tall, barred windows admitted filtered daylight, and from above, a dirty, snow-clogged dome allowed in a trace of the pale winter sun.

On the floor directly ahead of them lay a heap of coal, and farther down the room, a bale of straw stood beside a stack of fire-blackened timber, while on the bench above, bright blue liquid roiled in a huge glass beaker.

“Theodore?” Gareth called out, hand going back to Cole’s elbow. “Are you here?”

At the far end of the room, the shadows shuffled their feet anxiously, then disgorged the mad inventor. Instead of the rags he’d worn yesterday, this morning he was clad in a stained white coat with gaping holes at the elbows and a charred black patch across the breast. Trousers that looked as though they’d once been part of a gentleman’s suit completed the outfit.

“Hello?” The inventor took a cautious step forward and looked from Gareth to Cole with wide, alarmed eyes magnified by thick leather goggles strapped to his head. “Gareth! Oh. I didn’t realize you would—never mind, never mind.” He turned awkwardly and threw a canvas cover over something behind him in the shadows. Squinting, Gareth thought it might be a larger version of the beaker on the table, but it was hidden before he could be sure.

“Now, what can I do for you?” Theodore hurried up, waving his arms. “I can’t offer you—there’s no coffee, but I believe there’s some brandy or—”

“Theodore, forget it.” Gareth took the inventor’s arm. “I want you to meet Cole, all right? Thomas Cole.”

“Hello, hello.” Theodore nodded sharply, leaning forward and blinking rapidly from behind the thick lenses of the goggles.

Cole held out a hand, which Theodore peered at like some strange new species of fish before straightening and looking to Gareth for an explanation.

Gareth shot a reassuring look Cole’s way. *Trust me*, he mouthed.

Cole nodded and dropped his hand to his side.

Gareth cleared his throat. “I got the packages—”

“No, no!” Theodore cried out urgently. “You’re here for a demonstration of my new steam organ, aren’t you? And Cole too? Of course you are. Come, come.”

Gareth and Cole exchanged bemused glances but followed Theodore to the end of the room, past the item he’d covered on their arrival. He led them to a large, tangled mess of pipes and tubing that looked like nothing so much as a spider tangled in a mess of its own webbing. As the two of them waited patiently, Theodore turned nozzles and tapped valves, and the contraption wheezed to life, shuddering and jerking as it went. A sharp, metallic buzz started deep within its bowels, growing in volume until it made normal conversation impossible. Cole muttered an oath, and even Gareth,

accustomed as he was to Theodore's strange inventions, fell back a step as blue sparks danced from one spindly leg to the next. The air tasted of metals.

"Look, look! It's all done with steam and electricity, and it's based on the theory of vibrations. Watch this!" Theodore's voice was high and excited, and he spun a wheel mounted on the front of the iron surface.

The buzz deepened to a hum, and then, plaintive and shrill, came the opening notes of the anthem of the commonwealth.

Gareth stared at the thing, and beside him, Cole was motionless.

Theodore lifted his goggles, then slung a skinny arm around Gareth's shoulders and led him away from the contraption to a quieter corner of the room. "Now we can talk," he whispered. "But keep it down, you understand?"

Gareth nodded, bewildered. Cole took a step back and turned politely away, feigning interest in the steam spider. Gareth shot him a look of thanks.

"Gareth, you brought him—is he—can we trust him?" Theodore's eyes glittered brightly, and blue light from the merrily singing contraption flashed in the lenses of his goggles. "Normally I would not speak in front of a stranger, but they are close. There is no time! I must speak with you now, or this chance may be lost

forever!”

“I can vouch for Cole,” Gareth said calmly. “I would trust him with my life.”

“Good. You have the packages I sent? Last night and this morning?”

“Yes.” Gareth nodded, then shook his head. The electric buzz of the steam organ vibrated in his ears, and its high, piercing notes echoed inside his skull. “What was the meaning of them? Those spheres behave unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“Hollow iron globes.” Theodore waved his hands impatiently, eyes blazing. “But inside them—ah! That’s the interesting part. Inside them is a substance at the foremost end of modern weaponry.” Theodore gestured wildly. “Keep them safe, and on no account let them become hot. The substance is attracted to heat and will kill what is in its path. The iron will contain it, but if it were exposed to heat—there’s no telling what might happen. No! Come away from there!” Theodore rushed from Gareth’s side, arms waving in agitation.

Gareth turned and saw Cole drop the edge of a dirty and scorched tarpaulin back down over an object nearly twice as large as the spider. He held his hands up as Theodore approached.

Gareth hurried to the inventor’s side. “Theodore! Cole means no harm. He was just unaware of the delicate

nature of your work.” He shot Cole a warning glance. “Besides,” he continued as Theodore’s protests grew, “as I said, I would trust this man with my life.”

Cole’s eyes lit up. He stepped closer to Gareth’s back, hands safely in his pockets. “I apologize, sir,” he said to Theodore. “I let my curiosity overrule my manners. It won’t happen again. You have my word.”

Theodore appeared mollified, but he still regarded Cole warily. Gareth slung an arm around the inventor’s shoulders and guided him back into a corner of the garret, trying to get him back on track. “The spheres. Keep them safe for how long?”

Theodore shrugged. “I can’t say. Even now I am watched and must go into hiding—Gareth, there are forces at work within New Eddington, forces I don’t understand. And I am starting to suspect”—he leaned in close—“they might not be serving the king at all!”

Treason in the colonies was swiftly judged and even more swiftly dealt with, and if the iron globes were the tools of spies or worse, the mere possession of them could mean a death sentence. “The spheres and the document are proof of this? What of the mouse?” Gareth frowned. “What is it you want me to do?”

“At this point, do nothing.” Theodore looked around nervously. “Merely keep them for me.”

“Keep a dead mouse? Theodore, the winter is cold

but not so cold as to prevent it putrefying. How—”

“The mouse will not putrefy.” Theodore looked mysterious and lowered his voice. “I will send further instructions when I may. When I contact you, I shall address you as ‘Captain Charles.’” His skinny fingers sketched quotes in the air between them. “I will use Mr. Cole’s name, and I shall sign myself ‘your beloved Maria,’ so that no one shall suspect we are in communication. If you receive something without these things, you will know it is not from me. Or that I was coerced.”

Theodore held up his hands. “At times, it is my privilege as a scientist to fight on the front line. I may not fight with sword and musket as you did, but this contribution—this contribution is worth any sacrifice. Now leave me, and be vigilant. I fear that evil walks amongst us!”

With a flourish, the little inventor crossed to his steam spider and flicked one of the many switches on the carapace. Wheezing and groaning, the machine ground to a halt, and the buzz and hum died slowly away. Gareth tried to catch Cole’s eye, but the old soldier followed Theodore deferentially toward the spider.

Theodore cleared his throat, then made shooing motions at them, pointing to the door. “It was so nice of you to drop by, Gareth. So nice indeed, and I am so sorry

that Maria could not come today. She is a delightful young lady, your sweetheart, and I wish to see more of her. Take care, take care, it is very cold. I look forward to our next meeting.”

They let themselves be shooed.

The lab door firmly closed behind them, Gareth and Cole stood in the antechamber at the head of the stairs, looking at each other.

“I see what you mean,” Cole said. His eyes twinkled merrily.

Gareth shook his head. “That was crazy even by his standards,” he said slowly. He raised one hand to his ear. “And incredibly, that organ’s given me a headache. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

It was a scant few blocks from Gareth’s town house, but they crossed from the decaying lakefront’s splendor to a part of the city marked by a palpable squalor. Here, long, low wooden buildings with tiny square windows fronted directly onto the street, with sagging steps leading up to broken doors. Narrow alleys at the rear stank of garbage and something worse, and Gareth recalled the untraceable rumor he’d heard a month ago of overflowing sewers and an outbreak of cholera that had run rampant through this part of town.

He’d been prevented from printing that story, of course, and showered with written proofs in black and

white from city hall, but he'd wondered then, and what he saw today made him wonder more. The Reform had been hailed as a better life, a better way, and Gareth had fought gladly for the promise of equality and freedom, but the people on these streets looked as though they'd never heard of either.

Cole stopped in front of one of the nondescript wooden dwellings. "This one," he said, gesturing apologetically at the door. "You want to wait out here?"

"No," Gareth said and put a hand on Cole's arm.

Inside, the bare room was scrubbed and spotless. The space was tiny, barely wide enough for a narrow cot and standard military-issue chest, but Gareth noted with approval that the single blanket on the cot was folded with military precision, and the only other item in the room was a pair of worn and shabby boots.

"My spares," Cole said, seeing Gareth looking. "I cannot afford to polish two pairs."

Gareth glanced down at the boots Cole was currently wearing. Even after the fire and a day in the open, they shone with the gleam of spit-polished leather. A soldier's boots were his dearest possession, and he knew what it must have cost Cole to have left his spare boots uncared for. The thought of Cole returning each night to this lonely space, hungry, huddled in his single blanket against the bitter winter cold, was like a dagger

in his heart. His head throbbed, still ringing from the steam organ.

“Let me get the chest,” Gareth said gruffly, ignoring the pain in his head.

“Thanks.” Cole picked up the blanket and the spare boots. “Who’s Maria?” he asked with studied nonchalance.

“Maria?” Gareth grinned and hoisted the chest to his shoulder with a grunt. “There is no Maria. But the last time Theodore played cloak-and-dagger, nearly a year ago, he wanted me to help him get out of his laboratory without being spotted. So he dressed up in a gown and a bonnet, and I told everyone we met he was my sweetheart. Maria.”

Cole chuckled and led the way out the door.

Six

Gareth sat on the bed in the guest room, smoking and watching Cole unpack the contents of his trunk into the ornately faced bureau drawers. There was room to spare when he finished—Cole's belongings consisted of two shirts and a pair of worn military canvas pants. His old boots stood sadly on the floor of the wardrobe, and Cole stowed the small trunk beneath the chaise at the end of the bed.

"You know," Cole said, standing, "I've seen your Theodore before. I thought he looked familiar."

"You have?" Gareth raised a hand to rub at his eyes. His ears still rang with the low electric hum of the steam organ, and his head throbbed. "Where?"

"At the firehouse." Cole looked pensive. "I've seen him talking to my captain, more than once and always the day after a fire. They'd go in back, to the stores—I assumed he was some kind of inspector, looking at the wounded bugs or the logbooks or something."

Gareth frowned and took another drag off his cigarette, exhaling with a tired sigh. "As far as I know, Theodore never had anything to do with the firebugs, or the firehouse," he said slowly. "But then, I only know what he tells me, and that's not much. Hell, I only see the little guy a few times a year. I don't see how his connection with the firehouse can have anything to do with spies or weapons, though."

"I guess not. Just a coincidence." With a nod, Cole indicated Gareth's head. "Still hearing beautiful music?"

"Something like that. I pray that's one of Theodore's inventions that never sees the light of day, no matter how patriotic. I cannot believe the people of the commonwealth will be motivated to valor while feeling as if their heads are splitting open."

Cole snorted.

"Anyway, I'll be fine after I've sat down for a minute. I'm likely just overtired."

"Ah, indeed. I often hear the music of spiders when I'm exhausted." Cole plucked the remainder of the cigarette from Gareth's hand and stubbed it out in the plain tin ashtray sitting on the nightstand next to the bed. Then he pulled back the covers and, over Gareth's halfhearted protests, pushed him gently over backward and rolled him between the sheets and warm quilts. "Stop arguing," Cole said softly. He dropped a light kiss

on Gareth's lips. "The best cure for a headache is sleep, especially if you're planning a late run over to the paper."

Gareth stared, surprised, but Cole simply grinned and crawled in next to him, fully clothed. "While I agree to be your guest, I cannot in good conscience deny the people of New Eddington their news." He gathered Gareth into his arms with another kiss. "And anyway, if you're planning on keeping me up all night, you'd better get your rest while you can. I'll keep watch."

Gareth closed his eyes gratefully, enjoying the warmth of Cole's embrace. But rest was slow in coming. The note from his mysterious informant burned like an ember in the pocket of his trousers, and Gareth struggled with its import.

Explanations are vital.

But Gareth had no explanations and was shocked that his informant knew as little about last night's fire as he did. But more than that, Gareth remembered the pained look on Cole's face at Gareth's obvious lie. He knew his friend hadn't been fooled for a second, and this evening, Gareth would have to lie once again in order to perchance finally meet his contact face-to-face. He feared if Cole knew the truth of his activities, the man would never speak to him again, and the fragile connection they'd forged would be shattered in an instant. Gareth

burrowed closer against Cole's neck, desperate to hold on while he could.

Eventually he drifted into a fitful half sleep haunted by phantom images: the burns on Tom Moore's arms, the overturned bug with Livingston inside, and finally, he imagined he could hear the screams of the doomed janitor as the stacks of books caught fire around him. *A departure from the plan, indeed.*

He woke with a start.

The room was gloomy with the winter dusk, and for a moment he was disoriented. "Cole!" The name was on his lips almost before thought returned.

"Easy, soldier. All clear." Gareth felt himself still in Cole's arms and gasped with relief. "All clear, soldier."

Gareth fought away the images from his dreams and shifted closer to Cole. He couldn't express his relief at finding Cole still at his side, even if he felt unworthy of such loyalty.

"I told Hindle you had a headache and were lying down," Cole said softly next to his ear. "And that I was going to write letters in my room, and that neither of us were to be disturbed. How's the head?"

Still half filled with demons, Gareth thought. "Better, but still muzzy. What time is it?"

"Close on four. What time do you dine? On nights

you're not rescuing me from fire and freezing, that is?"

"Six," Gareth murmured with a soft laugh. He was suddenly conscious of Cole's engorged cock against his thigh, and the heat of his own desire beside it. His need to feel Cole against him, inside him, dwarfed his anxiety and swept the nightmares away. "Is there something you'd like me to rescue you from before dinner?"

"Well, I seem to be in the clutches of a mysterious, dark-haired gentleman. But to be honest, I'm rather enjoying it."

"So is the mysterious dark-haired gentleman." Gareth leaned in close and claimed Cole's mouth, slow and sure.

Gareth pushed Cole onto his back as they kissed, and Cole moaned softly. Gareth fumbled blindly with the buttons of Cole's trousers until the flap loosened and dropped free. He sought the slit in Cole's woolens for a moment, then the head of that hot, proud cock emerged, smearing precum across the back of Gareth's hand. Cole's moans grew louder.

Gareth froze, conscious that, in the daytime at least, his household would be much more attentive to their activities. Too attentive.

Seeming to understand, Cole quieted, then buried his face against Gareth's chest. He guided Gareth's hand down around his thick shaft, bucking into the touch.

But Gareth pulled back and sat up quickly. "Yes," he panted. "Just like that." He pushed the blanket aside and gazed appreciatively at the sight of Cole debauched, his cock jutting through the narrow opening in his clothes, trousers splayed wide around him. Cole's shirt was rucked up, baring the wiry curls that covered lean, hard muscle.

Cole's lips were parted, and his eyes, hungry and smoldering, were fixed on Gareth. The high planes of his cheekbones were shadowed in the evening light, his wiry body tense under Gareth's hands.

Gareth licked his lips, imagining the taste, the feel of Cole, silk and heat. He groaned. "Yes," he whispered again, then bent and licked tentatively at the spot just beneath the red and hungry cockhead.

Gareth licked his way along Cole's shaft, mouthing softly until finally easing his lips around the spongy, warm head. Cole groaned and writhed, and Gareth swallowed him deeper, exploring with his tongue, probing Cole's hidden places until his lover was whimpering helplessly, thrashing against the bed.

Gareth closed his hand around Cole's shaft while he worked the head with his tongue, pumping hard while Cole bucked into his fist. Gareth tongued his ridge, lapping and swirling, and on the next stroke, Cole sobbed and stiffened, arching and shaking while he filled

Gareth's mouth. Gareth swallowed his seed gratefully, matching him pulse for pulse before sucking the last drop from Cole's tip.

His own need was upon him, all the sweeter for the wait. Providentially, his medical kit remained upon the nightstand, and Gareth retrieved the coconut oil one-handed. With the other hand, he took his still-trembling lover's knee and raised it, opening Cole for his attentions.

With a grunt of assent, Cole pulled his other leg up and hooked his hands behind his knees. "Quick," he urged Gareth.

Gareth sank his fingers into the slippery oil and, taking Cole at his word, pressed both slick digits against his opening. Cole gasped a little, then groaned as Gareth's fingers passed his rim.

Sweat stood on Gareth's forehead as he fought back his own tide. He twisted his fingers in Cole's passage, and as Cole bucked and writhed, Gareth slicked his throbbing cock with his other hand.

Cole was tight, his muscles still spasming from his orgasm, and Gareth couldn't wait to get inside him. Shaking with the effort of holding back, he slid his fingers out and slowly, slowly pressed his hard member against the cleft of Cole's ass.

Cole gave a needy whimper. Gareth slid his own

hands up the back of Cole's thighs to his knees, pushing Cole's hands away. Cole's breath hissed through his teeth, and he fisted the blankets as Gareth pushed his knees higher and farther apart, and then at last Gareth was pressing his crown against Cole's ready hole.

For a moment, Cole's body fought him, denied him entrance, and then the sphincter gave against Gareth's pressure. His muscles grabbed at Gareth, possessing him, dragging him deeper, and Gareth gave himself over to Cole's body.

Deep inside, a prisoner of Cole's slick, tight heat, Gareth knew he couldn't last. His stroke was faster than his heartbeat, faster than thought, the pleasure and perfection of Cole's body tearing all vestige of control away.

Gareth arched, jaw clenched, and as Cole's hot passage worked its magic, Gareth let go.

Pleasure exploded through him, tearing his senses asunder in a flash of white-hot fire that roared through his limbs, leaving him shaking.

Gareth collapsed, spent, and buried his head against Cole's shoulder, holding on as tight as he was able, letting go. Letting everything go, everything except the sweet perfection of Cole holding him tight, Cole in his arms, Cole in his heart.

The dying rays of the sun crept in through the

narrow french door and laid a pale stripe across Cole's bared hip as the two of them lay together, panting and sweaty and fulfilled.

"Still determined to visit the paper tonight alone?" Cole asked softly.

It was all Gareth could do to nod. He couldn't bring himself to meet Cole's eyes as the last of the light faded from the room, and night fell heavily around them.

* * *

They emerged to dine on thick fish stew—a New Eddington staple and one of Gareth's cook's specialties. Fish fresh from the lake was the cheapest, most plentiful food source in the city, but the sweet potatoes and young onions were a rarity this far out of season.

Cole ate with gusto, Gareth noticed approvingly, and sipped only sparingly at his wine. In the cardroom, haunted and desperate, Cole had gulped his whiskey like a drowning man, but now it looked like drinking was the last thing on his mind. Gareth pushed his own goblet aside with a smile. He was a rare drinker himself, normally confining it to the nights he spent at the countess's, where it would have been remarkable to abstain. And in the colonies, being remarkable brought you to the attention of the watch.

Too much alcohol relaxed him, lowered his carefully

cultivated guard, let the deliberately forgotten images reappear. Gareth ran a hand across his eyes. It was on the nights he went to the cardroom that the nightmares were the worst.

“How’s your head?” Cole’s voice was quiet and accompanied by the softest press of his ankle underneath the table.

Gareth lowered his hand. “Better. Much, much better.” In truth, the momentary respite from his worries provided by the afternoon’s interlude had evaporated as soon as they’d left the bedroom. Gareth hated having to slip out and leave Cole, and hated more that he had to lie about it. But Countess Harvill’s cardroom was notorious for its hatched plots and fomenting revolutions, and Gareth was surprised Cole hadn’t commented on his presence there already.

Then again, I suppose I could say the same. He slid a hand across the table toward Cole.

The swish of the heavy door behind him made Gareth sit up suddenly, and he saw Cole quickly take one of the crusty buns from the plate in the center of the table, as though that was what he’d been reaching for all along.

Hindle set a dish of hot peas on the table, freshly buttered. Steam rose from the wetly gleaming green spheres, and Gareth was reminded of the strange iron

balls in the safe upstairs. He vowed to find a way to help Theodore after he'd settled his own troubles once and for all.

"Thank you, Hindle." Cole's voice held an authentic note of gratitude, and Hindle's eyes lit up before he bowed deferentially and scurried back toward the kitchen. Cole helped himself to a generous serving of peas but Gareth shook his head. Even the fine stew had turned to ash on his tongue, his stomach roiling in anticipation of the night's subterfuge.

At Cole's raised eyebrow, he said simply, "There is so much to do at the paper and so little time. Would you mind if I cut short our dinner and got on my way?"

Cole regarded him steadily, eyes measuring, and then he shrugged. "Sure, Gareth. Take as long as you need."

* * *

Gareth entered the cardhouse with no more than a cursory wave for Tom and only a brief nod in response to the countess's waspish greeting as she again led him past Judge Barrington's secretary and the other men of midlevel commerce. He'd nearly faltered at the last moment, standing at the door of his comfortable town house with Cole at his back. He'd recognized the forced cheer in Cole's blue eyes, the polite and careful smile as he'd helped Gareth with his greatcoat, and Gareth had

come perilously close to spilling everything and begging Cole's help.

But first, of course, he'd need forgiveness. When he got home, Gareth swore to himself, he'd tell Cole what little he knew about the mysterious informant and the arson attacks, and he could only pray the brave firewalker would listen and understand.

With a struggle, Gareth forced Cole from his mind and looked around the crowded cardroom. There was an empty spot at table four, and as Gareth approached, he recognized the players as his erstwhile partners from the previous evening. The florid banker caught his eye and bit fiercely at his cigar, gesturing to the empty chair.

Gareth wondered, rather wildly, if he'd been expected. If everyone in the cardroom was in on the plot except for him.

"You're just in time." The redhead nodded, essaying a shy grin. "Our fourth was called away."

Taking his seat, Gareth smiled blankly. Not for the first time, he wished his informant would be less cryptic. Was one of these three men his informant or even the arsonist himself?

Torn between thoughts of Cole and vigilance for anything out of the ordinary, Gareth was less sharp than usual in his play. At the end of half an hour, he was down three hands, the chips in front of him dwindling rapidly.

The only thing he'd learned so far was that the redhead and the clerk were definitely playing something close to their chest, although judging by their luck with the cards, it wasn't Fetch and Carry.

The banker raked in his winnings again with a satisfied grunt and raised his glass in a mock toast. "Seems none of you are on your mettle tonight."

On another night, Gareth might have chosen to be offended, and he saw the countess shoot a dark look in his direction, warning him to keep his temper in check. She misses nothing, Gareth reflected, barely dignifying the banker's remark with a short, mirthless laugh. "I find myself distracted," he said easily, watching the redhead tapping a wordless message on the table.

