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CLONE RANGERS

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CLONE RANGERS

Chapter One Surgery

“Scalpel.”

The blade flashed as the little nurse passed it over.

“Doesn’t look good,” the surgeon muttered. “This leg will have to come off.”

“Oh, no!” The little nurse gazed sorrowfully at the limp figure on the operating table. “What a shame for the poor dog – especially after he rescued those City children from the fire.”

The surgeon shook her head. “He should have got out of the building faster. At least he’ll still have three legs. If we lose the leg, we can save the dog.”

“But he’s so badly hurt!” whispered the little nurse.

“Nothing that time won’t cure. Get ready to clamp.” The surgeon busied herself with the saw: its remorseless buzz rasped through the operating theatre. “It’ll take time, and money,” she went on, “but those are Garracker’s orders – save the dog, whatever the cost.”

“Garracker?” The little nurse froze for an instant, and then glanced around nervously, as if expecting to see him swaggering in with a battalion of bodyguards.

“Garracker,” said the surgeon firmly.

“But why would he say that? Why is Garracker so interested in a dog?”

“Not just any dog. This is Officer Admiral Benbow of the City Police, and I’m told he’s the best undercover agent they’ve ever had.”

“He won’t be going back undercover with three legs,” mourned the nurse.

“There’s another reason why he’s special,” said the surgeon. “He’s voiced. One of the few successes. There won’t be any more voiced dogs, not until they lift the ban on genetic engineering. More swabs, please.”

The little nurse handed them over, watching the surgeon’s deft fingers at work. “I wonder why so few of those experiments worked. Why don’t more dogs have voices?”

“It takes more than a voice-box for a dog to speak human,” said the surgeon gruffly. “It needs the right palate, jaw, tongue – and most of all, intelligence. No point giving a dog a voice if it has nothing to say.”

“What a lot of trouble to go to, just to make voiced dogs to police the City.”

“They had to,” said the surgeon. “Humans wouldn’t do it any longer – the City got too dangerous. Half of its population are dogs, anyway.”

“And the other half are children. How many are there in the City?” asked the nurse curiously.

The surgeon shrugged. “Who knows? Who cares? If stray children choose to live there, how can anyone stop them? It’s the police dogs who keep the City under control. So if Garracker tells us to save this dog’s life, we do it.” She bent over the unconscious body on the table, cutting, swabbing, sewing.

The nurse gently touched a ragged ear protruding from the oxygen mask.

“Poor Benbow! They said he was going back for the third child when the building collapsed. Are the children he rescued all right?”

“Two of them are fine,” replied the surgeon. “Just bruises, shock. They’ll be out of hospital soon – though goodness knows where they’ll go...”

“City children? Someone will find homes for them, surely?”

“Or a Home. They might prefer to return to the City.”

The nurse shivered. She had heard what Homes were like. “What about the third child?”

“Badly burnt,” said the surgeon shortly. “Lost an eye. Scarred for life. There we are.” She dropped the detached leg with a soft thud into a metal dish.

“Finish the stitches,” she commanded. “And make it tidy. I’ve left enough tissue to fit an artificial leg.”

“A *what?*”

“Garracker’s orders.” The surgeon handed the needle over to the little nurse, who began to stitch carefully, anxious to do a good job. It wouldn’t do to displease Garracker.

“Finished,” she said ten minutes later, inspecting her own needle-work approvingly. “Very neat, don’t you think?” She turned to see if the surgeon agreed; but she was talking to empty air. The doctor had vanished.

The little nurse was quite put out. “Well! Where’s she gone? You’d think she’d stay to see the job finished! When it’s a hero and all whose leg she’s just cut off...”

Her voice trailed away, as she looked around for the dish containing Admiral Benbow’s leg.

But that had vanished too.

Chapter Two On the Ward

The little nurse noticed the girl first; her red hair glowed like a bright flame at the far end of the ward. The nurse trotted briskly past the line of low beds to meet her.