The clerk looked nervously from the redhead's fingers to the banker and then glanced at Gareth. "I shall fetch another bottle," he said hurriedly, jumping to his feet. "May I order anything for you, gentlemen?"

Gareth waved the offer away, watching the clerk's departing back speculatively. The redhead ran a nervous hand through his hair, paling under his freckles, and Gareth made a sudden decision. Casting down his cards, he got to his feet. "I shall play no more tonight," he declared, nodding to his tablemates. "There is a matter requiring my attention, and it interferes with my game, as you see."

Without waiting for a response, he turned away and hurried after the little clerk.

The small man moved fast and disappeared through the door leading up to the Pourhouse before Gareth was halfway across the room. Countess Harvill stepped into his path, expression forbidding, but Gareth dodged her challenge neatly. It would cost him dearly to regain her favor, but something in the clerk's demeanor and the redhead's nervous tension told Gareth that whatever the man was up to now, a bottle was the least of it.

The stairway felt damp and empty, and Gareth slipped up it as silently as he could. The wooden door at the top stood blank and silent, and Gareth inched the latch down, cracking it open.

Tom's genial voice came to him clearly as the big man bemoaned the weather, and Gareth heard the clatter of glass against the wooden countertop. "A bottle of me finest malt right here, sir, that'll keep this bitter cold away."

"Yes yes, let me pay now; I dislike keeping a tab." The clerk's thin fussy voice was followed by the clink of coins, and Gareth wondered for a moment if his instincts were wrong, if the clerk and the redhead were simply two amateur cardsharps, their nerves merely a symptom of their cheating.

Inch by careful inch, Gareth edged the door wider until he could slip through, hidden by the tapestry.

“Keep this for me, my man, while I blow a cloud?” Coins rattled on the counter, followed by the slap of a hand on wood.

“Of course, sir.”

Ah. Gareth peeked out from his hiding place in time to see the clerk’s coattails disappear through the door to the street and old Tom turning for the stove.

Unseen, Gareth crept the few feet to the door. Outside on the dark and icy streets, there was no sign of the clerk, just a wide, unseeing sky, cloudy but bereft of snow. Gareth huddled in the shadow beside the unprepossessing shop front, looking around wildly. A narrow alley snaked along one side of the Pourhouse, and on either side of the cobbled road leading down to the lake, squat buildings crowded in, their dark windows like unseeing eyes. Gareth started impulsively toward the alley, but as he stepped out of his shadow, a crushing blow hit him across the back of the neck.

The night sky was suddenly full of stars, and Gareth staggered, head pounding anew. An arm encircled his throat and dragged him back against a slim body in a long wool coat. “I see you got my message. A pity you decided not to heed its import.”

Gareth’s mind reeled. This was not the thin reedy

voice of the clerk from his table, but one deeper and more cultured. He clawed at the arm lying like an iron bar across his windpipe as colors wheeled and swooped in front of his eyes.

“Indeed,” the voice continued, “I should’ve known from the start you were nothing more than a fat lap cat of the commonwealth. I wouldn’t be surprised if you have the watch in your back pocket, you scabrous cur!”

Gareth clawed futilely at his assailant, vision growing dim. His thoughts were with Cole and the soft, laughing light he’d found in the old soldier’s eyes.

“I should never have trusted you with our secrets. He was right. You’re getting exactly what you deserve!”

Abruptly, the pressure increased, and Gareth felt his grip weaken, overwhelmed and overpowered. Darkness closed in all around him, and the cold pavement stinging his cheek as he fell was the last thing he knew.

Seven

Gareth woke to a shrill clanging inside his brain. He shook his head irritably, thoughts of Theodore's steam organ filling his brain. The acrid smell of smoke made him cough as he inhaled. His mouth was dry, and the cough caught him at the back of his throat, raw and harsh, as he struggled to a sitting position.

Gareth's head spun wildly as he moved, and he caught himself on his hands, gasping and choking. He was lying on a hard, polished floor in the dark, and the clamor he could hear was the town alarm bells, ringing at full volume on their wires. Meanwhile, the smoke was getting thicker.

Scrambling, Gareth made it halfway to his feet and slammed into a heavy piece of furniture. Crying out, he collapsed on the smooth surface—a desk or table—and shuddered, his legs too weak to hold his weight. Vaguely he recalled the note, the cardroom, shadowing the clerk.

Most displeased with this departure from the plan. The words suddenly took on an ominous ring. All along,

had his unknown informant been setting him up? Had it all been a trap? Shaking, Gareth struggled to think.

The smell of smoke was getting stronger now, and with it came a heavy, pushing heat. And something else, a scent Gareth knew well. *Printer's ink.*

Gareth suddenly realized where he was. *The newspaper. They're burning my paper.* He was in the production center, somewhere close to the huge press, the only door yards away at the end of the room. In his current weakened state, it might as well be in Crimea.

Leaning heavily on the desk and taking short shallow breaths, Gareth gathered the remnants of his strength. He had to get out. He had to get back to Cole.

Gareth tried again to stand, falling back to the desk as a sharp spike of pain lanced through his head. Cole, he thought numbly, desperately conjuring the image of his lover's face. With a final push, he stood, legs trembling, and turned in what he hoped was the direction of the door.

With a terrible crash, the wall ahead fell in, and in its place Gareth was confronted with a blazing wall of flame. The heat was intense, the orange inferno roaring like a living thing, rushing forward to consume this new fuel it had found.

Gareth staggered backward, hand thrown up to guard his face, until he slammed into the solid metal arm

of the press. With a shudder, the giant machine came to life. Unguided, it began to roll, its huge arm sliding forward and away, and Gareth grabbed on to the guard for support. He watched in fascinated horror as the paper sheets rolled through its maw and down the long print chute, spilling out into the waiting fury of the flames.

The shuddering grumble of the press could hardly be heard over the roaring of the fire, but under it Gareth suddenly became aware of a new noise, a rumbling, thumping sound that got louder, closer. Peering toward the flames, eyes narrowed against the heat and brightness, Gareth could barely make out the gleam of metal. A hissing, popping sound, louder than anything that had come before, filled the air, and gleaming blue foam arced over top of the flames, pooling and sliding.

The firebugs had arrived.

The press kept rolling, sending sheet after sheet down its relentless tunnel toward the fire's welcoming tongue. Gareth stumbled back to the desk, head throbbing, as the press was slowly consumed in black-tinged flames. The smoke was getting thicker, and Gareth started to choke, letting go of the desk. He dropped to the ground, desperate for air.

Blue foam was everywhere, roiling and sliding like it was alive, consuming the flames with hisses of satisfaction. Gareth looked wildly around him. He'd

imagined before that the foam moved of its own volition, but now, trapped here with it in the midst of a true fire, he could no longer deny the evidence of his own eyes.

The foam was actively seeking the flames. Everywhere Gareth looked, he saw it massing together, joining into larger and larger clumps, then slithering inexorably toward the flames.

And toward him.

Gareth struggled away, suddenly realizing that the nearest clump of blue foam had abandoned its attack on the fire and was heading his way. He kicked at it futilely, choking in the thick smoke, trying to shout for help.

“Gareth!” The voice came faintly through the dim smoke, but it was unmistakable.

“Cole!” Gareth tried to scream, but his voice came out as a thick croak, and he nearly sobbed in frustration. “Cole!” He tried to struggle to his feet, but it was as though the very air was being sucked from his lungs.

“Gareth!”

Gareth held on to the sound of the voice, too weak to stand or even speak, barely able to grab the hands that reached for him. He felt himself lifted and clung with everything he had as Cole hoisted him to his shoulder. He let go and let himself be carried.

Gareth fisted his hand in Cole’s shirt, holding on.

Clanks and whirrs sounded out of nowhere; then Cole's arm was around him, taking his weight, pulling him close.

"You..." Gareth managed a whisper.

"This bug will get us out of here!" Cole's voice was barely audible above the flames. "Hang on!"

Gareth turned his head to Cole's chest and, with all his strength, did as Cole had said.

* * *

Gareth was dreaming of a field hospital. Someone was bathing his face with cool water, and he lay on a soft bed. What had happened? Had he been injured on the battlefield? Had a trench collapsed and trapped him? He sought in vain for the smells of blood, sulphur, and gunpowder, and only then noted the absence of the usual screams of the injured and the dying. How far from the front had he been taken?

"Gareth? Are you awake?"

He knew that voice. It belonged not to a nurse in the Crimea but someone from a time of peace. Someone he loved. Shaking, Gareth turned his head away. Here at the front, such dreams had taunted him before, and he would not yield to their false promises again.

"Gareth," the voice insisted gently. It was joined by a hand caressing his cheek. "All is well. It's safe now.

Wake up, Gareth, come back to me.”

Something plaintive in the voice made Gareth want to believe that this was more than just another dream. The hand on his cheek was warm and real, and Gareth pressed into its touch, slowly opening his eyes, still expecting to see the pale green cap of a tireless frontline nurse.

Instead, he saw bloodshot blue eyes lined with soot and shining with unshed tears. “Cole!” Gareth gasped. He shook twice as hard as memory returned and grabbed at his lover’s face.

“Easy, Gareth. Don’t talk yet.” Cole’s voice broke, and he leaned in close, lightly brushing Gareth’s cheek with his lips.

Gareth clung to Cole, shaking with weakness and reaction as memory returned. The press, ink reservoirs alight, the horrifying, crawling blue foam... Cole pulling him from the flames and into the sweltering carapace of his firebug, which carried them away through a blazing inferno that Gareth had thought would never end.

“You got me out.” Gareth forced the words from a throat harsh and raw from the smoke, still feeling the compression in his chest. “I thought...”

“So did I.” Cole raised his head, and Gareth saw the naked terror in his eyes.

Gareth tried with difficulty to get closer to Cole. His

body ached all over, and his limbs were slow to respond.

“Lie still,” Cole whispered. “The firefoam has burned your lungs a little. You’ll be better after you sleep.”

Gareth managed a nod, fixing his eyes on his lover’s face. “Hold me,” he whispered. “I need to know you’re there. Please?”

Cole slid a hand through Gareth’s dark hair, his eyes shadowed and unreadable.

* * *

The next time Gareth awoke, it was to the chill of an icy winter morning, the light of another cold gray day seeping between the half-drawn curtains of the master bedroom in his town house.

Cole lay slumped and asleep in a chair next to the bed, dark streaks of soot marring his pale skin.

Gareth raised a hand to his own neck, feeling the tender welt that marked the place he had been struck. The strange summons to the cardroom, the attack at the Pourhouse, and worst of all, the burning of the *Chronicle*—it felt like a dream, strangely removed, and yet evidence of the chilling reality lay on his neck and smeared across Cole’s pale skin. Whoever was burning New Eddington had meant for Gareth to die.

Cole pushed himself up in the chair, blinking warily

in the morning light. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Gareth’s voice came in a hoarse croak, and he coughed. It stung, and with a gasp of pain, he raised a hand to his throat.

“Good.” Cole stood stiffly and stretched, then walked over to his military chest, lying open and packed to one side of Gareth’s garderobe. “I wanted to stay and make sure you woke.” He coughed thickly into one balled fist. Recovering, he said, “I didn’t want to leave while you slept.”

Again hung unspoken between them.

Panic sprang on Gareth like a lion, and he shoved himself to a sitting position, fighting to orient himself. “Wait, Cole—”

“No,” Cole said in a thick voice. “Hear me out.”

Gareth noted the cold light in his lover’s previously playful eyes, and the lion began feasting on his bones.

“I returned from Crimea to a corrupt commonwealth that could find no place for me. I came to the colonies with the shirt on my back, the boots on my feet, and the scar you’ve already seen, believing I could help build a better world out of the fresh damp clay across the ocean. I’ve put my life on the line for the citizens of New Eddington, and I’ll be damned—” Cole’s voice wavered. “Damned if I’ll throw my lot in now with a *firebug*.”

Gareth's head ached and his lungs burned, but he shoved the blankets away and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I can explain." The room shimmered uncertainly, and Gareth closed his eyes.

"I hope so. You have five minutes."

"I can do it in three." He opened his eyes to find Cole's hard expression hadn't softened. "Follow me." Gareth forced himself to stand and waved away Cole's outstretched arm. He hadn't earned the support, let alone the love he'd been given.

He padded out of the room and gingerly down the stairs in his soot-stained woolens, headed for the dining room. He crossed to the humidor, pulled out a cloth-wrapped package and laid it on the dining room table. Weak from exertion, Gareth collapsed in a chair. He didn't trust his shaking fingers to be careful enough with the precious object, so instead he pushed it across the gleaming wood toward Cole, who'd seated himself again at Gareth's right hand.

Gareth closed his eyes and leaned against the padded chair as Cole removed the fabric wrapping and unfolded the creased sheet of greasy parchment. He knew the words by heart.

"Mr. Charles,

Who I am is not important, but I am, at this point, nearly certain you are the Last Honest Man in New

Eddington. I am currently in the employ of Someone With Power, and in that position, a Fiendish Plot has come to my attention.

I dare not approach the Watch or the Authorities, as they are involved at the Highest Levels, and I am in fear of My Safety, if not My Very Life.

My Employer has become Embroiled in a Plan that threatens all of our Fair City if not the Entire Colony. Under the rubric of Public Safety and the Advancement of Knowledge, a Certain Group of Individuals have decided to burn a select list of structures so they may test out a Bold New Substance currently in development. This is no Jape, sir, or Amusing Jest, sir, I assure you.

I am endeavoring to discover more about the Substance In Question, but I fear my position will not allow me the wherewithal to prevent these fires before I can Make My Discovery. Therefore I am trusting you, as an Honorable Investigator and Publisher of News, to assist me in my inquiries. We must determine the identities of this Foul Cabal before they have a chance to burn fair New Eddington to the very rocks on which She Was Founded.

*Yours in faith of the Commonwealth,
Anon.”*

Gareth took a deep breath as he heard Cole turn over the page. “It’s a list of dates and places,” he said

wearily. "The fires that have been and those yet to come." He opened his eyes.

Cole set the page down at a distance from him on the table. "Explain. How did you come into possession of such a document?"

"About six weeks ago, I returned home from the cardhouse to find a note in my greatcoat, stating that if I was in any way trustworthy, I'd show up the following evening at ten before midnight at the corner of Lake and Battery Streets. I went and waited in the freezing cold alone for an hour. When I realized I'd been set up, I headed home in a foul mood. I do remember, about a block from home, one of those damned urchins came rocketing out of the darkness and took me round the knees. I kept my feet and he did not, but when I returned home, that note was in my pocket." Gareth stopped, racked by a cough that felt like his lungs were lined with glass. He fumbled for a handkerchief and, finding none in his woolens, spat blue goop onto the carpet and wiped his mouth roughly with the back of his hand.

"From that evening onward, the missives came regularly, at least once a week, each more urgent and less coherent than the last, all of them mysteriously arriving in my pocket, usually after a long night at the cardhouse." He gestured to the rest of the pile nestled in the fabric, but Cole made no move to touch them,

regarding them with the same distaste Gareth would have lavished on a centipede in his bath.

Cole said nothing, so Gareth continued.

“I’ve tried—God how I’ve tried—to find out the identity of the ‘Foul Cabal’ in question, or even just the identity of this mystery employer, but to no avail.” He stared down at the vines in the carpet. “Even that much was beyond me. Some newspaperman I turned out to be.”

They sat in silence. The steam pipes that carried heat through the town house hissed and clanged, and Gareth jumped. But Cole sat motionless.

Gareth leaned forward, extending a hand to the pile of papers. Cole leaned back. After a minute, he said, “Men died in those fires, Gareth.”

“And their blood will never wash from my hands. But if this mystery man is right...”

“Then the Reform government is sponsoring the fires.” Cole sat up, peering red-eyed at the pages in Gareth’s secret packet. He spread them across the table with an open palm. “You idiot.”

“What?”

“You noble, honest, brave, forthright *idiot*.”

“Thank you?”

“Why didn’t you go to the watch when you received the first missive?”

Gareth stared. "The watch is corrupt. You must know that as surely as my mystery correspondent."

Cole spluttered, and Gareth watched as hope foundered in his eyes. "Surely we are not the last two honest men in the colonies. Surely there is someone else..."

Gareth waited, heart in his throat. Finally, Cole arranged the letters in a neat pile and folded them back the same way Gareth had. He tucked the fabric tightly back around the edges until the whole looked just as they had before the conversation started. Cole raised his gaze to Gareth's eyes. "We look like a couple of chimney sweeps," Cole said, raising a hand to Gareth's cheek. "You're covered in soot, and I bet I am too. Go back to bed while I have a bath readied, and then I'll prepare a tonic for your throat."

Gareth started to protest, but one look in Cole's eyes stilled his tongue. Cole believed him. Perhaps could even believe in him.

Cole rose and tugged Gareth to his feet. "I hoped—" He choked on the words, and Gareth's arms were round him in an instant. "I wanted so much for you—that you—and not—" He foundered, and Gareth saved him from further speech with a kiss. *My proud and honest old soldier.* So much did he want to be worthy of Cole's love. He wanted this man at his side until the end of days.

Cole scrubbed angrily at his leaking eyes. "There's just one thing, Gareth."

Gareth didn't loosen his grip. "What's that?"

"This list. The one your mystery informant provided. The library's not on it."

Gareth opened his mouth to respond, but a sudden commotion in the hallway outside broke in on them.

Hindle's voice was raised and sounded almost frightened, and Gareth struggled to make out the words through the wall. He heard the manservant protesting; then an answer cut him off, loud and angry. Gareth groaned, just as the door opened.

"I'm here to see Mr. Charles, whether he's alive or dead, you understand? And if he's dead, I'll be addressing my questions to his cold lifeless corpse and expecting an answer just the same. And let me tell you, sonny boy, if you get in my way one more time, I'll have you in irons and up before the courts on charges of treason." Kint strode angrily into the room and stopped, looking from Gareth to Cole and back again. "Well hello there, Mr. Charles. I trust you and Mr. Cole spent a pleasant evening at home?" He took in Gareth's woolens and raised his eyebrows. "Nice outfit."

"Gareth is too unwell to speak with you today!" Cole said heatedly, stepping in front of Gareth.

"Cole, either stand down, or I'll take you downtown

right now and come back for the newshound.”

Gareth touched the rough wool of Cole’s jacket and gave him a reassuring smile as he stepped back. “Hindle, you may leave us.” The servant gave a nervous nod and retreated out the door.

“Spill it, Charles.” Kint growled. “Don’t make me spill it for you.”

“The Pourhouse,” Gareth said, fighting the urge to clear his throat. “I was there last night, and for the second time, I saw two men. They’re not the usual types. And I was following one of them when I was set upon.”

Slowly Gareth managed a description of the clerk and the redhead, watching as Kint scribbled in his notebook. At last he’d shared everything he’d planned, and when Kint looked up expectantly, Gareth shook his head. “That’s all. I know no more.”

He very carefully did not glance at the fabric-wrapped bundle on the table.

A look of speculation came over the lieutenant inspector’s face. “Maybe so,” he allowed, tapping his pencil against his notebook. “Or maybe there’s a hell of a lot more you know that you ain’t telling. Like how it is you always seem to turn up on the scene of these fires. And what forty gallons of kerosene was doing in the office of the *Chronicle*, all ready to explode nice and neat. See, if I was a suspicious man, that’s the kinda thing that’d

make my mind go to uncharitable places, Mr. Charles. Very uncharitable places.”

Gareth stared at the lieutenant in horror. He had not foreseen this development. His unknown informant had been feeding him just enough information to ensure he incriminated himself. “I never kept kerosene at the *Chronicle*.”

“What I got to say to you about that, Charles, is that someone did. And it was your building, your paper, and you’re the guy I keep seeing in the neighborhood, every time one of these fires starts up.” Kint’s eyes glittered dangerously. “And last night, you miscalculated and sent your own offices up in flames, and I’m not sorry, neither. You’re the piece of filth behind these fires, Charles, captain or no, and this ain’t the last you’ve seen of me.” With a long look at each of them, the gendarme stalked out of the room without a backward glance.

The stricken look on Cole’s face pierced Gareth’s heart. “Cole,” he managed hoarsely, “it’s not true, what he’s saying. I didn’t set the fires. I didn’t keep kerosene. I’m not—” He broke off, fear flooding through him. “Cole, please believe me.”

“I believe you.” Cole’s lips pressed softly against Gareth’s forehead, and Gareth opened his eyes, raising his head slowly. Cole looked worried but not angry, and he hadn’t pulled away.

He turned anxious eyes to Cole. "By morning, you may be the only one who does."

Gareth sighed, thinking of the circumstantial evidence Kint had mounted against him. It sounded bad, he knew—his informant had set him up well, getting him to a place in the vicinity of each fire, a place he'd be seen by many possible witnesses. Gareth enumerated them in his mind: the cardhall, the pie shop down by the docks and, on one occasion, the approved Reform Art gallery that occupied part of city hall. He'd gone like a lamb to slaughter and watched the fires with the same horrified fascination as the other onlookers. And Kint had watched him. The addition of the kerosene at the *Chronicle* had merely been icing on the cake, a final masterstroke in the scheme.

An uncertain cough made them both jump, and they turned to find Hindle regarding them nervously. "I came to see if you needed anything," he said, eyes on Cole's hand where it rested on Gareth's shoulder.

"Nothing," Gareth snapped, but Cole raised a hand, forestalling him.

"Yes, Hindle," he said smoothly. "Mr. Charles has suffered an injury to his throat. Kindly fetch towels, hot water, and honey, and bring them to the bathroom."

"Yessir." Hindle bobbed his head nervously and hurried from the room.

“Towels, hot water, and honey?” Gareth raised his eyebrows.

“With them, and with your medical kit, I can prepare a tonic to ease your throat. Come on, my friend. Let’s go back upstairs.”

Gareth let Cole help him up the stairs. Yesterday, he’d been a respected businessman, and yet today, at the very least, his livelihood had been destroyed, and now he was suspected of being the perpetrator. If, on top of that, Hindle informed against him as a homosexual—Gareth closed his eyes as Cole guided him back to his bed. “I fear you saved me from the flames only to see me hang.”

“Oh no, Gareth.” Cole spoke forcefully, and Gareth opened his eyes in surprise at the anger in his lover’s voice. “Don’t you quit on me, Captain. You might have been living soft in this fancy house the last few years, but you can’t have forgotten so easily what it means to fight.

“I know you know more than you told Kint, and I still believe—I have to believe—that you told me the truth, that you’re not the fire-setter. We fought the same war, believed the same truths. I know you, Gareth Charles, and whatever you are, whatever’s going on here, you’re a soldier, goddammit. Not some prissy Reformist captain who’ll lie down and die because some gendarme pushes him around a bit.” Cole looked at him an instant, breathing hard, then finished in a rush.

“Besides, I’ll be damned if I let you quit!”