“Who are you? What do you want? We’ve got a ward full of very sick dogs here, and it’s not visiting time!”

Then she saw a boy hiding behind the girl. His head was tightly wrapped in bandages. A black patch over one eye gave him a piratical look at odds with his small, thin frame. The other eye peered anxiously around the quiet ward.

“Natty? Is he here?” he whispered.

“He’s here, Wilf.” The girl patted his hand reassuringly, and turned to the nurse. “Please may we see Admiral Benbow – just for one minute?”

The nurse hesitated. She ought to send them packing: but the eye-patch jogged her memory. “Is your brother one of the children he saved?”

“Wilf? Yes, that’s right. There were three of them looking for mushrooms in an empty building, when the fire started – I don’t know how. Admiral Benbow ran into the building and dragged out the other two. He’d just gone back for Wilf when the rafters fell in and trapped them both.”

“Come along, then,” said the nurse, filled with pity for the thin, bandaged boy. She hurried the pair of children towards the bed where the dog lay on his side amidst snaking tubes and wires.

Admiral Benbow was a big, powerful dog, one part retriever, two parts German Shepherd, and the remaining quarter...what? The nurse couldn’t decide. Something swift and shaggy, like a wolf-hound maybe, except that his jaw was too broad, and oddly-shaped.

She checked his monitors: heartbeat steady, condition stable. He lay limply on his side, his coat clean and shining, for the nurses sponged and brushed him daily; but his eyes were closed, and his breathing was soundless.

Wilf stared down at the dog’s right foreleg. It ended in a neat, bandaged stump. He put up a hand to touch his eye-patch.

“I lost an eye, he lost a leg,” he murmured.

“He’s getting a new one, though,” said the nurse, straightening the sheet. “A nice, plastic, electronic leg, almost as good as the real thing.”

Wilf shook his head. “It won’t be the same. It won’t *be* the real thing.”

“He’ll hardly know the difference,” said the nurse, as a shrill yapping started up at the other end of the ward. “All right, Dodie! I’m coming!” She hurried off to attend to a fretful poodle.

Natty gently pulled Wilf’s sleeve. “Wilf? We’ve seen him now. You heard the nurse: he’ll be all right. There’s nothing else we can do for him.”

Wilf laid his hand upon the dog’s warm, rough flank, feeling its slow rise and fall, like the swell of a quiet sea.

“He’s looking at me,” he whispered, for the dog’s eye had half opened, as deep and dark as a well.

“He can’t see us, though,” said Natty. Slowly the eye closed again.

“I wish I could do something for him,” muttered Wilf.

“We will. I promise. But we can’t stay here any longer now! They’ll be missing you soon on your own ward.”

“I’m not going back there,” said Wilf. “They’re talking about sending me to a home.”

Natty caught her breath. “*What?*”

“They thought I was asleep,” said Wilf in a low voice. “I heard the doctor say my dressings could come off next week, and asking where I’d be sent. And someone else said, ‘He’s a City child. No family. He’ll have to go to a home.’”

“A home, or a Home?”

“I don’t know,” said Wilf. “I don’t want either. *You’re* my home, Natty. You’re my family. I just want to be with you – and Admiral Benbow.”

Natty considered quickly. A good foster home might be the best thing now for Wilf, frail and damaged as he was. But an uncaring home – or worse still, a Home, an orphanage – would be disastrous. She imagined what Wilf would go through amongst unsympathetic strangers, with his terrible scars and his missing eye.

Wilf was a City boy. Had been since babyhood. But now life in the City wouldn't be easy for him either.

She made her decision. Wilf should have what he wanted. She would look after him, as she had since he was tiny.

“All right,” she said. “We'll go before we're missed. Let's go now.”

“Where to?” Wilf stared at her.

“Just come on! Quick!”

Wilf gently stroked Admiral Benbow's shoulder one last time, then turned away to follow Natty.