Gareth swallowed with difficulty. The truth of Cole’s words hit him hard, straight to the heart, and he felt a rush of shame. “You’re right,” he whispered, then choked out a short, difficult laugh. “Although you may be damned regardless.”

That’s a chance I’ll gladly take.” Cole eyed him for a moment, then twisted a smile. “Sit still and don’t talk. You’ll feel better when I fix this up, believe me.” He turned away, busying himself at the washstand while Gareth did as he asked.

After only a few moments, Cole handed over a steaming bowl of pale green liquid, wrapped in a towel. “Breathe this in,” he instructed, and Gareth lowered his head obediently, drawing in a lungful of the warm, damp air. A soft medicinal tang settled on his tongue.

Watching the liquid swirl against the bowl’s enameled sides, Gareth breathed the warm, soothing steam. With every moment he could feel the raw tightness in his throat relaxing, the sting dulling with every swallow. He could hear Cole moving around the room and took in the splash of water and the chink of enamel before he heard the *snick* of the door closing. His cough abated with none of the pain from earlier, and Gareth sighed with relief. He expanded his chest, breathing as deeply as he was able.

It wasn't long before Cole returned and took the cooling bowl from his hands. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," Gareth said, essaying a small smile. "I did not know you were so skilled in medical matters."

"I'm not." Cole placed the bowl on the nightstand. "But I learned. A physician charges more by the hour than a firewalker makes in a week."

Gareth shivered, reaching for his lover, thinking that Cole had not forgotten how to fight. Even back from war, his every day had been a struggle.

"It's okay." Cole pulled Gareth into his arms, grunting with satisfaction as Gareth wrapped his own arms around him. "You feel up to a bath?"

Submerged in warm water to his chin, head resting against his lover's shoulder, Gareth sighed contentedly. The steam inhalation had soothed his throat, and the heat of the bath and the Epsom salts in the water were soaking away the soreness still present in his muscles. The slight sting of witch hazel had given way to a pleasant tingling as the antiseptic did its work on his grazes and scratches.

Cole's hands were on his skin, soaping him down, sliding across his shoulders, gentle on the bruise on his neck, then sliding lower, tracing his collarbone, and then sliding lower. Gareth moaned softly as Cole caressed his chest, turning the dark hair white with lather, thumbs

teasing Gareth's nipples into tight, hard buds.

"All right?" Cole breathed softly in his ear.

Gareth whimpered, arching back against his lover's body.

Cole kissed his jaw softly, and Gareth shuddered in his lover's arms, eyes closed. Aching with desire, he let his head fall back on Cole's shoulder and moaned his need. Cole's hands slid lower, down to Gareth's hips, between his spread legs.

Water splashed as he bucked into Cole's touch, groaning as the strong hand stroked him, firm and compelling. Chills rushed up Gareth's spine, and he whimpered, arching, sending more water sloshing over the side of the tub. He sobbed desperately as Cole clasped an arm across his chest, holding him tight, while with his other hand he worked Gareth's cock, skilled and rhythmic. "Let go," Cole said, low and hoarse. "I've got you."

That was all Gareth needed. With a harsh cry, he gave in to the throbbing ache deep in his balls. His orgasm, sudden and blinding, exploded in a wave of unbearable pleasure, and he thrashed in Cole's arms as the aftershocks rocked him, over and over.

"Easy," Cole whispered, kissing his neck and shoulder, hands soft on Gareth's skin, gentling him. Gareth held on blindly, eyes closed, as Cole rinsed the

soap away and got them both out of the bathroom and back into bed.

Gareth tried to rouse himself as he felt Cole lie down beside him, pulling the bedclothes over them both. He fought to force his eyes open.

Cole kissed him gently and held him tight. "Sleep, now. You need your strength. Tomorrow, I fear we may be at war."

Eight

Gareth woke before sunset and lay still, watching the pale winter sun struggle free of the low, impenetrable clouds that hung over New Eddington, promising another night of sleet. He shivered and moved a little closer to Cole's naked sleeping form, his mind returning to the previous night's events.

It seemed clear that the informant, instead of a concerned citizen seeking to have the arson plot made public, was an enemy, out to discredit Gareth for some reason he could not fathom. Gareth shuddered. Was he merely a convenient scapegoat, someone to divert the suspicions of the watch? Or did the plot run deeper, an attack against him specifically?

He shuddered at the memory of the burning press, the flames leaping higher, the familiar office of the *Chronicle* being consumed, devoured, before his eyes. The awful creeping blue foam, the overpowering terror... Gareth closed his eyes. In the moments before he'd heard Cole call his name, he'd been facing certain death, too

weak to save himself. He had lied to Cole, and despite that, Cole had come when he needed him. Cole had saved his life.

“But how did he know I was in there?” Gareth spoke under his breath, but Cole rolled over, blinking sleepily.

“How did who know?”

“I didn’t know you were awake.” Gareth turned on his side, facing Cole, eyes searching the old soldier’s face. There was a trace of wariness in Cole’s eyes, but he met Gareth’s gaze steadily. Gareth took a deep breath. “You, Cole. How did you know I was at the newspaper office? How did you find me? How did you even know I was in danger?”

Cole hesitated, running his tongue over his lips. “I followed you,” he said after a long moment. “I knew you were lying about the message that came, and... Gareth, I couldn’t wait here to find out why. I had to know. I had to know before it was too late.”

“Too late?”

“What I feel for you already...” Cole stopped, and Gareth watched him struggle to find words.

His heart swelled, and he was opening his mouth to speak when a strange sound came from downstairs. Cole’s fingers tightened on Gareth’s bare arms, and the sound came again, this time unmistakable: the sound of splintered wood and a lock forced asunder, then the slam

of solid oak into soft plaster. "Gareth Charles!" shouted an unfamiliar voice. "In the name of Reform!"

Then footsteps thundered on the stairs.

Gareth and Cole spared only a moment in silent, panicked communication; then the teeth of danger sank into both their hides, and they sprang up and apart, scrambling for garments. "The watch," Gareth managed, pulling his woollens back up his legs.

"Yes. Their visit does not appear social in nature." Cole slipped his trousers up over his hips and buttoned them with his eyes on Gareth. "Your home..."

"Built by good old-fashioned colonists with more faith in the earth than their government. Follow me." He pulled his shirt on as he spoke and bumped one panel of the ornate wainscoting with a hip.

It swung silently aside as official fists hammered at their chamber door. "Gareth Charles. Open up in the name of the law!"

Gareth dove to the carpet and clawed at the wood planks under one corner. Cole darted to one side of a walnut dresser and painstakingly shoved it across the door frame, panting with the effort. Gareth opened the safe with shaking hands and scooped the contents into a leather shoulder satchel.

"Gareth Charles, you are under arrest!" Voices quarreled in the corridor, as if unsure of their duty.

“Open this door at once!”

Gareth dropped the heavy safe door shut. Cole looked meaningfully at the open wainscoting as the walnut bureau guaranteeing their safety shifted with every fusillade of fists and inched across the floor toward them, leaving indentations in the wooden planks.

“This way.” Gareth crossed to the wall and, with an effort, hitched his leg across the sash.

“There’s another?” Cole muttered. He was hot on Gareth’s heels even as the pounding in the corridor continued. At the last moment, Gareth saw Cole lean across the nightstand and grab the medical kit, buckling it hurriedly before ducking behind the open panel. He nodded his approval as Cole slammed the panel shut.

Behind the wainscoting, rough steps led down into the pitch-dark. Gareth reached for Cole’s hand at the exact instant it made contact with his hip. Old soldiers never die, he thought, taking the stairs as fast as he dared. They just keep reloading. He felt his way along the brick passage leading down to the ground floor. Cold air welled up around them, and Gareth shivered in his shirtsleeves.

Above them he could hear more splintering wood and salty oaths as the watch broke into his bedroom, expecting to find...what? Had they been betrayed by his servants? A too-keen but unknown pair of eyes? And

were Kint's men there expecting to find homosexuals or traitors to the crown?

Did they still know the difference?

Gareth stumbled down the stone steps, and Cole caught his elbow, preventing him from falling. There was no time for thanks, though, not with the crash of wood above indicating the watch in hot pursuit. Gareth stood stock-still and blind in the pitch-black passage, feeling the bricks with his fingertips. He'd used this passageway only once, on a drunken dare, and now in the sober light of true danger, he regretted his carelessness. Fighting down panic, Gareth ran his hands lightly over the rough squares and mortar. Cole's hand remained at his hip, firm and reassuring. He panted in Gareth's ear.

With a quiet *snick*, the door of the passage came free, and Gareth shouldered it open.

The two men emerged into the cold dark kitchen of Gareth's town house. There was no sign of Cook or Hindle and Gareth offered up a prayer for their safety as Cole closed the passage door behind them. Anxious, inquiring feet crossed the floor above their heads, and rough male voices cautioned each other in the passage behind the walls. The watch was still in hot pursuit.

Gareth scooped a loaf of bread out from under a still-damp towel and stuffed it in his satchel. Then he crossed to the wide-mouthed brick oven. "Trust me," he

muttered, then eased himself quickly onto the oven's cold lip, swinging his feet into the guttered mouth. He felt the lip of the oven beneath his buttocks and extended his legs down cautiously, nearly weeping with relief when his shoes encountered the rough stones of the passage.

Cole crawled in after him. "Bless these paranoid colonist builders of yours," he muttered.

The space was still warm with the heat from the stove, and Gareth started down, feeling Cole close behind him, hand still resting on his hip.

The staircase was short, and at the bottom, Gareth ducked his head and peered into a low-ceilinged tunnel. He fumbled for Cole's hand, needing its presence in his own as much for reassurance as for guiding. From overhead came more rough voices and the shouts of frenzied searching. Cook had shown him the space beneath the house a couple of summers ago when he'd wondered aloud where she'd stored vegetables during the hot weather. From there, Gareth had researched the history of the house for a *Chronicle* story and discovered New Eddington was honeycombed with such tunnels—a hidden accompaniment to the steam pipes that powered so many of the town's services.

The story had been struck dead by the Minister for the People's Truth. Sometimes a little history could be dangerous.

Gareth held Cole's sleeve as he searched the shelves across from the staircase. Rocklike root vegetables, their skins wrinkled and soft, skittered away from his touch as he fumbled for the flint he'd remembered seeing on his first visit.

It was nowhere to be found.

As fine china shattered against the wooden floor above, Gareth pulled Cole down the corridor, his brain hurriedly reassembling a map of the underground labyrinth. The rough granite under their feet was at least dry and ice-free, and each step he took was sure, even as his hands blindly mapped cool, slick walls as they passed.

The two men hurried, bent nearly double, as heavy boots stomped across the floor overhead. Gareth doubled his pace as the tunnel began to slope down, Cole's hand warm and sure in the small of his back, until at last the roof got higher. It was lighter now, no longer the impenetrable full dark of underground, and Gareth breathed a sigh of relief.

A few more feet and his hands found the first of the iron rungs set into the wall. Gareth stopped, breathing hard. He pulled on Cole's sleeve and moved his hand to the nearest rusted rung, already climbing.

At the top of the ladder was a small iron hatch. The metal was icy cold and burned to touch, and Gareth

suppressed an oath.

“Gareth?” Cole hissed from below.

Gareth whistled a low all clear just as the latch gave under his hand. He cautiously cracked the hatch open and stared. Outside there was nothing but the gloomy twilight and dark, quiet buildings, their inhabitants hiding from the snow and cold. Gareth scrambled out, whistling to Cole.

He slid out of the opening and listened to the sound of Cole ascending, willing his partner to hurry. The chill of the night air bit into his exposed skin, and he winced at the unfamiliar discomfort. When Cole appeared, Gareth could have kissed him easily, but he settled instead for offering a hand, helping Cole out of the tunnel.

“General Beaufort?” Cole said in a tone of disbelief, and Gareth gave a short laugh, standing up.

They were in the park below Gareth’s house, beneath the general’s statue. Cole looked from the general’s proud, unseeing eyes down to the base of the statue, the seemingly solid, speckled granite block.

Gareth grinned. “It seems the perfect irony to have him cover our escape.”

The raised iron letters set in the base of the statue were barely visible in the gloom. *Toward a Better Freedom*. Gareth swung the latch home, and the

decorative plate returned to its original position.

Together, he and Cole crunched up the slush-crusted bank, taking cover behind a squat and bushy evergreen. The town house was clearly visible from their hiding place, and Gareth swore under his breath. The heavy front door hung broken and askew, smashed by the gendarmes, and on the doorstep stood two forbidding members of the watch.

“They meant business,” Cole said under his breath.

Gareth nodded, shifting slightly to press his shoulder harder against his partner. If anyone had asked him, he would have said he placed little value on material things, but the last day and a half had made him realize he'd come to place more reliance on his position and his possessions than he knew.

Just then, one of the strongly built horses harnessed to the prison wagon stamped a foot and gave a restless, snorting neigh. The driver shouted to him angrily. Seconds later, the sound of thundering hooves came through the rapidly descending twilight, and Gareth and Cole shrank farther back into concealment.

With a rattling jounce, a shabby-looking hansom trundled to a stop, blocking their view of the house. Almost before it ceased moving, the door was flung open and Lieutenant Kint jumped out without waiting to use the steps. He stumbled as he landed and flung a coin at

the driver. "Smithson!" he roared, face scarlet, marching toward the prison wagon. "What's going on? Where's Charles? This is my case, and if you oafs have jeopardized it, I'll have your hide!"

The hansom jingled away down the street, leaving Kint face-to-face with the luckless officer, shouting and gesticulating. The pair were soon joined by another, while several more stood idly by, smirking.

"Dissension in the watch," Cole murmured.

"I doubt it helps us any, unfortunately." Gareth sighed. "But if it wasn't Kint who ordered my arrest, who was it?"

"One way to find out. Wait here." Before Gareth could stop him, Cole had slipped out from behind the bush and, as Gareth watched in trepidation, strolled across the street toward the prison wagon.

Cole stopped on the street side of the wagon, hidden from the house and Kint by the vehicle's bulk. He tapped on the driver's box, and after a few brief negotiations, the man leaned down and handed Cole a cigarette. Gareth's hand went to his pocket reflexively at the sight of the lit end, but their flight had been too sudden. Instead, he waited nervously. What Cole was doing was risky, and Gareth wasn't sure if the payoff was worth the risk.

A shouted command from the house made the driver look up hurriedly, and Cole raised his hands,

stepping back. Gareth saw the driver sketch a hurried wave, and Cole turned on his heel, walking briskly away down the street as gendarmes poured out of the house and into the road.

He lost sight of Cole almost immediately in the gathering dusk. The lamplighter's mournful call came from several blocks away, closer to the lake, but up here on the hill, the darkness grew deeper by the minute. Gareth froze, listening in the dark, straining his ears for footsteps.

Soldier's instinct told him Cole was nearby, and Gareth was wondering if he dared risk a signal of some kind when he heard the low sweet note of a hunting owl. Gareth came to attention in an instant, and when the sound came again, he recognized it for what it was. Cole's signal.

He followed a gravel path deeper into the park, heading toward the sound until he came to a silent water feature, fountain off for the winter, its bowl a dish of ice. The ground beneath was already white with frost. Keeping to the shadows, Gareth looked around the stark and naked shrubbery and chanced a low whistle himself.

Cole slipped out of the gloom on the other side of the clearing, and in two quick steps, Gareth crossed the space between them and gripped Cole's arms hard. "What did you learn?"

Cole pressed against him, eyes boring into Gareth's. "Come," he whispered. "Let's get somewhere we can talk."

Gareth managed a nod, relief surging through him at the feel of Cole at his side once again. "I think I know a place. We should get to ground for the night."

Cole sucked in air through his teeth. "Where d'you have in mind?"

Gareth registered the shiver that went through his friend, and he remembered with a pang the cut running along Cole's side. "A place that's warm and private, deserted, and with any luck, there's even some food lying around."

"Sounds perfect. Where is it?"

Gareth told him.

Cole's face fell. "Tell me you're kidding."

"Do you trust me? Now of all times, when I'm a wanted criminal?"

Cole stepped in close. "More now than ever, but still..."

Gareth chuckled. "Follow me."

He led Cole quickly along a gravel path leading away from the center of the park. The sound of their footfalls fell like fists on Gareth's worn nerves, but he reckoned that was less of a trail than fresh footprints breaking the frozen rime of the hibernating shrub beds.

If someone heard them now and came running, Gareth knew with certainty they'd both fight capture to the death, but they were neither of them as young as they'd been in the Crimean, and Gareth was eager to hole up for the remainder of the evening. Their path wound scenically around a series of plaques set into the ground, laid out like the segments of a snake and carved with Reform slogans. *Honor Through Service*, read one. *Strength Before Charity*, another.

Gareth bit back a snort as they trod lightly over the snow-encrusted letters. *Just goes to show, can't believe everything you read.*

They reached their destination without mishap, and with Cole hard on his heels, Gareth led them behind a row of evergreens whose thick branches glittered with ice. The sun had abandoned New Eddington, and it felt like the temperature had dropped at least ten degrees since their flight from the town house. With Cole standing guard, Gareth worked his penknife into the steel padlock holding the double doors to the basement passage firmly shut. It burned his palm, and he hurried as much as he dared, until finally it dropped open. With a last look around him at the quiet, shuttered streets, Gareth opened one door and gestured Cole to follow behind.

They descended a flight of stone steps before Gareth

stopped Cole with a tug at his trousers. With the other hand, he fumbled along the wall until he felt a recessed alcove. Flint and a tallow candle lay inside, and with a last look to make sure the doors at the top of the stairs were firmly shut, Gareth struck a spark and touched flame to the greasy, odorous wax. They were standing at the head of a short, dark corridor. Gareth led the way, Cole's hand resting on his back. At the end, a steep, narrow stair led up, and they stepped softly on the petrified wooden steps, their movements no louder than the creak of the old building settling around them.

They ascended six flights, each tiny landing barely wider than the step that preceded it, the walls of the narrow stairwell close against their shoulders. The air was cold and stale, and they were both breathing hard by the time they reached the top.

Gareth panted as he sought the hatch in the wall; he gave the metal ring a sharp twist, and the hatch came open in his hands, its hinges moving in well-oiled silence.

He scrambled through and turned to help Cole, then closed the hatch firmly behind them.

The candle's smoky orange flame showed the corner of an attic with bare-board walls, furnished with a tall wooden table and a sleeping pallet in the corner. From nearby came a dull metallic *thunk*, followed by six echoing gong strikes and the whirring of cogs as the

giant clock that watched over the city marked the passing of another hour.

After the sounds died away, Cole whispered, "I have to admit, no one would think to look for New Eddington's most wanted in the tower of city hall itself. How did you find this place?"

"There's no need for quiet here," Gareth replied in a normal voice. He indicated a strange round metal oval, seamed down the middle and speckled with black dotlike pores, sitting motionless in one corner of the room. Two antennae protruded from the end closest to them, their ends glowing with soft green light. As Gareth spoke, the antennae executed slow, wavering circles. "One of Theodore's many endearing quirks is his rabid paranoia. This is one of his favorite safe houses, insulated for sound by that...contraption over there."

"Safe houses? You mean he has more than one?"

"Four at last count. And those are just the ones I know about."

"Your mad little inventor friend grows curiouser and curiouser," Cole commented.

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of. But he's a useful ally." Gareth knelt and began to undo his boots. He gestured to Cole to do the same. Theodore's mysterious invention would swallow their voices, but it was no defense against the sound of hobnails crossing the

wooden floor. Although the business of city hall should be winding down at this hour, Gareth hated to chance their safety.

“And the warmth of the place,” Cole said, “is that Theodore’s doing as well?”

“Hardly. City hall is renowned for having the most efficient and up-to-date heating system in the city. Can’t have the king’s men growing cold in their quest for justice.” Gareth carried his boots over to the small pallet and lined them up neatly before opening a small, squat cubby set at the foot of the bed. “Ah. Theodore, my stomach thanks you.”

Cole placed his boots next to Gareth’s. “Don’t tell me. This Theodore is also a chef?”

Gareth withdrew a few small, wrapped bundles from inside the primitive pantry and handed them to Cole. “No. But he does have to eat.” He withdrew the last of the foodstuffs and indicated the rough table with a nod. “As do we. Come. The best planning’s done on full stomachs.”

“You’ll hear no argument from me.” Cole dropped heavily into a chair and began untying the bundles. The loaf of bread from Gareth’s satchel was joined by a hunk of hard, crumbly yellow cheese and a jar of strange, moonlike vegetables floating in liquid. Cole unscrewed the lid as Gareth joined him. “Onions pickled in ale. I can’t remember the last time I had these. They’re a

delicacy.”

Gareth uncovered two bottles of dark beer, tightly stoppered, and set them next to the rest. “Did you hear anything of interest at the house?”

“This Smithson who led the raid knew nothing of you,” Cole said. He tore a chunk of bread off the end of the loaf, and Gareth handed over his penknife for the cheese. “The order came from above, from one Judge Barrington, and Smithson was asked for by name. That was all the driver knew. That and Kint’s fury at being bypassed.”

“I know nothing of this Smithson either,” Gareth mused. “And as for Barrington, all I know of him is that his secretary plays at the cardhall, often deeper than he ought. Come to think of it, the countess is constantly at pains to keep me from his table. Cole, I cannot fathom what this all means.” Gareth unwrapped a bundle of dried fish, salted and pounded flat into strips. He paused at the sight.

“What?” Cole popped a pearllike onion into his mouth and crunched loudly.

“I think Theodore’s been here recently. Or at least he’s stocked the place ready for use.” Gareth regarded the fish jerky uneasily. “He’s expecting trouble.”

“Well, he’s likely found it. I know it’s bad form to question the integrity of a man while raiding his larder,

but... Gareth, about what I told you earlier. I don't believe in coincidences. I mean, what if these safe houses of Theodore's aren't a symptom of his paranoia but of his guilt?"

Cole opened one of the bottles and offered it to Gareth. "I am truly sorry. But what if his visits to the firehouse were neither inspections nor innocent curiosity? My skills at being unobserved have fallen into disuse, and when the two of them caught me listening, they retreated to the firehouse kitchen and shut the door with perhaps more firmness than was strictly warranted."

Gareth took a swig of the dark beer. "Still, I have difficulty believing Theodore could be mixed up in these arsons. What of his own troubles?"

"I didn't tell you before..." Cole eyed Gareth uneasily. "When we were in Theodore's laboratory, I saw a strange contraption indeed. It was a firebug, but no such bug as I have ever ridden, and what its purpose may be, I cannot hazard a guess."

"A firebug?" Gareth's eyebrows shot up. "What use would Theodore have for a firebug?"

"Judging by the tools at its side, he was not using it so much as building it. Or modifying it." Cole pursed his lips. "It was the largest bug I have ever seen, and on its back was a strange, misshapen hump. I do not know what

it has to do with all this, but I do not believe it can be a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe it either.” Gareth frowned. “And what of the iron spheres?” He retrieved the strange globes from the satchel and set them on the table. “They appear harmless, I know, but—”

Cole laid a hand on his arm. The iron balls were moving, just as before, making a beeline for the candle. Gareth remembered Theodore’s note: *Don’t worry; it cannot be traced, and is not dangerous in its current form.*

A soft blue spark arced off the first ball as the second caught up to it, and Gareth snatched them all up off the table. He didn’t want to know what would’ve happened if the spheres had reached the candle. Nor why they sparked then and only then. They sat in his palm now, heavy, cold, and inert.

Cole stared at Gareth, eyes wide with suspicion and incomprehension. “These things seek fire. Theodore made them, and Theodore spends hours at the firehouse. All the while, the town is besieged by fire, fire that is being laid at your door. Gareth, what the hell is going on here?”

“Theodore,” Gareth whispered uneasily. “What have you gotten yourself into?”

Cole reached over and took the strange objects from

Gareth's hand and dropped them back into the satchel. "I do not understand your friend Theodore's inventions, but he's given us a measure of peace tonight and a good meal. And I wager my captain, Wymes, will not shirk an honest question. I'll go tomorrow and ask outright about your friend." He reached out and took Gareth's hand in his own.

Gareth sought his eyes in the candlelight. "Are you sure of him?"

Cole smiled easily and rubbed the base of Gareth's palm with his thumb. "As sure as I can be of anyone... excepting you."

Gareth swallowed hard. "You...and I... I'm sorry to have gotten you into this whole mess. I wish things were easier, and not so—"

Cole leaned over and kissed him, tasting faintly of beer. "Don't be. This is the most fun I've had since I arrived. And were it not for Theodore and his strange troubles, you and I might never have met."

Gareth nodded dumbly, still grasping Cole's hand.

"Now eat, soldier. Who knows when we'll have a spread like this again? And once we're done..." He cleared his throat. "We should get some rest." But Cole's playful, teasing gaze promised anything but.

The rest of their meal took little time, and when they were done, sufficient remained for a light soldier's

breakfast. Cole wrapped the remnants in their cloths and returned them to the cubbyhole.

Gareth carried the candle over to the narrow pallet and set it on the floor, then crawled under the pile of moth-eaten, patterned eiderdowns covering the rude bed. A thin cotton sheet covered the mattress beneath. Cole quickly joined him, sliding in and covering Gareth's body with his own. He regarded Gareth from lined, tired eyes that still held a spark of humor and lust.

The time for words had passed.

They kissed with urgency and passion. Resolve and strength flowed into Gareth, the hot perfection of Cole in his arms, their connection something larger than both of them, bringing them to life. Gareth gasped with the strength of it, almost overwhelmed by the feeling, losing himself in Cole.

Cole groaned with urgent need, and Gareth kissed him harder, desperate to get closer, to make himself a part of Cole. To give him everything, share everything. He clawed at Cole's clothing.

Frantically they stripped each other, hardly able to bear even the thin barrier of fabric between them. Cole's naked body sent fire through Gareth from every place it touched.

Gareth spread his legs as Cole ground their hips together, and Cole kissed him, hard and aggressive,

claiming Gareth's mouth with hungry certainty. Gareth responded with equal hunger, bucking against Cole's body, his cock swollen and ready. He swallowed an urgent cry as his crown slid over Cole's stomach.

Cole kissed him again, gentler this time, eyes soft, and Gareth grabbed at his lover's shoulders, moaning his need. His body ached for Cole inside him, sealing their connection. Sealing their partnership.

Cole's hard cock rubbed over Gareth's, and the coarse hair of his groin scraped over Gareth's shaft. The jolt of pleasure was nearly unbearable, and Gareth arched, trembling, hands tightening on Cole's back.

Cole sobbed with pleasure and lightly mouthed Gareth's neck. "You want this?" he whispered, sliding a hand down Gareth's belly. Gareth raised his legs, spreading himself beneath his lover, giving Cole access. Asking him for everything.

It was rare that Gareth allowed a man to take him, but this was different; being with Cole was more than pleasure, more than simple need. Even more than love.

"I want everything, Cole. Want to be everything to you. Want you every way there is."

Cole's eyes darkened with hunger, and Gareth moaned as Cole's hand shifted to his inner thigh. Cole claimed his mouth again, and Gareth closed his eyes, giving himself over to sensation.

Cole's mouth on his was magic, seeking, finding, his tongue sending waves of desire crashing over Gareth. Each time their lips met, the feeling grew stronger, and then Gareth felt the cool touch of oil on his skin.

Gareth whimpered softly as Cole broke their kiss, raising his body slightly, and Cole whispered his name. Gareth whimpered again.

"You are everything to me," Cole whispered in his ear. His slippery finger probed between Gareth's cheeks and found his hole, circling and teasing, and Gareth sobbed, rocking into the touch.

Gareth was unused to penetration, but Cole seemed to understand, gently fingering his entrance, playing with him, slowly loosening the tight muscle. The ache inside was all-consuming, and Gareth gasped with the urgency, wanting more.

"Easy," Cole whispered, leaning closer and then kissing him lightly on the lips. Gareth groaned in reply, feeling Cole spread more oil on his hole, and then at last his lover's finger breached him, sliding home. Gareth moaned in relief, flexing his hips, breathing coming faster as Cole moved inside him.

Gareth writhed as Cole worked his hole, the perfection and pleasure nearly more than he could stand, thrilling tendrils setting his body quivering. "Cole," he pleaded, arching against his lover's hand. "Need you."

Cole withdrew his fingers and Gareth moaned as he felt the press of Cole's cock against his entrance. Trembling with anticipation, he opened his eyes. Cole was staring down at him, heat and lust blazing in his eyes, the flickering candle turning his skin and hair to gold. As Gareth stared, mesmerized, Cole pushed in. The perfect agony of the moment built in Gareth, a pure, distilled ecstasy that grew inside him, taking him higher, ready to explode. He could see the feeling building in Cole's eyes, driving him on, past the point of no return.

Gareth sobbed and panted, and with an oath, Cole thrust in hard, driving his hips against Gareth's ass, his hands hard on Gareth's shoulders. Gareth gasped, breathless, pain and pleasure flowing over him in equal measures as his body adjusted to the intrusion, overwhelmed by the sensation of Cole inside him, Cole making him his.

Cole's first short stroke went home, straight to Gareth's pleasure center, and Gareth rolled his hips back, whining his need. Cole's mouth was on his, urgent and desperate, kissing him as though he'd never stop, and Gareth grabbed Cole's hips, clutching with all his strength. Cole stroked harder, and Gareth groaned in satisfaction, meeting every thrust, but still he wanted more. As hard as Cole drove him, it wasn't enough, could never be enough.

With a final thrust, Cole drove in roughly, his body shaking, hips driven hard against Gareth's flesh. Gareth gasped at the look in his eyes—part tenderness, part hunger—and raised a shaking hand to cup Cole's cheek.

"Come on, partner," Cole whispered and drove into Gareth again.

Pleasure exploded in Gareth, deeper, fuller than anything he'd ever known, his whole body on fire from an ember deep inside. He thrashed against the blankets, clinging to Cole with all his strength, letting himself go.

Cole dropped heavily on his chest, shaking, and Gareth held him tight as their movements gradually ceased. At last they lay still together, panting softly, Gareth's hand gentle on Cole's sweat-slick back.

"You and me," Gareth whispered, and Cole raised his head. His blue eyes were clear and joyful, suddenly the eyes of a much younger man, and Gareth smiled involuntarily, his own heart lifting.

"You and me, Gareth." Cole kissed him, deep and hard. As he raised his head again, his softening cock slipped free of Gareth's body, and Gareth grunted at the loss. He sat up slowly as Cole moved, sliding his arm around his lover, feeling the warmth of his skin against the cold touch of the air.

"It's getting cold," he murmured.

"I know." Cole leaned in close. "Should get dressed, I

guess.” But he made no move to break the connection.

Gareth understood how he felt. Where he was touching Cole, he felt warmth and reassurance flowing into him, giving him strength, giving him purpose. The idea of letting go, even for the moment or two it would take to dress, was unwelcome, almost frightening. The connection was so strong, so vital, he wasn’t surprised that Cole felt it too.

He leaned forward, reaching across the floor for their discarded clothing. He dried himself off roughly with his shirt, then performed the same service for Cole. As he stood to don his undershirt, his gaze fell on the tallow candle, burning lower.

Gareth bit his lip, looking at Cole who had folded back the blankets and was preparing their bed.

“What?” Cole slid his long legs into the bedding and picked up his undershirt, looking up inquiringly.

“I know you don’t like sleeping in the dark any more than I do. But I fear this candle will not last the night.”

“Then put it out.” Cole gave him a small smile. “We will need its light tomorrow. And if you’ll hold me, I hazard that I will not dream of war.”

Gareth felt a slow smile spread over his own face. “You make a good point.” He joined his partner in the bed, leaned over, and blew out the candle. Then he lay down and let Cole’s warmth consume him.

Nine

“I’m going with you to the firehouse,” Gareth announced.

Cole yawned and stretched, pressing his naked body against Gareth’s with slow, sinuous movements.

“You forget,” Cole said sleepily, “you’re a fugitive. You have to stay here and stay hidden. I’ll be back before anyone’s the wiser. Certainly before noon and well before evening.”

“When you put it that way... Just—for God’s sake, be careful.”

Cole smiled grimly. “Crimea stole my god, Gareth. But for your sake”—he stole a kiss—“I will.”

Gareth slid his hands over the solid contours of Cole’s back as he tried to make sense of the pieces of the puzzle. The fact that he’d been framed for the arsons indicated he’d somehow gotten too close to whoever was really behind them, somehow invoked their wrath. But who? And when? As a newspaperman, Gareth could

admit he'd taken too long to arrive at any inkling of the truth, had given in too easily to the solid black bars stamped across his stories, protecting New Eddington from a truth apparently more difficult to stomach than needless destruction. He'd put his Crimean training too far behind him and gotten soft, living easily while honest men toiled for their bread. Men like Cole... Gareth cupped his lover's ass, relishing the heat of his skin, the way he arched against Gareth at the contact.

There was so much to make up for and so little time.

They moved against each other, urgent and rough, preserving their connection as best they could with grasping hands and wet and eager mouths.

Lying spent and sated against Cole's chest, Gareth closed his eyes, willing the dawn to stay away. But at last their errands could be put off no longer.

They rose and dressed in silence and consumed the remains of the previous evening's meal. The rude fare reminded Gareth of a thousand soldiers' billets, and he shivered. They marched to war indeed. "Wish me luck," Cole whispered as he prepared to take his leave.

"I don't believe in it. Just return to me, safe and sound." Gareth brushed Cole's lips with his own.

Cole sketched a salute. Then he gently eased open the hatch and slipped out into the passageway, leaving Gareth very much alone.

Gareth's good intentions lasted for exactly three hands of solitaire.

The cards were worn and tattered and slipped easily through his hands as he mulled over his situation. He was sure it was linked to Theodore's troubles and the odd packages: the mouse, the strange parchment, and the cluster of spheres currently sitting heavy and inert in the pocket of his satchel.

Perhaps if he and Theodore compared notes, they could make some sense of it all. By Gareth's reckoning, it was nearly light now, plenty of time for the little inventor to have arrived at his laboratory, if he hadn't in fact spent the night there. Gareth stood and collected the cards, then dropped them into the satchel. What he'd told Cole was true; he didn't believe in luck, but he sure as hell believed in stacking the deck.

It was the work of a few moments to slip out the door and pick his way carefully across the exposed rafter beams.

The chill morning was filled with hurrying pedestrians, coat collars turned up against the frost. Gareth found himself with the uneasy sensation of eyes upon him, but everywhere he looked, he saw only citizens about their business. No one spared him a second glance.

Even so, he waited until the sentry on city hall's steps was occupied exchanging pleasantries with one of the numerous flower sellers in the square before joining the passing throng and hurrying in the direction of the waterfront.

He arrived at Theodore's laboratory to find the huge room in a shambles. Oddly colored liquids pooled on the floor, their beakers lying smashed and shattered all over. Sheets of paper covered with Theodore's precise copperplate and intricate drawings lay crumpled or burned on every surface. The steam-organ spider lay on its side, legs in the air. Some of its other legs lay nearby, bent at impossible angles.

Gareth slowly crossed the cavernous space, his shoes crunching over shards of glass. He marveled at the destruction.

On the high workbench that ran the length of the room, Gareth spied a thick, leather-bound ledger, seemingly untouched. He crossed to it with growing unease. As he reached for it, he froze with revulsion. A lifeless mouse lay pinned to a dissection board, its skin pulled away from a long incision running from throat to tail. Inside, all of its organs were stained a terrible vivid blue. Gareth looked away and reached for the journal next to it with care.

The pages were covered with Theodore's precise

hand, words scrawled across the page, some at odd angles, and everywhere were sketches. The line drawings looked like nothing Gareth had ever seen, but as he stared at them, he realized he was looking at a series of plans. He scanned the notes accompanying them but could make little sense of the inventor's ramblings.

Ferrous materials provide the only known containment abilities for the vitriol. Yet, over time, the unstable endothermic reactions inherent to the substance build mass enough to eat away at the containers, eventually consuming the raw material and converting it to additional resources. The accumulation of endothermic activity feeds into itself in a cycle of unending thermodynamic instability. Sources of the required energy appear to include both man-made and organic materials.

Gareth shrugged. The notes might as well have been in Crimean. He refocused his attentions on the diagrams.

Each drawing seemed to illustrate a small component of a greater whole—as Gareth flicked the pages, he saw the arrows indicating where each piece would join—then he turned a page and froze. Neatly drawn in Theodore's telltale hand was a diagram of a firebug unlike any Gareth had ever seen before. The carapace was humped and misshapen, and Gareth

thought of what Cole had seen in this very laboratory. In the diagram, the bug wasn't connected to any foam wagon; instead, a cutaway showed that it carried its own foam supply, just behind the driver's head.

He turned the page and stared in shock. The next sheet was slashed through, as if in anger, and jittery writing spidered across it.

The mice prove it! The foam is breathed into an organism's lungs and from there affects all the porous tissues of the body causing blindness, seizures, and a swift and terrible death. The blue vitriol must be stopped!!!

The remaining pages of the journal were blank.

He closed the book and made to add it to his satchel, but as he lifted it off the workbench, a slip of onionskin drifted to the floor. Frowning, Gareth bent and retrieved it, then froze. Too well he knew that list of dates and places. Too well by far.

Gareth stared around him unseeingly. *It's true. It's all true. Theodore is the arsonist.*

With an oath, Gareth started for the door, conscious of every passing moment. If Theodore was the arsonist, then Cole was right—about everything—and was walking directly into a trap.

Outside, the morning air stung Gareth's lungs, burning in his chest. Fresh ice gleamed treacherously on

the cobblestones and edged every gable and empty, shadowed window box. Gareth turned his face away as a pair of suit-clad clerks marched past. He couldn't afford to be seen.

With that in mind, he turned away from the main street and into the maze of dirty alleys that honeycombed the city. Gareth wished desperately for a cigarette as he navigated the twisting byways. He knew the way to the firehouse and had ridden to it in a hansom cab once to interview the chief. But on foot, slipping through the grimy back lanes of the city, the winter wind at his throat, and his belly already missing the morning's meager breakfast, it was a different journey entirely.

At last Gareth emerged from the alleys—a block from the sturdy brick firehouse. There were more people out and about in this part of the city, and Gareth took temporary shelter in the doorway of a boarded-up storefront.

A small group of coarse workmen passed the shadowed entrance without a backward glance, entirely focused on conducting their gruff conversation with the minimum of exposure to the bitter wind coming off the lake. On the corner, two washerwomen traded insults, their voices carried away from Gareth's ears by the wind. No one was paying undue attention, and reassured,

Gareth left his doorway and headed for his destination.

The station was a squat, two-story building fronted by sliding wooden doors whose many tall windows resembled nothing so much as the toothy rictus of a kind of gigantic architectural skull. Gareth shivered as he contemplated the sight.

Unobserved, he crept down the narrow mews behind the firehouse until coming to a heavy oak door. It was the old stable entrance, Gareth realized, disused since the Reform and the advent of the mechanized firebugs, which had replaced the old water-carrying fire engines and the trained fire-horses who drew them.

Gareth inched the heavy door open and found himself in a dank, cavernous barn. Its floor was stone, and the air felt cold and damp. Along the wall stood a row of stables.

In front of the stables stood the battalion's firebugs—but as Gareth approached, he realized something was wrong. Each machine hung awkward and askew, powerful limbs crumpled and bent at odd angles. Gareth turned from the sight, feeling sick.

There was no sign of the night shift, and were it not for the startled squeak of a large rat that skittered off toward a collection of packing cases, Gareth would have thought himself entirely alone.

The stables led through a wide, rectangular

entrance to the main room of the station, the one fronted by the windowed wooden doors Gareth had seen from the outside, now stingily granting passage to the gray morning light. In the middle of the vast space sat two sturdy metal tanks, each with three hose attachments leading from valves at roughly the height of a firebug's carapace. Frowning, Gareth stepped closer to the nearest tank. Each of the valves was stained and corroded, and under two of them, puddles of viscous blue liquid lay on the cold floor. Gareth knelt by one and extended a hand.

Immediately, the puddle coalesced and slid across the floor toward him, and Gareth sprang back, landing hard on his rear. As the puddle gave chase, he scooted across the concrete as fast as he could. The liquid pursued, until Gareth managed to put six feet between them, at which point his adversary rolled into a slow and wary circle on the floor, like a hound scenting prey, then collapsed with a soggy splash, returning once more to the form of a harmless puddle.

Gareth's heart thudded as he stared around him at the vats and the empty fire station. His gaze scoured the rest of the floor around the tanks, noting how the sticky liquid dripped from the ends of the hoses and drizzled down the worn, stained valves. The two huge vats dwarfed the room, and it didn't take Gareth long to realize how much foam they contained.

Theodore had written something in his book about heat, body heat, and the blue foam. Gareth sat on the cold concrete and racked his brain, one eye fixed on the now-inert puddle in the middle of the floor. The blue foam consumed every heat source it came into contact with. The page of neat copperplate equations swam before his mind's eye, and Gareth waved them away. They'd meant nothing to him and likely never would. But to Theodore Molen, the brilliant scientist, they'd been important enough—or terrifying enough—to make him even more paranoid about his work than usual, going so far as to entrust Gareth with the trio of mysterious iron balls that moved of their own accord.

Gareth's eye lit on his satchel. When he'd scrambled away to safety, it had fallen from his hand and sat a few feet from the spilled liquid. And as Gareth watched, incredulous, his satchel shook of its own volition.

By the gods. The foam is trying to find its own.

Gareth got shakily to his knees, eyes fixed on his worn leather bag. Even now, he could dimly make out a scraping, scrabbling sound. Instantly, the final lines from Theodore's aborted journal appeared before his eyes: “*Ferrous materials provide the only known containment for the vitriol. Yet, over time, the unstable endothermic reactions inherent to the substance build mass enough to eat away at the containers, eventually consuming the raw material and converting it to*

additional resources.”

Gareth looked at the immense iron vats. As he watched, a new trickle of fluid slid around an edge of the nearest valve, starting a fresh pool on the floor beneath it.

In a heartbeat, Gareth was on his feet. He leaned over and grabbed the satchel with its deadly contents and dashed toward the only other exit he could see: an archway leading away to the right. Just before he reached it, his feet became tangled in an unnoticed obstacle, and he went sprawling. Shaking his head to clear it, Gareth squinted into the gloom, examining the object he'd tumbled over.

“No,” he muttered. “Oh no, please.”

Lying prone and cold in a corner next to the packing crates, Theodore lay staring sightlessly up at the rafters. His goggles were shoved up onto his forehead, and one lens was spiderwebbed with cracks. Beneath his stained and moth-eaten greatcoat, a massive bullet wound had caved in his thin chest. From Gareth's too-extensive experience of the species, it appeared to have been fired from a revolver of some sort, held close enough to char Theodore's tattered sweater.

Guilt and sorrow warred in Gareth's chest as he contemplated the corpse of his friend. Theodore's fears had been well-founded, and whatever dark forces he'd

become involved with had been too much for him. The firefoam had taken another life, however indirectly.

He reached down and closed Theodore's eyes, mumbling the soldier's requiem for comrades lost in battle, his words turning to puffs of steam in the frigid building.

Then, rising, he resumed his mission.

Beyond the archway lay a small and sparsely appointed antechamber, obviously the firewalkers' mess. A rickety table stood in the center of the room, surrounded by mismatched chairs, and against one wall sat a stained corduroy settee. Stuffing protruded through several rips in the once-fine fabric. Under a tiny lead-glass window, too small for even a child to pass through, stood a high, ornate sideboard boasting a scarred and blackened samovar and three chipped mugs, one lying on its side. Gareth fingered the damp spot at the mug's mouth and frowned. The wireless interrupt through which the walkers would be summoned to action sat in the middle of the table, its speaking horn lying next to it haphazardly instead of hanging on its accustomed hook. A deck of playing cards surrounded it, the hands dropped as if in a hurry, the pot for Fetching from the middle nothing more than a messy, disorganized pile.

Gareth walked slowly toward the table and turned over the top card of the hand nearest him. A grinning

maiden glared at him, eyes feral, the black ink drawing unsettlingly vivid in the dim light. The queen of spades.

Gareth looked unhappily around the room, its contents the very picture of a quiet evening interrupted. But what bothered him more than anything else, what sent his heart shivering into his boots, was that of Cole there was no sign.

Ten

“Thought I’d find you here, Charles.”

Gareth spun around. Lieutenant Inspector Kint had his gun in hand and aimed directly at Gareth’s head.

“Looks like your luck’s finally run out, firebug.”

Gareth’s gaze moved from Kint’s pleased, porcine eyes down to the gun in his hand and back. “Lieutenant, you’ve got this all wrong. I have nothing to do with any of the—”

“Rash of fires you’ve been so diligent about reporting to the fine, upstanding citizens of New Eddington, right?”

“That’s it exactly, and if you’d just let me explain—”

“Save it. I’ve had my eye on you for a while now, buster. Been watching you strut around the city like you own it, like you’re its savior, and let me tell you something: you don’t know the first thing about what goes on here. You just like to put on a show. Well, the show’s over, Charles. I’m shutting you down.”

A moment of silence hung heavy between them. The old building shifted its bones uneasily around them, as if trying to fight off the chill.

“That was some speech, Lieutenant. You practice it on the way over?” Gareth looked around stealthily, searching for something he could use as a weapon. He took a half step back, and Kint closed in quickly, shoving the pistol up under Gareth’s chin.

“Going somewhere?”