Behind him, the dog's eyes slowly opened, stared blankly at the two departing backs, and closed once more.

Chapter Three

Ten Months Later

Admiral Benbow lay awkwardly on the couch with his grey plastic foreleg stretched out before him. His nose twitched: the leg still smelt strange, four months after its fitting, and ten months after his old leg had gone. And he thought he would never get used to its appearance. It still gave him a heart-jarring shock every time he looked down.

Beyond the alien scent of the leg drifted other, more familiar odours: disinfectant; bathwater, metal-scented from the tank; the comforting promise of reheated gravy for his evening meal. Hospital smells that cocooned him, lulled him, as did the reassuring clank of the approaching trolley and the nurses' chatter.

Benbow turned his head drowsily to the window. His move to the convalescent wing had been a great improvement, for it meant his own room, no more tubes and wires, and a view that stretched right across the Fringes to the dark heart of the City.

His eyes were drawn there now. The City's ragged towers were silhouetted against the sunset. A few sparse dots of light flickered here and there – cooking fires, whose glimmer made the surrounding darkness seem yet darker.

Clambering stiffly down from his couch, Benbow nosed the window open. The City's smell came riding in on the evening air: smoke and concrete, rats and rotteness, a mixture as harsh as an alarm bell. His heart contracted, tight in his chest. Ten months without the City...

“How are you, Admiral?” Nurse Browning entered, a little round swift bullet of a nurse. She marched briskly to the window and slammed it shut. “That’s better!” she said, with a shiver.

“I’m fine, thank you,” said Benbow.

“How’s the leg?”

“Fine.” Benbow replied gruffly, not because of any difficulty speaking – his voice-box was undamaged – but because his leg was not, in fact, fine. His leg *hurt*.

The stump itself didn’t hurt, for the plastic leg fitted comfortably enough. It hurt where his leg *wasn’t*. That was why the sight of the plastic gave him such a shock – because he could still feel the vanished leg. Cramps and aches and prickles needled the non-existent skin right down to the absent claws.

“Jolly good,” said Nurse Browning. “Here’s tea.” She slapped the bowl down, twitched at Benbow’s blanket, fidgeted with his water, swivelled the ragged bunch of flowers that someone had sent him, and coughed several times.

“You’ve got a visitor,” she said suddenly. “I saw him downstairs. I’m not supposed to tell.”

“Then don’t,” said Benbow, folding down his ears. But she darted to his side and whispered in a hurried gust:

“Garracker!” With that, she grabbed the trolley and shot out through the door.

Benbow shook his head free of the word. His eyes turned back towards the view. Necklaces of buzzing traffic circled the Fringes around the City’s edge, stringing outwards to the country, to the houses of the well-to-do in their walled and gated villages. But no traffic entered the City.

How long, he wondered, since the City had fallen into decay? Years before he was born, the shops and offices had started closing down, moving to new sites in the countryside, clean and vandal-free. The high tower-blocks emptied, slowly at first, then with gathering speed. As flats fell vacant, vandals smashed them up. The streets filled with broken glass and litter.

Soon no-one wanted to live there any more. The college and the theatres were boarded up, the hospital closed down, buses stopped running. Gangs roamed the streets, looting and burning.

At first the City Council tried to rebuild. But as soon as one tower-block was repaired, another would go up in flames. In the end they gave it up as a bad job, shut the Town Hall and moved out.

The police went on strike, refusing to patrol the City streets. As rats and disease spread, even the gangs left, abandoning the tower blocks to the wind and rain. Barbed wire went up around the empty City.

But it didn’t stay empty. Lost and lonely children, the homeless and the runaways, crept through the wire with their dogs to form new gangs and make new homes in the silent tower-blocks. Theirs was a dangerous life; the burnt-out towers were crumbling year by year. Every so often one collapsed entirely, so that huge grey flowers of dust blossomed from the rubble.

That was when Police dogs moved back in. Humans didn’t want to know. Policing the City was a thankless task...

“Miss it, do you?” said a voice. Not the nurse’s. But even without her warning, Benbow recognised it. He had heard it often enough over Elise’s fuzzy radio, back at the City Police Station.

“Garracker,” he said. It came out as a bark.

Garracker grinned. His teeth were white and perfect in a lined, tanned, handsome face. He closed the door silently and strolled towards the chair.

“May I sit down?” He did not expect an answer. Carefully adjusting the knife-sharp creases in his trousers, he settled himself opposite Benbow, and crossed his legs. “I expect you want to get back to work.”

“I doubt if the service will take me back with this.” Benbow raised his plastic paw.

“Why not? It’s the best leg money can buy,” said Garracker. “I should know. I bought it.”

“You?” A growl rumbled in Benbow’s throat.

“Sure. Who else? Who do you think is paying for all this lot?” Garracker waved a careless hand at his surroundings.

“Dogs’ Benevolent Fund, they told me.”

“They’re not as benevolent as *this*. I’ve paid for it, Benbow – with a reason.”

Benbow waited.

But Garracker seemed unwilling to go on. He jumped out of the chair and began to prowl around the room, as sleek and powerful as a big cat, despite the grey that speckled his black hair. Halting by the window, he stared out at the dusk.

“My City,” he said.

Benbow frowned. Garracker was rich; the richest businessman around. If his wealth came from crime – as was rumoured – it had never yet been proved in court. He had the Council eating from his hand. But this was the first time that Benbow had heard of his owning the City.

“Your City?” he questioned.

“My City... It’s beyond repair.”

“Not necessarily,” said Benbow, pained.

“Beyond repair,” repeated Garracker, his voice harsh. He let the blind rattle down, shutting the City out. “I want to tell you what happened to your leg, Benbow.”

“Cut off. Beyond repair,” said Benbow wryly.

“But not beyond use,” said Garracker. “Your leg was... used.”

“Used? How?” Benbow’s mouth went dry.

“Cloned.”

“You cloned my *leg*?”

Garracker glared at him. “We cloned *you*, you numskull!”

“That’s illegal,” said Benbow automatically. “Has been since 2024, unless you’re a government laboratory.” He realised too late that it was not a tactful answer. The man stared at him with eyes as hard as sapphires.

“Don’t tell me what’s legal,” said Garracker with quiet venom, barely opening his mouth. “We cloned you. Don’t ask who did it for me. We didn’t need the whole leg,

but it was convenient to have so much to work with. We had three successes. Yes. Three nice little clones. Three perfect baby Benbows.”

Benbow could hardly speak. He felt as though he had just swallowed his dinner, whole, in the tin. “Why?”

Garracker swiftly patted his shoulder. “Because I need you, Admiral! The police force needs you.”

“You don’t run the City police,” objected Benbow.

“I do *now*. You think the Council can afford to keep them going without my help? You think they want to pay for any of the City’s problems? I fund the police, and the Council give me a free hand.” Garracker smiled thinly. “And you’re the best dog we’ve got.”

“Not with three legs,” said Benbow. The missing limb began to tingle and throb again. “So you made three new Benbows. Replacements?”

“They’re not designed to replace you, Admiral. How could they?” Garracker’s kindly earnestness filled Benbow with deep distrust. “You’re to work together. They’re just pups still – fine young pups, and growing fast – but they need a teacher. A leader. *You*.”

“Me?”

“You. That’s why I paid for all this—” Garracker swept his arm around again, knocking over the vase of shabby flowers, “–the surgery, the twenty-four hour care, the leg.”

Benbow was bewildered, and suspicious. His stay in hospital must have been a vast expense, and Garracker was not a man to waste money on good causes.

“I don’t understand,” he said bluntly. “There are other police dogs. Excellent dogs, some of them voiced. Why does the City need three new Benbows?” I certainly don’t need them, he thought.