Gareth swallowed hard but stayed quiet as Kint seated the pistol deeper under his jaw.

“You think you’ve got it all figured out. You and your little firewalker friend. A couple of two-bit, gas-happy deserters playing detective in the colonies. I’m ashamed I served in the same war as you two wastrels.”

Gareth met Kint’s eyes levelly. “Careful what you say about Sergeant Cole, Lieutenant,” he said softly. Every movement caused the cold metal barrel to dig deeper against his windpipe, but Gareth’s blood boiled at Kint’s words. It was one thing to be accused himself, but he’d as soon die as see Cole’s good name besmirched. “I may be many things, but the least of them is loyal.”

“You can’t really be as dumb as you seem, can you?”

Gareth gritted his teeth.

“Cause you’ve been running round the edges of

these fires so much, I can only come up with two explanations: one, you're helping them, or two, you're too stupid to figure out how to stop them."

Gareth stared up at the old post-and-beam ceiling. "You know who really set these fires, don't you?" Kint didn't respond, and Gareth next spoke through clenched teeth. "How long've you known?"

"As soon as I have proof, I'll take it to the Crown. And right now, you're looking like Exhibit A."

"How long?"

"Charles, don't you even—"

"How many fires have you stood by and let happen, Lieutenant? How many firewalkers have needlessly placed their lives on the line while you waited for enough proof?"

Kint shoved Gareth hard, backing him up against the rough brick wall. He brought his arm across Gareth's throat. "Don't you dare, Charles. Don't you dare. I don't want to have to kill you, but I'm going to get to the bottom of this." He slapped the brick right next to Gareth's head. "Tell me what you know! Start with how your weird little friend Theodore's lying dead on the floor not six feet from here! Tell me!"

"I have no idea, how—"

With a frustrated growl, Kint pulled Gareth away

from the wall and shoved him into the middle of the room. Kint extended his arm, pistol in hand. He leveled it at Gareth's head. "Keep talking about all these ideas you don't happen to have. While you're at it, tell me why I walked into this place and found you standing sentry over a dead body! Tell me why a dozen of New Eddington's finest got hauled off to city hall last night under Judge Barrington's orders!"

"What are you talking about? Who?"

Kint smirked, saying nothing, and Gareth stepped closer until the barrel of the pistol was flush against his forehead. "Who?"

"And here I thought I was the one asking all the questions."

"Look, I'll cooperate, I'll—just—where are all the firewalkers?"

Kint cocked his head to one side. After a few seconds, he answered. "City hall. Order came down last night. Round 'em all up, every last one of 'em."

"City hall!" Gareth struggled to master his emotions. *Round 'em all up, every last one.* Including Cole. Impatiently, Gareth grabbed Kint's hand and shoved it to one side. But the old lieutenant maintained an iron grip, and he returned the barrel of the pistol to Gareth's forehead, jabbing it against his skin.

"Not so fast. You've got a lot of explaining to do.

You've been way too close and way too convenient not to be mixed up in this somehow."

"You don't understand! You know where they took those men, you know what's being done to them—innocent men—being interrogated by the Reform's finest sadists while we stand here arguing. Let's go! Let's get an order to get them out immediately!"

"Don't you dare lecture me, Charles. I've been upholding the law longer than you've been alive. And let me tell you something—"

But Gareth had heard enough. Arguing the finer points of police procedure wouldn't rescue his lover. Before he had time to consider the consequences, Gareth hauled off and slugged Kint in the face with as much force as he could muster. Bone cracked under his knuckles, and the lower half of the lieutenant's face was suddenly awash in blood. The pistol fell from Kint's hand as he staggered and half fell against the bricks. He reached for his broken nose with an expression of mingled anger and surprise.

Taking advantage of the lieutenant's momentary preoccupation, Gareth turned and started for the door, but the lieutenant recovered all too quickly, landing two sharp rabbit punches to Gareth's kidneys.

Gareth crumpled forward, extending a hand to the cold stone floor for balance. Snarling, Kint grabbed the

back of Gareth's greatcoat, hauling him upward, but Gareth swept his leg out and around in a wide circle, toppling the lieutenant to the floor next to him. As he hit the ground, Kint roared, whether with anger or pain, Gareth didn't stick around to find out. He hauled himself to his feet, one hand automatically pressed to his aching kidneys, and stumbled out through the archway, crossing the huge, open front room and making a beeline for the stables. But as he approached, Gareth saw Kint had closed the stable door behind him, sealing it with the watch's signature crimson ribbons.

"Charles!" A shot plowed into the painted brick next to his head. Gareth flinched, then slowly turned around.

Kint stood in the doorway, gun in hand, breathing heavily, his face still awash in gore. "Hold it right there. You and me, we ain't done by a long shot."

With an oath, Gareth ran for the tall windows at the front of the firehouse. A second shot sank into the heavy oak frame surrounding the nearest one, and Gareth smelled the charge, gunpowder heavy in his nose and at the back of his throat, just before he slammed his shoulder into the glass. It shattered it into thousands of tiny shards, and Gareth tumbled out into the crisp morning air.

He hit the stones outside like a bag of sand falling off a cart and, for a moment, just lay there stunned and

blinking at the sudden daylight.

Then Kint's face appeared at the window frame. "Charles, you bastard. Stop right there or so help me God, I'll—"

Gareth scrambled to his feet and ran.

At this hour, the street was just beginning to fill with New Eddington's hardy denizens, bundled up tightly against the cold, backs bowed to the elements. Gareth ran past them without a second thought, shoving aside the ones he couldn't avoid, ignoring their startled and angry glances, their muttered imprecations. A pair of grimy, soot-splashed urchins who froze in Gareth's frantic path went down like ninepins as he shoved his way up the street, their foul language floating through the chill air at his heels. None of them mattered. Nothing mattered except getting Cole back, safely away from the watch's interrogators. Gareth gritted his teeth and kept moving, his shoulder throbbing with every step.

At the top of the street, an overturned hansom blocked the thoroughfare, other cabs stacking up in three directions behind and around it. A knot of drivers had converged in the middle, trying to right the contraption while the horses reared and kicked in their twisted harnesses. Gareth whipped around their flying hooves, his brain racing, figuring out the fastest route back to city hall. He and Cole had fled the town house in such

haste, he hadn't had time to take even his ancient service pistol; he was counting on desperation to fuel his ingenuity.

He sailed round the corner, narrowly avoiding the apothecary beating his rug against the stoop in front of his shop, and as Gareth pushed through the cloud of dust, he thought back to a chance comment Theodore'd made one night when Gareth had kept him company in his glass aerie. Theodore maintained that the steam tunnels sunk into the earth below the city, powering so many of their conveniences, would be the perfect cover for moving people out of the watch's stone fortress. That was, of course, if the subjects in question were willing to endure a little discomfort during the passage. The heated vapors that rushed through the metal pipes maimed or killed when they disobeyed their masters and went rogue, exploding out of the pipes and roaring out their displeasure at being made to serve. Still, Gareth thought, it was his only hope of getting into—

A weight like a ten-ton barge slammed into Gareth from the side, and his shoulder met the streets of New Eddington for the second time that morning, with no less painful results. Gareth rolled onto his back and gasped, his good arm automatically probing the fire at his other side.

Chest heaving with exertion, Lieutenant Kint stood

over Gareth, pistol drawn, face still streaked with blood. Gareth's heart raced, even as his mind whirled with questions. How had Kint, easily twenty years his senior, managed to catch up?

Kint bent forward, panting. He placed the barrel of the gun back against Gareth's forehead. It was still warm from the last shot. Gareth fell back against the stones, and Kint followed, pinning Gareth under the barrel. "Thirty...three...years," he wheezed. "You get...to know...all the shortcuts."

Gareth groaned and gave it one final try. "Please, Kint," he said softly. "If you've ever, even once in your life cared for someone, please. Let me go."

"Aw yeah"—Kint nodded—"the broken heart thing'll get me every time." He reholstered the pistol at his side with a snort. "You're coming with me, Charles, and this time, no funny business."

Before Gareth had a chance to retort, Kint continued. "Just one thing before we get going." He drew back a fist like a ham hock, and Gareth's head bounced off the pavement.

"Now we're even." Kint hauled Gareth to his feet and frog-marched him through the streets, one fist gripping his neck like a vise, the other holding the pistol close to his hip. Gareth's heart sank further and further with every step.

Their destination came as a complete surprise. Steering Gareth in the opposite direction from city hall, Kint dragged him east, toward the tenements where Cole had kept his rude apartment, and Gareth's confusion only deepened as he was marched down a narrow lane and into the disintegrating front parlor of what had once been a stately home, now divided into a myriad of small boarding rooms. With a grip like iron, Kint guided Gareth up the inside staircase to the third floor, then along the landing to a nondescript door. The knob turned easily at the lieutenant's touch.

"From the look of you two, there's a great story we don't have time for here." The countess was standing just inside the door, smoking a long, black cigarillo. In her other hand she held a coffee cup, and the combined aroma of the two items made Gareth weak at the knees. He didn't know what to stare at first.

The cold gray light of the morning did little for the bare sitting room's furnishings. A washbasin and chipped ewer stood under a scratched but spotless mirror, and a military chest identical to Cole's—and indeed identical to one Gareth himself had owned, way back in the mists of time—sat at the foot of a narrow bed.

"Mr. Fancypants thought he knew how to fight," Kint grouched, crossing to the barred window. "Now he

knows better.”

The countess snorted, smoke from the cigarillo winding toward the stained and peeling plaster of the ceiling. “Well, what’re you waiting for, Charles? After the night you had, I imagine you’d kill for a hot cup.” She gestured, and Gareth turned to see a hot plate mounted on a shelf next to the door. It drew its power from a long, curling hose snaking through a fist-size hole in the plaster, and as Gareth gratefully snatched up a chipped mug from a collection of them mounted on hooks under the shelf, he was able to make out where the hose had been soldered to the thick, wormlike steam pipe behind the wall. He turned and stared at Kint, who had collected a fistful of snow from the window’s narrow ledge and was tying it in a gray handkerchief.

Kint dropped heavily onto the bed next to the countess, who favored him with an amused glance. “Three tours for the Crown, making this godforsaken land safe for habitation, and the best they can do is this rattrap? Reform, my ass.”

“Now now, Archie,” the countess chided. “We’ve all of us fallen on hard times.”

“This from the woman who spends as much on perfume each month as I pay for heat.” Kint sat back against the wall and pressed the handkerchief to his swelling nose.

Gareth gulped at the hot coffee, ignoring how it burned his mouth as he swallowed. The slight pain kept him from dwelling too much on the countess calling Kint by his first name.

“An exaggeration, and you well know it. But the time’s past for chitchat. You!” She stabbed at Gareth with the cigarillo. “One helluva mess you’ve gotten yourself into. And the whole time you went like a lamb led to slaughter, with barely a peep in that rag of yours. If the library hadn’t’ve gone up like it did, I shudder to think what rabbit hole the judge’s secretary would’ve chased you down. Honestly, didn’t you stop for a single second and think why he chose you for his dirty work?”

Gareth and Kint fought to speak over one another as the countess placidly enjoyed her cigarillo. She gave them a few moments, then exhaled deeply and laid a restraining hand on Kint’s knee. Gareth couldn’t speak to why Kint shut up, but he himself fell silent from shock.

The cigarillo was nearly out, and the countess fished another from an embroidered clutch and lit it while the two of them watched, spellbound. She held the case open to Gareth invitingly, and he reached forward eagerly. Only a sudden flash of Cole, beaten and in chains—or worse—in the city hall’s dungeon stayed his hand. He felt guilty enjoying the comforts of civilization while such a fine man endured His Majesty’s torments.

With a piercing look, the countess returned the case to her clutch. "Now, would you like to tell me just exactly what you were thinking back there at the firehouse, Gareth?"

"Which part?" Gareth asked simply. "The part where I found a good friend murdered, the part where the firefighting foam tried to kill me, or the part where my best friend in the world disappeared?"

Kint dropped the handkerchief and leaned forward. "How about the part where you decided to assault an officer of the law? Or the part where you had no explanation for what you were doing, breaking into the —"

"Archie," the countess said mildly. Kint returned to silence. "All of it," she said. "Start from the beginning."

Ignoring Kint's disgruntled snort, Gareth took a deep breath and started talking. He told them all of it, just as he had with Cole. *Any more recitations and I'll simply get on the wireless interrupt and be done with it.* "And I'll have you know," Gareth continued, "that the *Chronicle* is no rag. It's the best an honest man can do, hampered by the shackles of a Reform-minded government that likes its citizens best left to moulder in the dark like some type of barely sentient cheese!"

The countess waved away his tirade. "So let me get this straight: your friend Theodore discovered that

firefighting foam kills people, you've been framed for the fires by an unknown person or persons, and then when you broke into the firehouse, the foam tried to kill you."

Gareth stared into his half-drunk coffee. "Well, when you put it like that...yes. That's it exactly." He started to raise the cup to his lips, then stopped. "I cannot sit here any longer and attempt to convince the two of you of my innocence. Not while a good man—many good men—suffer at the hands of the Reform's paid sadists."

"Very nicely put," the countess replied. "Likely the best editorial you've ever come up with."

Gareth opened his mouth to protest further.

"But one that'll never see the light of day. Surely you're not as naive as you seem? Wasn't one attempt on your life enough? Think the warrant for your arrest was just a warning shot? The disappearance of an entire hive of firewalkers a clever jape? Think, Gareth. You too, Archie." The countess smoothed her skirts. "You are many things, Charles, but right now, first and foremost, you're a fugitive from justice. And as for poor Theodore, I fear it was inevitable. He surely didn't think his Crimean ancestry could be hidden forever. That's likely how he was duped into compliance."

Gareth closed his eyes, fingers tightening on the handle of the coffee cup. The parchment, written in

Crimean. *Zmolensky. Not a place, a name.* Theodore's birth certificate. "If the truth had been known, he'd never be allowed near a laboratory again. That poor, poor bastard."

The countess continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Barrington is a fool, but a dangerous fool, and anyone who falls afoul of him pays in the end."

"Barrington?" the two men asked in unison.

"Everyone knows he's behind the fires."

"Not quite everyone, Aurelia," Kint growled.

"Poor dear, Archie. Loyal to the last. It's what I've always loved about you."

"Too bad I no longer know where your own loyalties lie. When were you planning to tell me your suspicions?"

The countess shrugged. "The library fire was not Barrington's work. It was merely a simple and exceedingly ill-planned stunt by a pair of idealists. Don't tell me, Gareth, that you haven't noticed the antics of two of your fellow cardplayers."

Gareth was starting to feel dizzy. "That stunt, as you call it, cost two men their lives." He remembered the redhead and the clerk, the pair of them archly sending messages in full view of the cardroom. Cheaters, yes, but for much grander stakes than a simple pot of coins. "They killed those men. As sure as if they'd filled them

with shot or pushed them into the freezing lake. But what have they to do with Barrington—or Theodore?”

Kint spat on the floor. “Those treacherous curs.”

“Nothing at all,” the countess said impatiently. “Revolutionaries are the least of New Eddington’s problems. Have the two of you truly not realized what Barrington’s real aim is?” She leaned and tossed the stub of her cigarillo out the open window. It hissed as it hit the snow. “I have known for some time of a plot afoot. Through the aegis of his secretary, Judge Barrington has used my cardroom to assemble men of a type he could not meet in other venues, and I have watched and wondered. But now, I believe, all is clear.” She stood and collected her clutch, wool coat, and quilted velvet stole from the bed. “I must get this information to the king. He should know both of Barrington and the rogue zealots setting fire to this city.”

There was a moment of perfect, poignant silence.

“Aw hell, Aurelia.” Kint’s eyes shone with pain. “You’re...you’re the king’s spy?”

“I’m not a spy,” the countess replied calmly. “I merely send His Majesty certain tidings. I keep him informed of when things are about to go awry in his colonies. Much like you, I’m a man on the street. I just report a little higher up the chain.”

Kint tossed his sodden handkerchief in the

washbasin. "Countess Aurelia, I arrest you for espionage
—"

"Oh stow it, Archie," she said mildly. Her gaze softened. "You take care of yourself, you hear me?"

Kint turned to face the wall, and just for a moment, Gareth believed he saw a flash of anger in the countess's eyes.

"But, Countess," Gareth interjected. "Barrington has Cole. I have to get him out! If it is as you say, there's no telling what he'll do to those firewalkers."

She regarded Gareth for a long moment. "Every conflict has its martyrs," she said at last. As Gareth stared, mouth open, she swept from the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Her heels beat out a staccato on the stairs as she went, fading until they heard the squeak of the heavy front parlor door open and then close.

"You know, time was, she was a good woman. A steadfast woman. Laughed a lot and chastised a man for uttering even the mildest of oaths." Kint stared off into a distant past.

"What happened?"

"She had a son, Leopold. Just the one. About your height, same build, a little firmer around the jaw, maybe. Anyway, as soon as the Conflict broke out, he joined up,

and off he went, out to the frozen trenches.”

Gareth closed his eyes. He feared he knew all too well what had changed the countess so dramatically.

“She was never the same, after. She hardened herself against his going, and when he didn’t come back, she hardened herself a little more.”

So many men dead, so many lives ruined. Gareth set his jaw. He wouldn’t allow the Reform to take Cole as its next victim. Not even if it meant his own life in the bargain. He set his half-empty cup on the shelf next to the makeshift hot plate and turned for the door.

A heavy fist dropped onto his shoulder. “Where you think you’re going?”

“Cole’s no one’s martyr. He’s my friend and partner, and whatever else Barrington’s getting away with, imprisoning him and the other firewalkers is one thing I’ve no intention of letting slide.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something? You’re still technically under arrest.”

Gareth narrowed his eyes.

“So the least I can do is escort you back to city hall. Let’s get those men freed and see what we can do about the big pig in the courthouse. Livestock doesn’t belong inside, not even in this weather.”

Gareth grinned slowly. He had no idea whether

Kint's about-face was real—hell, nothing in the damn town was what it seemed—but for the moment, it was the best chance Cole had of seeing another sunset.

Cut the Deck

City hall loomed bleak and dismal beneath the heavy afternoon clouds. Gareth wondered if they were in for a further snowfall, then forgot the weather as Kint grabbed him roughly by the arm and marched him up the stairs.

“Have to make it look realistic,” Kint muttered as Gareth resisted.

With a grunt of acquiescence, Gareth let himself be frog-marched into the belly of the beast.

Kint’s office was bare and windowless, hunched in the corner of the building. Gareth pulled his coat straight, shooting a pointed glare at Kint.

Kint glared. “You’re here, aren’t you? Read your statement; then I’ll take you down to booking.”

Gareth opened his mouth to respond, and Kint raised a warning finger, pointing upward. Gareth looked up to the bare ceiling, puzzled, then understood. The walls had ears at city hall. “Let’s get on with it, then.”

With a nod of approval, Kint turned to a cupboard standing in the corner and brought out a lantern. "This way," he said and led the way out the door.

Gareth followed Kint down the corridor until they came to a narrow wooden stair. It was ill-lit and bore signs of disuse. Gareth drew away from the cobwebs on the walls, trying not to stumble. At last they emerged into a dank stone room, dimly lit by gratings near the ceiling.

Gareth's feet scuffed over gritty dust with each step, and the space smelled strongly of coal. "I'm guessing this isn't booking," he said in a low voice.

Kint spoke normally. "There's no one listening down here. Anyone asks, on the way down the corridor, you overpowered me, dragged me down to the old coal cellar." He gestured at the bare walls.

"The old coal cellar. How does that help—"

"Because, dummy, the coal's used to run the furnaces, got it? The furnaces that make the steam. And steam's the only thing that ever got into the dungeons down below without being seen. You understand?"

"The steam pipes." Gareth gasped. He, like the rest of the citizenry, knew of the vast underground network of steam tunnels that powered New Eddington. "You really think a person could make it through them?"

"That I can't tell you." The wizened lieutenant

looked grim. “All I can do is show you the entrance and wish you Godspeed and the devil’s own luck.”

Gareth nodded decisively. Getting into the dungeons and to Cole without alerting the guards was the most important thing, and the steam pipes offered what might be his only chance. “Where is this entrance?”

Kint led the way to a grating in the wall. It swung on hinges and was big enough for a man to pass through. From it came a draft of air, warmer than the air of the cellar. “The furnace room,” Kint said. “Behind the furnaces, there’s a trapdoor into the pipes. It’s used now and then for maintenance. Here, take my lantern.”

“Thank you.” Gareth clasped Kint’s hand in a brief gesture of farewell.

Kint held his hand longer than necessary. “You know, you remind me of Leopold. Just a little bit.” He cleared his throat. “Cept that kid was a helluva lot less trouble.” He released Gareth’s hand and gestured to the furnace room.

Gareth shook his head with a snort, then scrambled through the grating into the warm dark.

The only light came from Gareth’s lantern and the glowing mouths of three huge furnaces at the rear of the room. The crackling of the fires inside was dulled by the mechanical crunching of a cog-driven belt carrying loads of coal into each flaming maw. Gareth gave the machines

a wide berth, starting to sweat in the unaccustomed warmth. He knew from the Reformist lectures he'd been required to attend that the huge furnaces powering the city burned without ceasing, increasing the pressure in the enormous boilers—somewhere below his feet now, he guessed—until the jets of steam were released through the pipes.

He found the trapdoor quickly. It led the way into a rock-sided tunnel, tall enough for Gareth to stand nearly upright. Cautiously, he scrambled down inside and, after a moment, reached up and pulled the trapdoor closed behind him. It would be well to leave no signs of his passing.

The tunnel smelled vaguely of earth and decay overlaid with an unpleasant singed scent.

As he crept cautiously along, Gareth heard hissing and bangs from the pipes overhead and peered anxiously to the far reaches of the light. At a junction in the tunnels, he paused for a moment, then, cursing, chose the path that led downward. He started forward, then stumbled quickly back as a cloud of steam surged out of a faulty join. As it hit the cold air it turned to water, falling in the tunnel like boiling rain.

Gareth froze until the last of the steam had passed, then ran. One scalding drop hit the back of his neck; then he was past, and the tunnels returned to silence.

At last he came to a blackened grill covering the entrance to a dark, forbidding passageway, smaller than the rest. The air from the grate felt warm and close.

Gareth shuddered, looking through the grill uneasily.

A leak in this pipe would mean certain death. And judging by the singed and blackened grate and the heat coming down the passage toward him, the pipes were by no means as solid as the Reformists meant the city to believe.

But without him, Cole would surely perish.

It was the work of a moment to tear free the supports on one side, the old wooden brackets giving under Gareth's onslaught. Even the hard oak had perished in the hot damp air, and it came away from its rusted bolts with barely a struggle.

The yards through this tunnel were some of the hardest he'd ever traversed, eyes narrowed against the dry heat, sipping the air slowly, fighting the urge to cough. He struggled on for what seemed like hours until at last he came to a dead end. A huge slab of rock blocked his path, the only opening a tiny chink at the top where the pipe passed through. The stone radiated heat, and through the tiny gap came a muted roar.

Gareth stared in disbelief, then frantically clawed at the tiny chink in the rock. His fingertips brushed the

burning pipe, and with a startled cry, he dropped the lantern. It flickered and went out.

The darkness closed in around him like a living thing, hot and fierce, and Gareth groaned in earnest. Without a light, he was stranded. Desperately, he scrabbled for the lantern on the hot, dry earth—and found wood under his hand.

Gareth explored desperately, realizing he knelt before a trapdoor. His questing fingers found a metal ring, but it was hot as fire. He snatched his hand back, then tried again, gripping it through the satchel's leather. With a sharp tug, he got the wooden hatch raised and was greeted with a blast of cold air and a trickle of flickering torchlight. He had found the entrance to the dungeons.

In the weak light, he found his lantern, rolled to the side but apparently unharmed. He picked it up and clambered through the hatch.

There was a short drop to the straw-covered floor below, and Gareth found himself in some kind of storeroom. Manacles and chains lay in piles, and on one wall hung a selection of whips. His stomach dropped.

Light filtered in through a grill in the door, and peering out, Gareth saw a stone-flagged corridor, lit at intervals with torches in brackets on the walls. A guard dressed in the livery of the Reform paced slowly past, a

rifle on his shoulder, and Gareth drew back.

He glanced up at the open trapdoor in the ceiling, shivering. It might give away his presence, and so far, surprise was the only thing on his side. Hurriedly, he seized a broom from the corner, and with its handle, he coaxed the hatch closed.

Peering back out through the grill, he found the corridor empty and so slipped out, closing the door silently behind him. With a soldier's ease, he ran soundlessly along the hall in the direction the guard had taken, then, following a hunch, veered down a narrow set of stone stairs.

It made sense that the Reform's torture chambers were well belowground, where no sound would carry. And Gareth had heard a rumor, years ago now, of secret passages from the city dungeons to the lake, a way for spies and traitors to be shipped off to cold and watery demises. The Reform ran on secrecy, preventing the martyrdom of its opponents and quashing all sign of opposition.

Gareth shivered. If he found Cole, perhaps those secret passages would lead them to freedom. It was a slim chance but likely their only hope.

At last, voices penetrated the silence of the corridor, and Gareth slowed his steps, creeping from door to door. Each cell was large and contained several prisoners,

chained to benches and walls, clothed in rags. Most of these men looked like they had been captive for a long time. None of them paid any attention to Gareth's desperate scrutiny.

A guard's purposeful tread reached Gareth's ears, and he looked around wildly. The narrow space offered no place to hide. As soon as the man rounded the corner, Gareth would be discovered. With a muttered oath, he moved close to the wall, the best place to take the oncoming guard by surprise.

Tensed to fight, it took Gareth a moment to realize that the footsteps had stopped, mere feet away. He froze.

"Them the prisoners for questioning?" The guard's voice was casual, as was that of the man who answered.

"Yup. Firewalkers, they say. Been plotting against the Reform."

"There's men don't know when they're well-off," the first guard said ruminatively. "I'm figurin' Judge Barrington'll learn 'em the error of their ways and make 'em wish they'd never thought of treason."

"He'll make 'em wish they never were born, more like. Is he ready to start?"

"Yup. Soon's we can drag 'em to the interrogation room."

Gareth's heart sank. The journey through the pipes

must have taken longer than he'd anticipated. Cole was about to be dragged beyond his reach unless Gareth could defeat two armed guards alone. Kint's pistol would account for one, but sheer cunning would have to do for the other. As quietly as he could, Gareth freed his gun and clasped it like a talisman, peering cautiously around the corner of the corridor.

A heavy cell door screeched open, and the prisoners shuffled out, chains clanking as they went. Their heads were bowed, their arms bound behind them, and a heavy chain ran from ankle to ankle, binding them to each other and to their fate. Gareth felt sick.

The men were led away along the corridor, deeper under the earth, and Gareth's stomach knotted. Even in the gloomy tunnel, he knew he wasn't mistaken: none of them were Cole.

Emerging from hiding, Gareth crept along the corridor toward the next cell but was stopped in his tracks by a faint noise coming from inside the newly emptied cell. Gareth peered through the grill intently.

On the filthy straw just inside the door lay the body of a man, facedown and unmoving. Blood covered his neck and shoulders. Gareth closed his eyes against the sight; a part of him grieved, but a more selfish part rejoiced in that it was not Cole. He turned away.

"Gareth..."

The word was barely a whisper, but it had definitely come from the other side of the door.

Desperately, Gareth tore at the lock, but it did not give. Looking around, he grabbed a shard of flint from the floor and slid it into the lock. The rock slipped and slid in his hand, but at last he found purchase and forced the lock open. He eased the thick wooden door slowly open.

“Gareth...is that you?”

Gareth nearly sobbed with a combination of relief and fear. In the far corner of the cell, Cole half lay across the rude bench, arms chained to a ring set high in the wall. Gareth was at his side in an instant, taking his weight.

Cole breathed heavily against Gareth’s shoulder as Gareth released the chains from Cole’s wrists. Slowly, Cole brought his freed hands around in front of him, wincing, but he managed a smile when Gareth touched his face. “How did you get here?” he asked.

“Not important.” Gareth looked anxiously from his lover to the open door. “Are you all right? What have they done to you?”

“I’m fine.” Cole flexed his shoulders, stretching. “Merely a knock on the head and a bruise or two.” He stood up stiffly. “Apparently, I’m a special case, and Judge Barrington wanted to interview me personally.

They said I was to be delivered in good condition.”

Gareth shuddered and looked at the body on the floor. “Not everyone was so lucky.”

“That wasn’t the guards.” Cole looked at Gareth, and his eyes were pained. “That’s my captain, Captain Wymes. He—” Cole swallowed hard. “The rest of the men believed him responsible for our incarceration. They set on him.” He turned away. “This firefoam kills without even being present, it seems. Gareth, I was chained to the wall—I could do nothing. They—with their feet, Gareth, and he—”

“I’m sorry.” Gareth blocked Cole’s view of the body and laid a hand alongside his jaw. “He was a good man. You told me yourself. He didn’t deserve this. None of you did.”

Cole nodded dumbly.

“It’s time for some justice, Cole. The true kind, not the Reform’s. But we must hurry if we’ve any chance of succeeding.”

Gareth led the way through the gloomy dungeon corridors, tense and watchful but no longer afraid. Cole’s hand rested at the small of his back, warm and present, and the comfort of knowing Cole was there with him, safe, as ready to fight as Gareth himself, was immeasurable. There was danger aplenty before them and more behind, but now they were together, and that

made all the difference. His previous life—newspaperman, cardsharp, upstanding society fat cat—all of it seemed like a dream he'd once had. He slipped a hand back to graze his lover's hip.

Suddenly, the silence of the dungeon was broken by muffled, echoing shouts. Running footsteps sounded behind them, and Cole grabbed Gareth's arm. "We're found out!"

Gareth nodded once, grimly, and started to run, Cole hard on his heels. The noise behind them increased, and Gareth wondered if the whole garrison was after them. Suddenly, Cole yanked him to a stop.

"What?" Gareth panted, then saw what his partner was indicating. Shadowed darkness heralded a junction where one tight passage led steeply down, off to the left of the corridor. Gareth glanced at Cole, and they wordlessly agreed; without further hesitation, the two men ducked into the low-ceilinged tunnel and kept moving.

The air got colder as they went, and water dripped down the tunnel walls, the floor damp and puddled in places. The sounds of pursuit echoed behind, impossible to tell how close. Gareth fought the urge to look over his shoulder. It didn't matter; if the tunnel they were in was a dead end, they would be caught like rats in a trap.

They moved as quickly as they dared, hurrying along the passageway for what felt like miles with the

quick footfalls and shouted oaths of their pursuers driving them. At last they turned a corner, and Gareth's worst fears were realized: it dead-ended in a smooth, rock-walled cave. Cole panted at his side, his ill-treatment clearly taking its toll. "We're trapped!"

"Don't give up on me, soldier," Gareth responded. "This tunnel had to be built for a reason. Keep searching!" He ran his hands over the smooth rock, searching for the tiniest clue to an exit. After a moment, Cole followed suit. The tiny space was dominated by their hoarse breathing and the sounds of their pursuers growing ever louder.

"Gareth..." Cole warned.

"Save your energy." Gareth frantically ran his palms over the walls. "If it comes to it..." He looked over at Cole, and the other man nodded, agreeing with Gareth's unspoken plan: they'd die fighting rather than be taken.

Gareth pushed the grim thought away and redoubled his search, crouching and running his fingers along the seam where wall met floor.

"Got it!" Cole shouted.

Gareth looked up and saw his friend with a hand raised to the ceiling of the chamber, fingertips barely brushing a rusted iron ring recessed into the rock.

But there was no time for celebration.

“Stop in the name of the Reform!” The first guard, a slender youth of perhaps eighteen, burst around the corridor, bayonet extended in front of him.

Gareth sprang.

He tackled the boy round the waist and pushed him back into the corridor. A shot rang out, and the smell of cordite filled the chamber. Steeling himself, Gareth hit the boy as hard as he dared, knocking him out cold. He grabbed the bayonet and rose with it pointed toward the ceiling. He managed to hook the sharp metal tip through the ring and shoved.

Nothing happened.

“Here, let me try.” Cole added his strength to Gareth’s, and they heaved the musket skyward.

The metal pike snapped off and clattered to the stone floor, but the barrel of the rifle caught the ring and opened a stone square above them. The sweet night sky beckoned through the opening, just as the first guard’s reinforcements tripped over his recumbent form. “Halt! You there!”

Before Gareth could argue, Cole bent and grabbed him round the thighs, hoisting him up and through the narrow opening.

Gareth wrestled his way through, tossed the broken bayonet to one side, and hauled himself up onto the

uneven rocks. As soon as he was free, he knelt and reached back through the opening to grasp Cole's wrists, heaving with all his might.

"In the name of the Reform!" Uniformed hands grabbed Cole just as Gareth lifted. "You are both under —"

His pronouncement was cut short by a vicious kick to the chin, then Cole was free and pulling himself through the narrow opening to collapse onto the rocks next to Gareth. A third guard's fingers appeared from the cavern below, and he called to his fellows to lift him, just as Cole had done with Gareth.

As his head emerged into the clear night, Cole delivered a blow that rendered the guard senseless, and he dropped like a lead weight on his fellows below. Gareth rescued the false-stone hatch and fitted it back in place. An iron ring on its top matched up neatly with a second set in a huge square of granite, and it was the matter of a moment to thread the rifle barrel through them both and weight the stock on the other side with a hefty rock, effectively sealing off their pursuers.

Angry shouts and thumps sounded from below, but the tunnel's lid stayed firmly closed. Gareth pulled Cole away, scrambling over rock.

They'd emerged on the man-made breakwater that sheltered New Eddington's harbor.

A long, thin promontory assembled of rough-hewn granite boulders, the breakwater sat less than half a mile from the shore. The lights of the city glowed orange in the clear night, outlining the docks and warehouses that lined the lakeshore. The ice was newly broken on the lake, and under a crisp, clear sky, twinkling with stars, only a few sturdy icebreakers and pilot gigs sat at their slips, still dormant but ready to awaken with the reopening of New Eddington's water highway.

They picked their way cautiously along the boulders of the breakwater, heading back toward the docks. The twin aromas of fish and engine oil grew stronger as they reached the shore and crept quietly along the icy wooden pier leading back to civilization. Beside the empty ferry booth, Gareth paused and drew Cole back into the deep shadows. "Looks like we made it," he whispered.

"Thought it was all over there for a while," Cole replied softly. "Thought I was dreaming when you walked into that cell. Then I thought you'd been captured too."

"I almost was. But it turns out Kint's at least half on our side. Judge Barrington is a formidable enemy, and by now, if he's not aware we're on to him, he's at least suspicious."

"The judge is the arsonist?"

“One of them. Come on, it’s a long story not suited for the open.” Gareth clambered wearily to his feet and extended a hand to Cole. “We need to get out of this cold and find a place to hide, but at this point, I doubt it’s safe to visit any of Theodore’s safe houses. If Barrington’s the type of blackguard I suspect him to be, he’ll fight like a cornered rat to keep his secrets and tie up any loose ends.”

“Like us, you mean.” Cole shivered. “I might know of a place we loose ends could stay safely tied up for the night.”

Gareth was too tired to do anything but nod. “Any chance your knotwork comes with coffee or a cigarette?”

Cole snorted. “Dream on. But right about now, a couple hours of rest sounds better than both.”

Gareth couldn’t argue with that.

They stuck to the shadows, creeping past the empty ferry booth and sleeping customhouse to the road, cautiously avoiding the pale circles the gaslights cast on the road.

As they passed a forbidding warehouse, four guards ran past, feet ringing on the cobbles as they went. Cole pressed Gareth back into the shadows until the troops had safely rounded the corner and headed back up the hill. Gareth followed Cole through the shadows without question.

Farther down the dock, where the cobbles gave way to the pebbles of the lakeshore and the deserted fishing quays, they came to a small hut, set well back from the icy water. The lock was simple, and they forced it without difficulty.

Cole led the way inside.

The hut was a rude boathouse, filled with extra oars, fishing nets, and hooks, but it was shelter from the elements, and with the door carefully refastened, it seemed relatively secure and surprisingly warm.

Cole grinned knowingly. "We're directly above the furnace that powers the dock hoists. The cold won't find us here tonight."

"Something to be thankful for," Gareth replied, removing his jacket.

Underneath the lone grime-smeared window sat a cold stove, and next to it an array of pots and cutlery. Cole rummaged through a cupboard on the opposite wall and came up with a jar of pickled fish, another of savory compote, and a loaf of hardtack bread wrapped tightly in wax paper. They shared the cold feast hungrily, not daring to light the stove lest it gave away their presence. As they ate, Gareth told Cole what he'd learned in the hours since they'd been separated: the dangerous propensities of the firefoam, the countess's involvement, her revelations about the revolutionaries behind the

library fire, and Judge Barrington's shadowy involvement with it all, leading to Theodore's death.

Cole took a fishhook down from the wall and tested the point gingerly. "I saw his body and was going to him when I was grabbed from behind. By the time I'd recovered my senses, they were dragging me down the street with the rest of my battalion."

"He was Crimean," Gareth said slowly. "Theodore, I mean. Judge Barrington blackmailed him with the accident of his birth. It doesn't excuse what he did, certainly, but..."

Cole squeezed his knee and said nothing.

Their desperate flight to freedom returned to Gareth in a rush, and he leaned in close to Cole. Despite his friend's resilience, he was worried Cole's capture and abuse had taken a greater toll on him than he let on. They were neither of them young men anymore, and Gareth's own body ached with weariness.

"Ought we sleep?" Cole whispered, echoing Gareth's thought, but his body told Gareth a different story.

"We ought," he whispered back, "but first..."

The hut boasted a narrow cot replete with coarse wool blankets and a thin, straw-stuffed pillow; Gareth pushed Cole toward it. Their time was short, and Gareth's soldier's instinct told him that now, safe and hidden, he should sleep while he could. But right now,

Gareth needed Cole more than sleep, needed the reassurance of his lover's body, of the heat between them.

Cole sucked in his breath, signifying both his acceptance and approval all at once, and pulled Gareth after him.

They divested themselves of their remaining clothes, luxuriating in each other and the solitude.

Cole pushed Gareth up off him, eyes glittering in the moonlight. No words were needed. Gareth was all too aware of their close call at the dungeons and the bond that arced between them. He had no intention of wasting a single precious moment. He pulled Cole close, reveling in the warmth of his skin, the sweetness of his lips, and Cole groaned hungrily.

Cole straddled Gareth's hips, rubbing against Gareth's throbbing cock. Gareth found Cole's lips and was immediately overwhelmed by the heat and fire of Cole's response. Trembling with desire, he spat on his fingers, then slid his palm across Cole's back, gentle over the ridge of raised scar tissue, then dipped into Cole's cleft, sliding down until he found his lover's entrance.

Cole groaned in ecstasy as Gareth touched him, finger circling on the soft, willing flesh. Cole pressed into the touch, writhing, and the movement sent jolts of exquisite agony from Gareth's cock to his very core.

With a gasp of pleasure, Gareth jerked upward

against Cole's body, and his finger slid past Cole's ring, into the tight entrance. Cole moaned, spreading his legs farther and dropping heavily onto Gareth's chest, raising his ass higher.

Thrusting urgently against Cole's stomach, moaning at the warm wetness pooling from their leaking cocks, Gareth moved his finger in time with the thrusts from his hips, working Cole's passage.

Cole pressed into his touch, whining his need as Gareth delved deeper. As his moans became more frantic, Gareth slid a second finger inside. Cole's voice broke, his cock pulsing hot against Gareth's groin.

Gareth held him fast by his hips and thrust, pressing against Cole's ass until his cock followed the slick trail to Cole's entrance.

Cole dropped his head to Gareth's shoulder, biting down as Gareth pushed through the ring of muscle, feeling the unbearable tightness as it squeezed his crown and the magic as it finally gave and he slid deeply in.

Cole pushed back, impaling himself on Gareth's cock. Gareth fell back, groaning, as Cole thrust down and then began to stroke, fucking himself on Gareth's cock.

It was too perfect, too intense, and the feeling rose in Gareth hard and fast. It burned inside him, overwhelming and white-hot, his need for Cole, his love. Gareth gasped his lover's name, thrashing as he felt

Cole's passage tighten and spasm around him.

Cole fell heavy on his chest, gasping, hot seed spurting across Gareth's skin, rocking against him slowly until at last they both lay still.

In the end, after the rigors and terrors of the day, the comfort of being together again was immense, and neither of them were willing to leave it for sleep.

Gareth lay still and rested, drawing strength from his lover's presence. His body ached from the exertions of the day, a knot of pain in his shoulder, a telling ache in his left hip, the throb of his jaw where Kint's punch had landed. Even the sharp bite of the tiny steam burn on his neck was a war wound, the fruit of a battle Gareth counted a success. He had won Cole back, and that was all that mattered.

Dawn at the docks was greeted with the squeak and bash of ice floes protesting as a huge freighter from the warmer south made her ponderous way into port. Gareth and Cole vacated the hut reluctantly and slipped back into the murky alleys beside the docks.

A pie seller sauntered down the street to the corner, crying out his wares in a mournful singsong, and he was soon surrounded by hungry stevedores.

"Give me your muffler," Cole said suddenly.

Gareth looked at him in surprise but pulled the garment from his neck and handed it over. With a

crooked grin, Cole wrapped the scarf over his head, pulled some coins from his pocket, and was gone from Gareth's side, heading for the pie vendor.

Gareth watched anxiously from the mouth of the alley. The muffler made a close approximation to the ear-flapped wool caps many of the men wore, and the coat nearly hid the fact Cole's borrowed pants were tailored wool rather than the baggy corduroy favored by the dockworkers. And walking with his head down and shoulders slumped, Cole blended easily with the crowd.

The pie vendor's wail didn't falter as he took Cole's money and handed over one of the pastries from his tray. Cole headed away from Gareth and ducked down the alley between two warehouses. Gareth quailed as Cole disappeared from sight, but he fought down his fear and stayed put.

"Breakfast." The soft voice at his elbow made him jump, and Gareth spun around to see his partner grinning and holding out half the pie. "I dared not buy two, for fear of him remarking it."

"It was a crazy risk," Gareth said gruffly, but he took the pie.

"Little risk." Cole shrugged. "And who knows when we will eat again? Last night was luck."

"Last night was luck indeed," he agreed drily and bit into the hard-won pastry.

“So what now?” Cole asked as they finished their makeshift meal. “According to the schedule, New Eddington will burn tonight, and the firewalkers have all been taken. The watch is corrupt and in the pay of Judge Barrington. Where does that leave us?”

“Good summation. There is no one in authority with the power to stop Barrington; Kint as much as admitted it. It seems to me now that our only hope is the countess.”

“The countess?” Cole echoed in surprise.

“She’s a spy for the king,” Gareth said quietly. He glanced around the narrow alleyway. “And she may not be the only one. It may be that there are others in positions of power, only awaiting the word to act. We must convince her, if we can, to say that word.”

In return, Cole said a word of his own, one unlikely to be repeated by the countess or anyone of her ilk.

Gareth quite saw his point.

They were startled by the sound of rough voices approaching, and as one, slipped back into the shadows.

“Funny, you know, I never would’ve pegged that newspaper fellow as the arsonist. You’d think if he wanted to burn down the city, he’d have chosen a little less conspicuous career first, know what I mean?”

“Maybe he had the newspaper before he decided to burn the city. You can’t always choose your job to fit your

lifestyle,” came the response. Smoke from a cheap-cut shag cigarette drifted down the alley, and Gareth closed his eyes and inhaled appreciatively. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a cigarette, and the taste of the smoke in his nostrils was intoxicating. Cole elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

“Still, you have to hand it to him: getting in league with a firewalker was smart. If you wanted to set fires like, without getting caught.”

Cole muttered an oath under his breath, and it was Gareth’s turn to do the elbowing.

“Think they’ve gotten far?” the second voice asked.

“Not with the streets all blocked off like this. They’d have to be—what those little creepy things called?”

“Mice?”

“No. Bugs-like.”

“Cockroaches?”

“Them. Yep.”

Gareth shot Cole a questioning look. *Blockades?* he mouthed.

Cole nodded grimly. He pantomimed the two of them returning to the fish hut, thin, elegant fingers sketching economically. Gareth nodded and scanned the narrow passageway. With watchmen at the entrance, they’d need to find a different way out. He spied a narrow

window ledge, just high enough to catch hold of with a boost. From there, they could reach a catwalk and get to the roof.

“I’m wrecked-like. Just worked two shifts back-to-back afore these blighters caused such a commotion.” There was a soft hiss, then the sound of a heavy boot grinding the spent butt into the icy dock. “Let’s hope they’re found sooner-like rather than later, so I can get some sleep.”

Gareth tugged Cole’s sleeve and crept back along the alley toward the window. It took only a moment for Gareth to outline his plan, then Cole was pushing him up toward the ledge and back toward their temporary haven.

* * *

Cole tore a small hole in the paper covering the fishing hut’s windows and peered out. “We should be safe here for a while but not forever. I suppose we can get across the lake safely, find a skiff or a pilot gig or something, but without resources—papers and a destination—I don’t like our chances. Nor the city’s. Any idea what time the fire’s on for?”

Gareth shrugged. “All I’ve got are dates, not times. But the pattern indicates they prefer the cover of night.”