Garracker’s eyelids flickered. “You’re right, Benbow. Smart dog. There is something I haven’t told you.” Smoothly he walked to the door, and flung it open to survey the empty corridor. Closing it silently, he turned and stared at Benbow with unblinking eyes. Definitely cat-like, decided Benbow. No affinity with dogs at all.

“I’m not prepared to tell you here,” said Garracker at last. “Come to my office tomorrow morning, nine o’clock. Top floor, Prospect Towers.”

Benbow felt no inclination to agree. “I was assuming I’d retire.”

“You can’t.” The man’s voice sharpened. “You’re too young. You’ll get no pension.”

“There’s other work.”

“Who wants a crippled dog?” snarled Garracker. “You’ll end up as a flea-bitten stray! And what about your clones? They’re no use to me without you. No use at all. Might as well be rid of them.” His eyes glittered. “Be there, Benbow.” Without waiting for an answer, he strode out.

Benbow looked down at his cold, expensive dinner congealing in its bowl. His appetite had gone. Now what? he thought. I could ignore him. Just leave; just disappear.

But there were the clones. Three pups he didn't want. Did they really exist? If they did, how could he leave them to Garracker's mercy?

And then there was the City, and its children...

A memory brushed its wing across his mind. A face white with bandages and red with scars: a black, patched eye, the other eye wide and pleading...

Benbow shook his head. Picking up the fallen flowers in his mouth, he set them back in their vase. Then he pulled up the blind again.

There was the City, waiting for him through all his long sleep. He had thought it must be lost to him forever.

Now Garracker was giving him the chance to return. Of course he would obey. He had to go back.

Chapter Four

The Fringes

Benbow's new leg was the best walker of the four. The other three were weak from lack of use, but he sensed the plastic leg would never tire.

The hospital was far behind him now. Prospect Towers was still two miles away, thirty minutes' brisk walk through the business zone – the office blocks of mirrored glass and concrete, built by Garracker a safe distance from the City.

But Benbow did not want to go that way. Cold gales blew between the office blocks, and there were no dogs apart from rushed and edgy errand hounds. So he chose the long way round, looping through the Fringes: the bleak estates that encircled the City, just outside the wire.

He plodded through squat ranks of housing blocks adorned with tattered lines of washing. No-one lived in the Fringes if they could afford somewhere better. Shouting children chased each other through playgrounds in which every swing and slide was broken.

Still, thought Benbow, at least these children had homes. Families. This wasn't the City. A pair of dogs came trotting up to sniff a casual welcome in a way that City dogs would seldom do; and they did not shy away at the sight of the police badge on his collar.

"What's new round here?" Benbow asked them in Dog, a combination of barks, head tilts, and tail position. For of course these dogs were not voiced, and while they probably understood Human, it would be impolite to address them in it.

"Oh, nothing much, Officer," said the foremost dog, a nervous whippet. "Nothing new, couple of stolen cars, dog fell off a balcony and broke a leg, we had a murder the other day."

Benbow's shaggy ears pricked up. "A murder? Who?"

“Oh, just a man. His dog was all right. It was a shop-keeper – two other men took all his money, stabbed him and ran off, into the City.”

“Laughing,” said the second dog, a quiet mongrel.

Benbow nodded. “They won’t laugh long, in there.” A year ago it would have been his job to hunt the murderers down, get them out of the City and into jail.

“Anyone else gone under the wire?”

“A few,” said the quiet dog. “Three children and a collie. Usual thing – father in prison, mother dead. A couple of runaways last month. Two girls. No dogs.”

“Thanks,” said Benbow. Nothing had changed, then.

“Heard about our monsters?” offered the whippet eagerly.

“Monsters?”

“Big machines, black and yellow.” The dog made a get-off-me-wasp gesture. “Down by the City fence. They’ve been hanging around there for months!”

“Will you show me?” asked Benbow.