“Think the watch will still have the streets sealed

by then?"

"I think we'll have to chance it. Our best hope for getting out of here and finding any reinforcements is to wait until the ferry gets in and use it as a diversion."

Cole looked over with interest. "What time's it get in?"

"Half past three, if the lake cooperates. This time of year, sometimes the ice re-forms and they go a little slow, so say...sometime between then and four."

"And sunset's what, four thirty or so?"

Gareth nodded. "Round about then. Ferry's the fastest way down to civilization and brings whiskey and bourbon up from the south. There should be activity enough to cover our escape. We'll keep our heads down and keep walking."

Cole turned away from the window and sauntered over to the cot. "Ah. And did you have any activities planned for us while we wait? Cards, perhaps?"

Gareth allowed himself a grin. "Something like that."

Sinking onto the bed, Cole cupped Gareth's jaw and stole a kiss. "I might have some ideas."

Jack

As soon as the ferry's long, lonesome horn sounded across the water, the two of them slipped from the fishing hut and wended their way through the crowds, ignored in the excitement of the ferry's arrival.

They made their way through the city via the meanest alleys, Cole leading Gareth through slums he'd hardly known existed. The poverty-stricken underbelly of New Eddington had fared poorly under the Reform, and many of the buildings they passed were so rickety, they looked as though a strong wind would bring them down. Gareth shuddered to think of the horror a fire would visit on these mean, overcrowded streets.

They passed the blackened, burned-out shell of the shuttered dance hall, and Gareth hunched his shoulders against a wind only he could feel. February fifteenth, he thought automatically. Cole didn't seem to notice, but Gareth looked around furtively, wondering if anyone else could see the guilt branded on his soul.

At the corners of Bank and Battery, they turned

left and ducked between two tall buildings, but not before Gareth caught sight of the chandler's, similarly burned and deserted.

February nineteenth. Gareth's chest tightened. He remembered the sharp *pop* of each window as he'd run up, watching flames burst through the ruined frames. He fought for breath, giving his head a quick shake to clear it.

Cole took his arm, frowning. "Trouble?"

Gareth wondered where to start. How to unburden himself to this virtuous man—the most important person in his life.

Cole tugged him to a halt. "Gareth."

The rivers of colored wax that had coursed out the chandler's open door mixed in Gareth's memories with the smell of burning sugar and the crash of flaming timbers—the candy shop over by the millinery—February twenty-third—

"Focus, man," Cole said softly. "Now tell me: tonight's target?"

Gareth jerked himself back to the present, freeing his arm from Cole's grasp. "The tobacconists. Smoke and Mirrors."

"Under Theodore's laboratory?"

"The same. With all that stock in the back, the place

will burn like a funeral pyre.”

“And the city’s firewalkers under lock and key. I wonder how the judge is planning to explain that away. Gareth, that building’s close to the city armory. With no one to put it out and no way to contain it, one loose spark —”

“And good-bye New Eddington. But that means finding the countess is useless! If the armory goes—it’s the definition of a powder keg, and there’ll be nothing to stop the fire then. Even the foam will do little. Cole, we must find some way to stop this madman from destroying the whole city!”

“Easy,” Cole murmured. “I think I have a plan.”

They reached a busy intersection and darted between the rumbling hansom cabs, horses trotting determinedly in either direction under the harsh shouts of their drivers. The sidewalks were crowded with dockworkers and quarrymen, trudging along with their heads firmly downcast. A lone watchman stood outside the cobblers, scanning the street with narrowed eyes, and Gareth let Cole pull him under the eaves of the glassblower’s shop. Even with their backs to the street, they could still see the watchman reflected in the huge window.

“As a firewalker, I cannot in good conscience ignore the threat of the coming night. Surely you must know

someone—any last honest man in this town who can help us spread the word of danger and evacuate the area. Our best weapon now is word of mouth.”

“But by simply warning people of fire, we run the risk of riot.”

“To my mind, that’s a damned sight better than losing the whole city. Think, man! Who can we trust?”

Gareth wracked his brains. “Kint, I believe, is at heart a good man. You saw him when the watch was after us. He’s ignorant of their plan. And his apartment’s not far from here.”

“Good. With his uniform and credentials, he stands a better chance of being believed. Anyone else?”

Gareth shook his head. “Hindle, maybe. But he’s just a lad, barely out of school.”

“He’ll be enthusiastic, at least; maybe he can rally everyone around, get them to follow him—”

“Follow him where, Cole? This isn’t Hamlin, and he’s not the piper!”

“But if the city goes up, the rats’ll have the best chance. Especially if they head for the water.” Cole exhaled heavily. He looked wan and drawn, at least as old as Gareth felt, every inch an old soldier called unexpectedly back into action. He rubbed his eyes wearily. “Gareth... I’m running out of ideas here.

Frankly, this feels too big for us to handle by ourselves. We've got what...you, me, a teenager in livery, a septuagenarian detective, and a royal spy. And Judge Barr—" Cole looked around nervously and lowered his voice. "Judge Barrington has the whole watch on his side, the firewalkers incarcerated, and based on how the other fires burned, they've already seeded the tobacconist's with incendiary materials. Even if we could get there and get inside, get everybody out, the shop's still stuffed to the rafters with things that burn. It's—"

"Impossible. Insurmountable. We'll probably die. On the other hand, it's our only chance."

Cole grinned, and the expression took a couple of decades off him. "You make it sound so easy."

"With you, it really is that easy. Come on."

The two men moved as quickly as they dared, staying close to buildings and keeping a cautious eye out for the watch. Gareth had no doubt the judge had put a bounty on both their heads, and after escaping from city hall once, he doubted they could manage a second time.

They turned the corner of Battery Street and moved purposefully up toward Theodore's laboratory and the tobacconist's. The afternoon was unusually warm for March, and Gareth was unsurprised to see the snow had all melted from the crest surmounting the door. With a quick look at Cole, Gareth shouldered the door open and

stepped inside.

The shop was packed with customers, the line at the counter two deep, everyone talking and clamoring for the attention of the round and florid shopkeeper and his young assistant as they weighed snuff and poured it into small cloth bags or plucked out slim brown cigars and cigarettes from their velvet-lined trays. The familiar odor of sweet, woodsy tobacco hung heavy in the air, and stacks of crates loomed precariously over their heads, packing straw peeking out between the joins.

It was an arsonist's fantasy.

"This is a nightmare," Cole said softly. "What here is not flammable? Everything's designed to go up in smoke."

Before Gareth could answer, a strange hand clutched his arm, the fingers digging heavily into his skin. He looked up at its owner and found himself staring into the face of Judge Barrington's secretary.

"You...you were supposed to expose him," the man said sadly. His spectacles were askew on his nose, and dark circles hung like half-moons under his eyes. "I was counting on you."

It took only a moment for Gareth to place the voice. "*I should've known from the start you were nothing more than a fat lap cat of the commonwealth. I should never have trusted you with our secrets.*"

Judge Barrington's secretary was his assailant from outside the cardhouse.

"You!" Gareth replied. He opened his mouth to say more, then noticed the bright scarlet stain widening across the secretary's waistcoat. A gaping rent in the fabric was thick with gore, and the hand that gripped his arm was bloodied.

The rest of the customers were crowding around the counter, intent on their business, and it was the work of a moment for Gareth and Cole to catch the secretary as his knees gave. They half carried him out the door and into the hallway where he slumped across the staircase. Cole knelt and peered at the man's wound, his expert hands probing it gently; he looked up at Gareth and shook his head minutely.

The secretary's laugh turned to a cough, and gobbets of blood spewed from his lips. "I thought for sure you'd expose them...print their names in that paper of yours, tell everyone—" He gasped, one hand flying to the wound in his side. "Tell everyone their precious Reform is being led by profit-hungry jackals. But you're just as bad." He sagged back against the carpet runner.

Gareth knelt by his side and took the secretary's other hand. "Save your strength."

"For what?" The man's laugh was bitter, and what little color he'd had had leached away, leaving his skin

grayish with two high spots of color in his cheeks. Perspiration slicked his brow. "He's done to me exactly what I'd planned for him. He and the others—just too powerful." He hissed through his teeth and threw his head back, grimacing.

"What others?" Cole asked. "Tell us their names. And to what end were these fires? What profit were they making?"

"I believe," a sepulchral voice wheezed from above, "that my once dear associate has said entirely enough."

Gareth looked up.

Making his unsteady way down the stairs toward them was a rail-thin elderly gentleman, bundled in fine linens and velvets and wrapped in an ankle-length cloak. With each step, he creaked as alarmingly as the ancient staircase, and one hand gripped the banister tightly as he moved. The other hand held a bloodied knife.

"Judge Barrington," Gareth growled. Cole rose and stepped closer to his side.

"I see my reputation precedes me," the judge said. He stopped and, with an expression of distaste, tossed the knife away. It bounced on the wood and tumbled down the stairs with a clatter, landing at Gareth's feet. "And if you still harbor any illusions of preventing the last of the fires, dear boys, you'll follow me." He turned and made his way back up the stairs, disappearing through the

door to Theodore's laboratory.

Gareth knelt and retrieved the knife at his feet, hefting it in one hand. "Well?"

"I think we'd best do as the judge says," Cole answered. "For one thing, we won't be getting any more answers out of this fellow." The judge's secretary stared sightlessly up toward the ceiling, his lips crusted with drying blood. Cole leaned over and gently lowered the man's eyelids. "And if there's a remote chance of preventing any more bloodshed..."

Gareth knew Cole's thoughts were with his fellow firewalkers, still trapped in the bowels of city hall. "You're a good man, Thomas Cole. The best."

Cole grinned and squeezed Gareth's arm. Shoulder to shoulder, they climbed the stairs for their appointment with the judge.

* * *

Theodore's laboratory was in just as much disarray as the last time Gareth had visited, but it was made so much worse by the presence of the man who Gareth now knew was responsible not just for Theodore's death but for the deaths of countless others. "Talk. Tell us about the fires or be gutted like a fish."

The judge laughed, a mirthless, papery sound. "This from New Eddington's most notorious fugitive, the

man discovered to be behind so much death and destruction. A hollow threat if ever I heard one. And I've heard more than you know."

Cole stepped in front of Gareth. "Good men died in the fires you set, Judge. You'll answer for each and every one of them."

"Ah yes. Gareth Charles' coconspirator, the eminently respectable firewalker, Thomas Cole. Do you know, I still cannot decide whether the two of you were turned mad by your service in Crimea or were following the dictates of your inborn moral failings. Although it might be poor for morale if word gets out that His Majesty's Army has been infiltrated by sodomites." He spat the last word at them and wiped his mouth with the back of a thin, veined hand.

Cole colored, and Gareth gripped the knife more tightly. "You have no right to judge anyone. Not anymore."

"Oh, but you have it all backward, my dear boy. With Dr. Zmolensky's firefoam shipped out to Crimea, we're sure to win that little tussle in no time at all, and as the man who brought it to the king, I'll be a colonial hero. They can tear down the statue of that buffoon in the park who stumbled on New Eddington while drunk one night and thought the lake they named after him was the English Channel. No, no, my name is one that'll

go down in history, especially after I catch the two of you laying the last fire. I only hope the populace goes easy on your corpses. They do have such a tendency to overreact about these things. I mean, after I caught the two of you stocking the place with incendiaries, and you, Charles—no, let me think a minute...yes, that's much better. In search of my poor, misguided secretary—such a capable man until he fell in with the wrong crowd—I stumbled across the two of you conspiring with him and witnessed you, Cole, just about to stab the lad. A falling-out between miscreants! Too late to prevent his murder, I fled for my life, barricading you inside your very target. The watch will not, I fear, be in time to save you or the tobacconists. Another worthless house of vice eliminated and, with the two of you dead, no more cause for alarm.”

Gareth looked down at the knife in his hand. The secretary's blood was all over his hands and smeared on his clothing. They'd fallen very neatly into a madman's cunning trap. “All this for some poisonous foam,” he said softly.

The judge laughed again. “That foam's worth its weight in gold! Do you think I would squander such a thing on firefighting? You call it poisonous. I call it the greatest weapon ever built! It seeks fire, certainly, but when there is no fire, it simply seeks heat. The heat of men! Think of it on the battlefield!”

Gareth thought of the dead mouse splayed on Theodore's dissecting board and felt sick. "That is no death for a soldier!" he shouted. "Choked and poisoned —"

"Like the vermin they are." Judge Barrington cackled. "The foam will render our army unbeatable—thanks to me! Imagine it seething over the commonwealth's enemies!"

"Imagine how much of New Eddington will burn this time with the firewalkers all locked in your dungeons," Cole said bitterly. "Who will spray your precious foam then?"

The judge pulled his robes tighter around him with an expression of distaste. "What do I care if this whole godforsaken city burns to the ground? Sooner or later, there'll be more snow to put out the remaining embers, and by then I'll be safely in the comforts of Yorktown or, better yet, back in the mother country where I belong. Oh no no no, my dear Thomas, the more of New Eddington that burns, the less likely the king is to decide to rebuild. A terrible place. Why on earth he wanted a trade outpost here in the first place is beyond me."

Gareth thought for a moment. "What is it you did to land yourself here? Has it always been fire, Judge? Or has it always been money?" He stepped around Cole and walked toward the judge, knife in hand. "Got caught

accepting bribes on the bench? And what about the other people behind this scheme? Your secretary indicated there was a group of you.”

The judge’s eyes glittered like ice. “My secretary was a loudmouthed, treacherous fool who got what was coming to him. And even for a newspaperman, you ask far too many questions.” He fumbled in the pocket of his robe and withdrew a pistol with shaking hands. “You have no idea what it’s like to be an old man in cold like this. No idea. Now drop the knife.”

Gareth did so only with reluctance, noting how the judge aimed his weapon squarely at Cole, despite having his eyes on Gareth. Movement in the shadows caught his eye, and two watchmen stepped out of the gloom, hands on the holsters at their hips. *Of course the judge would’ve brought reinforcements.* He’d planned multiple arsons, wrongly imprisoned and tortured a whole battalion of firewalkers, and killed the only people who knew his secrets. The man had planned for every eventuality.

Cole stepped to Gareth’s side. “I know what that cold’s like. Just like every veteran who returns from the front to find he’s been forgotten.” He took another step forward. “That the country he fought for can find no room for him that includes the magic steam heat we were promised. Do you remember the last time you went without that heat? Or what it’s like to go without a fine,

warm cloak?" Cole stepped in front of Gareth, close enough his hip brushed Gareth's hand.

Gareth felt a strange object in Cole's coat pocket as he passed. Like thin steel, curved. He frowned.

"What's it like not to have food enough to stoke a man's own furnace? That's a cold beyond reckoning." He stepped into Gareth again, his coat again brushing Gareth's hand.

Thin steel, curved...thin steel... Gareth racked his brain, then suddenly knew. In his mind, he saw Cole, the previous evening, taking a fishhook down off the wall of the fishing hut, testing the cruel point. "*By the time I'd recovered my senses, they were dragging me down the street with the rest of my battalion.*" Cole certainly had his senses about him now.

"If you squandered your veteran's pension on drink and women—or men—it's no concern of mine. The commonwealth provides for its soldiers admirably."

"Ah, but the Soldier's Support League has long run short of funds. They wish they could help us, truly they do, but—" Cole caught his foot on the floor and stumbled into Gareth.

A shot rang out, shattering a surviving beaker. "I must insist you cease this inane chattering and keep your hands where I can see them. My patriotism is beyond question, and I will not believe the lies of a moral

reprobate. Up, up!”

Cole complied, stepping squarely forward and raising his hands in surrender. “But surely your friends tell you of whatever schemes they use to leach the veteran’s groups dry, funneling the coins into their own grubby pockets. Tell me, where has that money gone? To the governor, perhaps? Or does the sweat of those veterans run through the golden steam pipes that heat your mansion? City hall is awash in the blood of good men, and your hand wields the knife. I’m sure we veterans are just more fodder for the machine that prints your coins.”

The judge appeared to have forgotten all about Gareth, who now held a knife in one hand and Cole’s fishhook—slipped from his pocket when he stumbled—in the other.

“Shut your mouth,” the judge whispered. Spittle appeared at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes took on a manic glaze. “You have no idea what I’ve had to do to get where I am today. And the foam! The foam will change everything! Think how many lives it can save!”

Cole hazarded another step forward, arms still raised. “You must’ve killed Theodore before he had a chance to tell you the foam is unstable. It’ll kill more of our own men than it saves.”

The judge frowned. He blinked his rheumy eyes and

lowered the pistol. "You're lying."

Gareth saw his chance. He yelled his lover's name and sprang at the judge.

Cole dove to one side, and Gareth toppled Judge Barrington. Another shot rang out, and Gareth felt a blaze of pain sear across his hip. He ignored it and wrestled for the judge's weapon as a second set of hands fell on his shoulders with a Reformist oath.

The old man was less frail than he seemed and fought like a wildcat. Both of them clung to the pistol fiercely, and the fishhook dropped from Gareth's hand with a dull ringing sound. The judge eyed it where it lay and spat in Gareth's face, then rested his head against the floor. "A sodomite, a traitor...and a cheat!" he wheezed.

The second assailant tore Gareth off the judge and slammed a ham-sized fist into his face.

Gareth saw a blinding red flash and stars. He lost his grip on the gun and faltered. The watchman followed up the punch with a knee to the groin that dropped Gareth to the floor. He caught sight of Cole sparring with the other watchman, the bloodied knife in one hand, then Judge Barrington grabbed Gareth by the hair, yanking his face up to meet his own.

"Do you honestly think you made one single move in this town without my approval? Are you really so

arrogant you don't realize I own you and those noisy, foul-smelling demons that make it possible for you to print your filthy swill?"

Bile rose in Gareth's throat, and the world swam before his eyes. His hips and groin throbbed, and the judge's breath smelled of fish and rot. "Every furtive stab in the dark, every late-night sally you undertook in your fruitless quest to stop us. I saw everything! There is nothing in New Eddington that escapes my attention, boy! Nothing!"

Over the judge's shoulder, Gareth saw Cole lashing out at a struggling figure on the floor. He groped blindly on the floor as the judge snarled at him, incoherent with rage. His fingers fumbled with the tip of the fishhook, and Gareth grabbed for it and swung hard, driving the hook bluntly into the face of the watchman who held him pinned.

The watchman fell back, dropping to the floor, clutching at his face and moaning.

Gareth got shakily to his feet, depositing Judge Barrington on the floor in a cursing heap.

"Gareth, you're hurt." Cole arrived at Gareth's side and reached a hand out to him. A searing throb renewed itself at Gareth's hip, warring with the agony between his legs. He twisted, angling to see his side, and found the track of a bullet where it had scorched a furrow in his

skin. The wound burned like the devil, but Gareth knew how lucky he'd been. He waved Cole's concern away. Judge Barrington was staggering to his feet, clawing his way up a pile of boxes filled with straw and tinder, obviously placed in Theodore's lab in preparation for the fire.

The fishhook fell from Gareth's nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. "It's over," he said. "All your plans, all your schemes, all of it ends now." Without taking his eyes off the judge, he knelt and grabbed the pistol up off the floor. It was a single-action repeater with four more bullets in the revolving chamber, the barrel still warm to the touch.

"Not exactly," the judge wheezed. He shifted his grip to Theodore's workbench—then gave a malevolent cackle. Drawing a tinderbox from the folds of his cloak with one hand, he used the other to wrench the Bunsen burners free from their mounts. Gareth started forward with a shout, but Judge Barrington gave the nearest tower of crates a violent shove. They toppled to the floor and shattered, the contents spilling out over the floor of the lab.

The smell of gas hung heavy in the air. Gareth and Cole both took a step back.

The crates had disgorged a number of rust-colored ovals marked with a string at one end. They skittered

across the stonelike floor and spun where they lay.

“Wasps’ nests,” Cole said in a cold voice. Gareth nodded dumbly. Widely used in the Conflict, the egg-shaped weapons were filled with ground glass and blasting powder. They were light, unstable, and absolutely deadly.

“What now, Gareth?” Cole asked in an urgent whisper.

Gareth stood frozen to the spot, looking from the open gas valves to the wasps’ nests. Judge Barrington raised the tinderbox, and Gareth grabbed Cole’s arm. The time for heroics was past.

“Run,” he whispered.

Queen

The two men exited the lab at a run, stumbling down the stairs and out into the clear air. Cole turned to dash back into the tobacconists, but Gareth grabbed his coat. “No time,” he panted. The wound in his side throbbed.

“But all the people inside,” Cole cried, “we must warn them—”

There was a muffled *whump* and then a roar as the top floor of the building exploded. Windows shattered all along the street, and the two men threw themselves to the ground as bricks and debris rained down around them.

Cole picked himself up first and ran back toward the tobacconist's, Gareth hard at his heels. People were streaming confusedly out the front door and pointing up at the smoke and flames billowing from the upstairs windows. High-pitched murmurs of panic ran up and down the street.

Cole shouldered his way through the crowd until he reached the front door and, holding an arm over his nose and mouth, tried to peer over the exiting crowd and into the smoke-filled shop.

Gareth caught his sleeve. "This is madness! If you try to go inside, you'll do more harm than good!"

Cole spun. "But there's no one else left to do anything! Without the firewalkers—"

He was interrupted by a whip-thin fellow in the livery of service, his uniform singed and his skin smeared with soot. His eyes widened at Cole's words. "The firewalkers? Aren't they coming?"

Overhead, the alarm bells rang shrilly, summoning men and machines Gareth knew would never arrive. He looked around the streets wildly. The bucket brigade was back in action, but this time it was even more pointless than at the library: the snow and slush being flung at the lower level had no hope against the fire that had already consumed most of the second floor.

And there was the gas to think of. Night was falling, and the gaslights that lit the main streets were coming alive, popping to life as each one's automatic igniter triggered. The idea of gaslights lighting of their own volition had always struck him as signally dangerous, despite Theodore's attempts to explain the science and safety behind the invention. Each *pop* was like a drop of

acid on Gareth's fraying nerves. He tugged harder at Cole's sleeve. "We've got to try to find a way to free the firewalkers, or the whole city will burn."

"Free them?" the liveried escapee asked. "What's happened to them?"

Cole grasped his shoulders tightly. "How many more are left inside? Focus, man!"

The shopkeeper pushed his way out of the tobacconist's, coughing hard. Gareth caught him round the shoulders and guided him out into the fresh night air. "Sir! Sir! Are you hurt? Are there others?"

The shopkeeper bent double and spat, clearing his lungs heavily. He waved his hand. "No no, I think that's it. Lucky it wasn't the weekend rush, huh?" Another coughing fit took him, and the liveried servant appeared at his side, pounding him on the back. Gareth spun around. "All..." he yelled.

The doorway of the building was vacant, and Cole was nowhere in sight.

"Clear," Gareth finished.