The two dogs willingly agreed. Leading Benbow through the dingy streets, they scampered over a rubbish tip and wriggled under a tangle of barbed wire. Benbow found himself looking across a wide ribbon of wasteland to the cracked and broken teeth of the City towers.

Nearby, as promised, stood three monsters, caged inside a tall wire fence: huge, metal vehicles, armed and clawed, poised like giant predators ready to attack.

Beneath them dozed two Rottweilers. At Benbow’s approach, the guard dogs woke with a start. Leaping to their feet, they barked terse warnings through the wire.

“Keep off!”

“Get out!”

Benbow raised his head to reveal his police badge. “Whose are these machines?”

“Ours!”

“Go away!” barked the guard dogs.

“What are they for?”

“Don’t know!”

“Ours!”

“They’re for knocking down buildings,” said the quiet mongrel wisely. “I’ve seen ’em do it. Knocked down a house in twenty seconds flat. I think they were just trying them out.”

Benbow scrutinised the huge machines. The two clawed ones were earth or rubble-movers, he guessed. The third one was a lanky crane.

As he stared at them, a sudden movement caught his eye. From behind the crane, two small humans emerged. They scuttled over to the surrounding fence, and began to climb.

“Are you blind?” barked Benbow at the guard dogs. “Look! Intruders!”

The Rottweilers spun round, and barking heroically, raced over to the fence. But the intruders had already scrambled too high up the shivering wire for them to reach. They leapt and snarled in vain. In a moment the humans were astride the fence, and starting to climb down on the outside. They were small and nimble: only children.

“Quick,” said Benbow. “Intercept!” He began to lope around the wire enclosure towards them. His new leg did not run as smoothly as it walked, and he was soon overtaken by the whippet, who yapped nervously at the children.

Benbow saw them clearly now: a boy and a girl. The boy jumped down, dashed past the flinching whippet, and raced off with Benbow and the mongrel in pursuit.

At peak fitness, Benbow could outrun any human with ease. But now, to his dismay, he realised that not only was he dreadfully unfit, but that his plastic leg slipped and juddered with each stride. The boy was getting away.

“Stop!” yelled Benbow, in Human. For an instant, the boy slowed in surprise.

The instant was enough. Benbow pounced. He leapt upon his back, bringing him down carefully, but firmly, a leg planted on each sprawling limb.

“Name!” he barked. The boy twisted vainly beneath him. “I said *Name!*”

And then the plastic leg collapsed. It snapped out of its socket and sent Benbow lurching sideways. At once the boy writhed out from underneath him, scrambled to his feet and sped away.

The mongrel chased him; Benbow couldn't. He tried to run on three legs with the fourth dangling, and had to give up.

He lay down, panting, and watched the girl take a flying leap off the fence. Ponytail streaming, she sprinted past the whippet, who bounded alongside her, yelping, “Oh, please stop! Please stop!”

“Halt!” barked Benbow, trying to get to his feet again. “You're under arrest!”

The girl didn't pause, but raced fleetly after the boy. Although the mongrel and the whippet gave chase, they were too small to hinder the children. The two of them ran into the shadows of the City, and were gone.

The dogs gave up and came trotting back to Benbow.

“Sorry,” panted the mongrel, “I'm not big enough to bring them down. And I'm not following them in *there.*”

“Never mind,” said Benbow. “You did well. Thank you both.” He was struggling to replace his false leg. At last he thought he'd done it, and stood up cautiously. The leg felt fine. Benbow felt terrible.

I got that wrong, he thought. Should have let the boy go, caught the girl instead. Now I've got neither. This isn't going to work. Not just the leg. Brain as well. I'm rusty.

He hobbled to the fence where the guard dogs waited sheepishly.

“Never smelt 'em!” they barked.

“Couldn't see 'em!”

“Didn't know they were there!”

“I wonder what they wanted,” Benbow said. He decided they'd probably just been mucking around, attracted by the earth-movers, maybe looking for something to steal. Though they could hardly steal those vast machines...