He dashed toward the burning building, shielding his face from the heat and flames. "Cole! Cole!" The interior of the shop was a mass of roiling smoke, and through it Gareth could barely make out glimpses of flames licking at the neatly stacked boxes and up the walls. With an ominous *creak*, the wrought-iron

chandelier hanging from the ceiling twirled lazily; then its anchor gave way, and it crashed to the floor with a resounding *smash*. Candles skittered across the floor, their flames eagerly seeking their brethren.

Gareth tried to advance, but the heat was too intense. “Cole!” Just as he made another sally, strong hands grabbed his shoulders and yanked him back out of the door frame, shoving him roughly away from the building.

“Are you mad?”

Gareth blinked the soot out of his eyes.

Cole stood staring, begrimed and looking furious but very, very alive.

“I thought—”

“That I’d lost my mind. So you decided to join me?”

Gareth grinned. His grin faded as the sounds of running feet and the insistent ringing of the alarm bells slammed him back to reality. “Cole, without the firewalkers—”

“The whole city might burn, yes. We’ve got to get to city hall and find a way to free them. Otherwise—” The shrill whistles of approaching watchmen sounded from the top of the street, and both men looked up in alarm. They carefully slipped back against the buildings as a platoon of guards came running down the street, boots

ringing on the cobblestones.

“New Eddington’s safety will be left up to the very men who’ve been trying to destroy her,” Cole finished quietly.

A second *whump*, much louder than the first, shook the buildings around them. Shards of glass dropped from broken panes and tinkled to the street below. Everyone froze for a moment; then their panicked chatter took on a new, more urgent tenor.

“What in the devil,” Gareth began.

“Charles, if I told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. Army language ain’t fit for a lady.”

Striding calmly up the street toward them, seemingly inured to the chaos around her, came a woman carrying a basket of wilted, sorry-looking flowers. It took Gareth a moment to recognize the countess under the gray scarf wrapped over her head and the garish lipstick she’d adorned herself with. He caught his breath, staring.

“Lilies, sirs.” The countess held out a limp stem that Gareth was sure had never been a lily as passersby shoved past them and up the street toward the second explosion. “Charles, I didn’t think you had it in you to spring your man, here, but this once I don’t mind admitting to being wrong.” She glanced from Gareth to Cole, and a small smile played around her mouth. “And

it's just as well, as I have a role for you tonight."

"We beg your pardon, madam, but we have no time for your games or your wares," Cole said. "If you will excuse us—"

"I'll do no such thing," the countess answered. "That noise you gentlemen just heard was likely city hall going up like fireworks on Virtue Night."

Cole gasped. "Gareth! We must save them!" He turned to follow the streaming masses heading for the heart of the city, but the countess grabbed his arm.

Glaring, Cole said, "Madam, I am warning you. Leave hold of me at once. My friend and I must save the city!"

"Still your tongue," the countess answered. "And after I've been so kind as to give you the house interest rate on your debts too."

"Countess?" Cole stared. "I beg your pardon, but—"

The countess raised an impatient hand. "Beg it later. Right now, I need your help. Realize that's the only time I'll ever say those words, so enjoy them." She had to raise her voice to be heard over the panicked tumult in the street. The trio slipped farther down the block, away from the commotion and onto the covered stoop of the building. "In a nutshell, our idealist friends have just blown up city hall. But lest you think I'm a cruel and heartless old woman, Mr. Cole, rest assured that your

firewalker friends were released before it happened.”

“I must go to them,” Cole said.

But the countess still had hold of his arm. “You must do no such thing. You boys have got to get word to the king. Judge Barrington’s cronies have cut him loose and have gotten in bed with the revolutionaries. Boys, this whole thing’s much bigger than even I suspected. Now that the revolutionaries have the firefoam, they’ll quit being an amusing nursery school and start causing some real trouble here on the homefront. In case the rousing bonfire that used to be our city seat wasn’t your first clue.”

The three of them paused as a knot of watchmen ran up the street, shrilling their whistles with every step. The air was thick with smoke from the nearby fire, and despite the lingering chill in the air, Gareth could taste it in his throat. He winced and spat, noting how the countess held a handkerchief over her nose and mouth. Only Cole seemed unaffected. “We’ve got to get out of here,” Gareth said.

“I agree.” The countess dug in her basket of dirty lilies and withdrew a leatherbound journal Gareth recognized immediately. He’d last seen it in his own satchel. “Here. Dr. Molen’s journal must reach the king. It’s the only proof we have, both of the conspiracy and the danger of the foam.”

Gareth stared, nonplussed, and the countess regarded him inscrutably. A small smile touched her lips, and Gareth pulled himself together hurriedly. "The king," he said slowly, taking the journal from the countess's hand. "We shall have to find passage—"

"Taken care of." The countess drew her shoulders back. "The *Sable Lady* docked this morning, and she'll sail again on the evening tide, bound south with a cargo of salted herring. Her captain is expecting two retired soldiers, brothers named James who don't mind sharing the one cabin." Her eyes twinkled. "I trust that'll be satisfactory?"

"More than satisfactory, Countess. But the fire—we must help—"

He was interrupted by an alarming *creak*; then the ponderous wooden sign hanging in front of Smoke and Mirrors crashed to the street, splintering and sending up a spray of sparks. A horse pulling a wagon full of barrels reared and whinnied in terror as the assembled crowd rushed to rescue the barrels.

"You will be no help here," the countess said coolly. "What can two men do? The firewalkers are likely already at their tasks, minus one, of course. Oh, and without those blasted bugs crawling around the place. Hope they remember how horses work."

Cole snorted. "Madam, we are in your debt."

“Get the journal to the king, and we’ll call it even. Now go! New Eddington’s a tough old broad, but your part in her history is past.”

Gareth and Cole exchanged a long glance, and Cole gave an infinitesimal nod. “We go to the docks,” he said.

“Your monarch will be in your debt,” the countess said cryptically and slipped off the stoop, just another lame, heart-weary flower seller trying to turn a penny even while the city burned around her.

King

The fire was growing fiercer by the minute, the building housing the tobacconist and Theodore's laboratory well ablaze. Gareth and Cole fell back down the road toward the lake and sanctuary. Through the smoke, they could see moving figures on the other side of the square, but there was no way to reach them now. "Let us hope it is the watch helping the citizens to safety," Gareth growled.

Cole nodded, wiping at his eyes. They were red-rimmed and watering from the smoke, and Gareth rubbed his own eyes. He was similarly afflicted, and the skin on his face felt tight from the searing heat.

They were stopped in their tracks by a terrifying roar that seemed to come from the ground beneath them. The earth shook, and directly ahead, the ground started to crack. Stumbling backward, holding on to one another, they stared in incomprehension.

Smoke poured from the fissure, black and oily, and over all came the hiss of escaping steam. Comprehension

dawned on Gareth, and with it, horror. "The steam pipes," he shouted urgently to Cole. "The furnaces are exploding—the steam pipes beneath us have ruptured!"

Cole turned white. "They have pressure enough to level the city. Come on!"

Ahead of them, on the other side of the crack in the cobbled street, citizens were stumbling in the direction of the docks. Their frightened cries came faintly over the roar of the fire and the hiss of escaping steam. But between Gareth and Cole and safety lay an ever-widening crevice from which smoke and steam boiled in equal measures.

Gareth stared in horror, then realized what Cole meant. To the side, an alley led away, and he followed Cole without further hesitation. They ran with all speed through the intense fire heat, hearing ever-louder rumblings beneath their feet. "The ground here may crack too," Gareth gasped out. "We don't have much time!"

They turned this way and that, meandering through the tiny service lanes. They were getting closer to the lake but so was the fire, roaring in their wake, until at last they ran from the mouth of an alley to find it ahead of them. Well ablaze, houses and storefronts fell as Gareth watched, and he spun back, horrified. Flames licked at the alley they'd just left, and Gareth swore.

“We’re trapped!”

Cole pointed at a building on the other side of the plaza. “The firehouse! We can use a firebug to escape!”

Gareth looked around him wildly, realizing Cole was right. They’d arrived in the small plaza in front of the firehouse, turned a strange and nightmare place by the fire shadows and billowing smoke. “But Cole—I saw the firebugs all smashed and broken—”

Cole looked grim. “I pray you’re wrong. We cannot escape these flames on foot. It’s our only chance.”

With a resounding crash, the pillar of a nearby building fell into the road. Gareth jumped back and turned to see Cole’s eyes wide with fear. “You’re right,” Gareth cried, and they fled across the square.

The huge, studded door of the building swung ajar. Cole swung it shut behind them, dropping the bar in place. “That will buy us a few more minutes. And the bug can cut through larger barriers than this.”

Moonlight streamed into the firehouse through the skylights in the roof, and the pinprick stars in the indigo sky offered no clue as to the conflagration going on beneath their impervious stare. Gareth shuddered, looking back from the sky, and saw Cole staring in horror at the ruined firebugs standing misshapen and askew at the rear of the building.

“This is carnage,” Cole said, his voice shaking. He

walked forward slowly, reaching out a hand as though to touch the nearest bug, then snatched it back. "Carnage." He straightened his shoulders. "But it's not getting us out of here. Come, Gareth, let us see if the bugs in the repair stalls have yet survived."

Gareth followed Cole to the rear of the building, peering with him over the half doors into the old stables. Each stable held a bug in various stages of disrepair, some blackened by smoke and ash, others missing limbs, doors, and windscreens.

"This doesn't look good," Gareth said in a low voice.

"There is one more stall," Cole said with forced cheerfulness. "Don't give up on me."

Together they peered into the last stable and saw a whole firebug. Gareth gave a shout of triumph, but Cole grabbed his arm. "It may not run. And even if it does... Gareth, it's like the bug I saw in Theodore's laboratory. See?"

Gareth looked where Cole pointed. The bug was larger than the others, and on its back was a strange, misshapen hump. Gareth remembered the drawing in Theodore's book. "It carries its own foam!"

"It may, but we have no time to fill it even if we knew how." Cole shrugged. "But we have no choice. There's no other way out."

"Does it need fuel?" Gareth asked hesitantly,

looking from the bug to his lover.

“No, it is cog-driven,” Cole said, opening the driver’s hatch. “I do not know the mechanics, but it starts by crank, and then each turn of its mechanism provides energy for the next.”

“Clever,” Gareth commented, hesitating as he watched Cole clamber into the guts of the machine. He couldn’t help but remember the helpless, frozen bug kicking fruitlessly at air, and Cole’s screams as Gareth had wrenched at the door. The idea of getting into one of the contraptions was terrifying.

Cole leaned down and held out a hand. “Gareth, it’s the only way, my friend.”

Gareth smiled at how easily Cole had seen his fear and reached up to take his partner’s hand. “With you, Cole,” he affirmed and sprang up to the cabin.

“There is space for two to sit,” Cole said, frowning a little. “That is not usual.”

“Helpful, though.” Gareth dropped to the leather bench next to Cole.

“I know. Let us hope that whatever has been done to this bug will help us escape.” He reached past Gareth and pulled the metal door closed, and with a high-pitched *whir*, the bug came to life.

Gareth tensed as Cole pulled a lever on the panel in

front of him. With a *hiss* as though of steam escaping and a metallic *graunch*, the capsule they were in rose up above the earth as the firebug straightened its legs. They seemed to sway in the air, and Gareth's stomach lurched. He grabbed the seat reflexively, drawing in his breath sharply.

"So far, so good," Cole said. Gareth watched as he manipulated foot pedals, then squeezed his eyes shut as the bug took a swaying step forward.

The bug's jaws made short work of the heavy firehouse door. The sight outside turned Gareth's bones to water. Everywhere he looked was aflame, and a huge crack ran across the center of the plaza. Beside him, Cole set his teeth and slammed a lever forward.

From overhead came a tearing, violent clanging, and Gareth opened his eyes again, looking up in horror. All he saw was the metal roof of the capsule, and he turned to Cole.

"I don't know what it is," Cole said, voice cracking. "And the bug's not responding—it won't head for the fire—" Urgently, he pushed the lever on the dash back.

The clanging came again, and Gareth leaned forward, craning his neck to see out through the bug's windscreen. What he saw made his mouth drop open, and he grabbed for Cole's arm. "Look, man!"

Cole leaned beside him, stiffening as he saw what

Gareth was pointing at. From the bug's misshapen carapace had sprouted an enormous pair of metal wings. "What the hell does it mean?" Gareth asked.

With an oath, Cole drove the foot pedals to the floor and reached forward, gripping a long, rubber-handled pole and pulling it hard toward him. "It means we may escape this hell after all! Gareth, hang on!"

Uncomprehending, Gareth grabbed his seat with one hand and Cole's arm with the other. The clanging came again from above, louder, and the bug leaped forward. Gareth thought for an instant they would be consumed by the flames, and then the plaza fell away from his view.

"Cole!" Gareth held on harder as it dawned on him what was happening. The bug was airborne, rising above the firehouse, and the darkness ahead was the night sky. "Cole!"

"These modifications are helpful indeed, it seems." Cole laughed, somewhere between stress and euphoria. "Look, Gareth!"

Gareth looked where Cole pointed. Below them, swinging dizzily, gleamed the ice of the lakeshore, and when he turned his head, he saw roaring, choking flames consuming the city. He caught his breath, and Cole pressed the lever forward. The bug swooped past the flames, and below them Gareth saw the ruin of city hall,

black and charred, small fires still burning here and there. New Eddington was well alight, and as Cole turned the bug again, Gareth made out the crowds down at the lakeshore, black against the ice.

Gareth shuddered. The sensation of being suspended in nothing was unnerving, and the way the ground swung beneath them was nauseating. "Cole," he said tensely as his partner headed their strange flying machine toward the fire. "Don't—if it should fall—"

"It will not fall," Cole said confidently. "It flies easier than my own bug rides. But without a firewagon filled with foam, it cannot fight the fire." He swung the machine back away from the flames with a twist of the long-handled lever. "I wonder, can we fly this all the way to Yorktown?"

"I believe we would freeze if we tried," Gareth pointed out, squeezing Cole's arm. He leaned forward, peering through the windscreen. Partway across the frozen expanse of lake, the moonlight illuminated the squat, square stern of a freighter, a black ragged trail of broken ice behind her. "Cole, I'll wager that is the *Sable Lady*. I believe her captain's expecting us."

"I believe you are right, Brother James." Cole grinned and squeezed Gareth's leg and sent the peculiar bug swooping in the wake of the ship.

Ace

The cabin on the *Sable Lady* was neither luxurious nor warm, but Gareth had got one wish: there was only one bed. While small, it was bigger than a one-man bunk, and Gareth nodded approvingly when the captain had suggested, hesitantly, that p'raps the brothers would condescend to top 'n tail, like?

"We have shared worse berths than this before today," Gareth assured the man, brushing aside his apologies and regrets that there was no better cabin to give them. "We shall do very well, sir."

"And did you wish to take the top or the tail, brother?" Cole purred as the door closed on the solicitous captain. He came up behind Gareth and closed his arms around his chest.

Gareth chuckled and leaned back into his lover's embrace. "I have every intention of exploring both," he said contentedly. "Thoroughly."

Cole had piloted the bug across the frozen lake

without incident, and although the landing on the other side had been rough, a carefully chosen snowdrift had broken the worst of their fall. Gareth had a few extra bruises but counted himself lucky to have come off an experience with a flying machine with nothing worse. Cole had sustained a small cut on his forehead, but it hadn't dimmed his enthusiasm for the flying machine. His only regret was that they had had to leave the bug behind on the shores of St. Martinberg, where they'd met the *Sable Lady* as she docked.

The brothers James had been surprised and amused that their dear friend Countess Harvill had told the captain they would be embarking at New Eddington—as the captain could see for himself, they were here in St. Martinberg, and had he kept their cabin for them? They were very much obliged, and so sorry for the inconvenience. They'd exclaimed in polite horror at the captain's report of the fire in New Eddington, and wondered aloud about the safety of their dear countess.

Now, safely installed in the small private cabin which would be their home for the next three weeks or more, Gareth dropped to the narrow bed. He watched as Cole pulled off his shirt and then his pants, and availed himself of the bucket of warm water they'd been brought. Before coming to the port, they'd washed themselves free of soot as best they could using snow melted over Gareth's lantern, but after the last few days, warm water

and soap was luxury indeed.

Gareth pulled off his own shirt and folded the waistband of his pants clear of the graze left by Judge Barrington's bullet. Miraculously, the wound still looked clean. It stung a little, but close inspection showed him it was as minor as he had originally thought. He put his shirt aside.

"A week ago, I didn't know you," Gareth said slowly, eyes on his lover's muscular back. He felt as though he'd known Cole forever. Cole was so much a part of him that the idea of a time before was almost inconceivable.

"A week ago." Cole sighed and turned to face him. "A week ago, New Eddington was whole, you were a gentleman, and I was a firewalker. I wonder what Barrington was hoping to achieve? And I wonder if, in the end, he thought it was worth it?"

"So much has been destroyed," Gareth mused, bending to remove his boots. "I hope the king understands the importance of this journal and acts quickly. The citizens will need help to see them through the winter." He patted his shirt, where the precious information was safely stowed in the breast pocket.

"So much has been destroyed indeed." Cole picked up the rough towel that hung beside the bucket and plied it vigorously. "Gareth, your home, all your possessions, your business, lost—"

Gareth stood, going to the bucket. "The accoutrements of gentility," he said, shaking his head. "They are less than nothing, Cole. I yet live, and you are at my side. I ask no more of life."

"A compliment indeed." Cole smiled wryly and held the towel out to Gareth. He frowned as he did so, looking at the wound at Gareth's hip. "When you have washed, I'll dress that for you. But it looks as though it will heal cleanly."

Beneath their feet, the deck lurched as the freighter got underway, and a slow grin spread across Gareth's face. At a time such as this, the crew would be occupied, and there would be none to interrupt them. "The wound can wait. First, I have more compliments to pay you," he said throatily, looking from Cole to the bunk, and Cole's eyes sparked.

"I'm listening," he said, watching appreciatively as Gareth ran the towel over his body. "And so far, I like what I see."

"So do I." Gareth flung the towel back on its peg and reached for Cole, swallowing a groan as he felt the heat of his lover's skin against his own body. Still slightly damp from his wash, Cole smelled of woodsmoke and salt, and Gareth inhaled deeply, breathing him in.

Cole was hard against him, moist and warm, and Gareth guided him to the bed, impatient. He kissed him

hungrily, the flicker of Cole's sweet tongue starting fiery jolts of pleasure, and thrust his own readiness against his lover's hip.

Cole's groan of encouragement was music to Gareth's ears. As Cole sank to the bunk, Gareth climbed on top of him, between Cole's spread legs, pressing his own groin against Cole's waiting flesh.

A shudder went through Cole, and he arched up against Gareth's body, rolling his hips back and thrusting against Gareth's stomach. His slick warmth slid over Gareth's skin, and Gareth bore him back down against the bed, hungry for more. "Turn over," he gasped.

Cole's eyes kindled as Gareth rose up, giving him room. He turned slowly, lowering his shoulders to the bed and raising his ass. As Gareth squeezed his pale ass cheeks, Cole gave a deep, guttural moan that went straight to Gareth's cock.

Shuddering with desire, Gareth pressed against the backs of Cole's thighs. His cock throbbed, making him light-headed, and he leaned on Cole's back for support.

"Gareth, I need you," Cole said, half order, half plea, and rocked against him.

Gareth knew how he felt. Struggling to keep his hand from shaking, he spat on his fingers and slowly explored Cole's willing flesh.

Cole's entrance pulsed under Gareth's fingers, inviting him in, and Gareth closed his eyes as he slid the tip of his middle finger inside. He groaned at the tightness of Cole's rim, gently pressing against the muscles that clenched around him, and as Cole's body surrendered, he reached beneath with his other hand and slowly stroked Cole's cock.

Cole whimpered and thrust awkwardly into Gareth's hand, and Gareth pressed his finger home. With a moan of surprise, Cole froze for an instant, then pushed back, rocking on Gareth's finger and thrusting again and again into his hand.

Gareth tightened his grip, letting his lover fuck himself until Cole's cock swelled in his fist, and Cole's whimpers turned high and breathless. Slowly he eased his finger out of Cole's warmth and, with a final pull, released his cock.

"Gareth...don't..." Cole panted, looking over his shoulder at Gareth, wild-eyed.

"Fear not. I won't leave you in such dire straits." Gareth smiled a little and spat into his palm. His own cock ached for attention as he slicked it with the saliva, and then he was pressing his crown against Cole's rim.

Cole gave a choked-off cry and jerked convulsively as Gareth slid inside, and Gareth froze, giving his lover time to adjust. But Cole was impatient and shoved back

urgently. Sweat rolled off Gareth as he tried to take it slowly, but with each thrust, Cole brought him closer.

With a sob, Gareth gave in to his desire, to his lover's need. He pushed forward, sinking into the heat of Cole's flesh, tight and perfect. Cole groaned his pleasure, his ass tightening around Gareth's cock.

They moved in rhythm, Cole meeting every one of Gareth's thrusts, and with every movement, Gareth felt his own fire burning brighter. Fighting to hold on, he reached beneath Cole and grasped his lover's swollen member, stroking in time with his rhythm.

Cole gasped, pumping into Gareth's hand and driving himself backward onto Gareth's cock. Gareth couldn't hold on any longer. With a ragged cry, he drove deep into Cole, dropping onto his back. Cole shuddered, pumping into Gareth's hand, crying out as his hot juices spurted over Gareth's fingers.

Tangled together, they collapsed onto the bunk. Cole rolled over as Gareth's cock slipped free and gathered Gareth into his arms. Gareth nuzzled against him, wrapping his own arms around Cole until there was no space left between them.

"Spies, it seems, travel in much greater comfort than soldiers," Cole murmured at last.

"I prefer to think of us as couriers," Gareth replied, raising his head. "And truly, had the army quartered me

like this, I would be a captain still.”

“Couriers. I like it.” Cole grinned and leaned up, stealing a kiss. “But surely, Captain, your billets were far more comfortable than those of us foot soldiers.”

Gareth kissed Cole back, a lingering, deep kiss that he finally broke with reluctance. “I have had better beds,” he admitted softly. “But never better company.”

Cole’s eyes brightened, and he pulled Gareth back down. “I have always found that in a hard campaign, it is the company that matters,” he said huskily.

“You have that right.” Gareth sighed contentedly. “It’s a long way to Yorktown, partner.”

“I’m counting on it. I plan on enjoying every mile.”

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Kate Roman

Firebug
Man and Wolf

Kate Roman

Currently based in Northern California, Kate divides her time between dreaming of beautiful, heartbroken men and the men who love them, and working in IT support. She's ably assisted by one cat, an assortment of dogs and several rabbits, and doesn't want to talk about the shameful state of her garden. She also reads more books than can possibly be healthy.