“Well, at least they didn't get away with anything,” he said. “Their hands were empty. So I shouldn't worry.”

Just as Benbow finished speaking, the giant crane blew up.

Chapter Five

A Meeting with Garracker

“You’re late,” said Garracker.

“A problem with my leg.” Benbow decided against mentioning the explosion. There was no need to bring it up just now.

Anyhow, Garracker evidently had other things on his mind. The big man swivelled restlessly in his leather armchair, fidgeting with a gilt-framed picture on his desk, picking it up and laying it down again with a frown.

“Sit,” he said. Benbow obediently sat up on the grey silk carpet, and waited. Garracker leaned forward.

“Clones,” he said.

Benbow cocked an ear politely.

“Not yours,” said Garracker. “Mine. Ten years ago – no, eleven now – I decided to have myself cloned.”

Benbow wondered how he should respond. Eleven years ago, cloning had been just as illegal as it was now. “Congratulations,” he said warily.

Garracker nodded. “I’m not getting any younger. I wanted someone to hand it all on to, someone who could run my business after me. I can see what you’re thinking.”

Benbow blinked. He hadn’t been thinking anything.

“Why not have a child the usual way?” continued Garracker. “But then it wouldn’t be all mine. Wouldn’t be *me*. Might be its mother’s: that wouldn’t do at all. I wanted to be sure my sons – my clones – would think as I do, act as I do, always. Bound to, aren’t they?”

Benbow nodded, doubtfully.

“They made four copies of me,” said Garracker. He sighed, gazing at the picture on his desk. “In those days, I had more enemies. Word got out. The four clones were being raised together, in a nursery. Unwise of me, I suppose – they should have been kept apart. They’d just turned one when they were kidnapped. I was sent a ransom note, by Arkheim – you remember him? No, he was before your time.”

But Benbow said, “I remember stories. A bank-robber, a gangster. Shot dead, wasn’t he?”

“Knifed,” said Garracker with certainty. “I don’t like blackmail. I wouldn’t pay his ransom. I thought I could outwit him; I nearly did – but not quite. He abandoned the babies to the wild dogs in the City. Sent me a body. What was left of it.” Briefly, Garracker closed his eyes.

“It was one of my clones,” he said. “I assumed the other three were dead as well. Arkheim only outlived them by a week.” The fist on the table was clenched. Then, slowly, it relaxed.

“I put it out of my mind,” said Garracker. “No use brooding on what’s gone. I could have started again with new clones, but...” He shook his head. “I didn’t have the heart.”

Benbow raised an eyebrow.

“In any case,” said Garracker, “controls on cloning got much tighter after that. The doctor I’d employed had to flee the country. I couldn’t find anyone else to do it. So that was that – till now.”

“And now?”

Garracker stood up, and went to the table by the door. Pouring himself a coffee from a steaming pot, he added a slug of whisky from a cut-glass decanter.

“Coffee?” he asked. “Beef tea? Or something stronger?”

“Beef tea, please.”

Garracker nodded, poured it from a silver thermos into a china dish, and set it down before him. Benbow lapped cautiously, conscious of the noise he was making, and anxious not to drip on the silky carpet.

He licked his lips and sat back. It was excellent beef tea. He wondered, fleetingly, what the dogs at the City Police Station would be breakfasting on. Rat, probably, and rust-flavoured water.

Garracker drained his coffee in two gulps, and slammed the cup down.

“I’ve had a threat,” he said. “A year ago, *this* came.”

He tossed a letter onto the carpet. Holding it flat with his paw, Benbow scanned it carefully, translating the Human symbols into Dog. It was clumsily written, childish... but not that childish.

Benbow read:

“Garracker!

I hear you’re planning to destroy the City.

If you do, I’ll destroy YOU, and blow up Prospect Towers.

Don’t try it!

Signed,

THE CITY CHIEFTAIN.”

“*Are* you planning to destroy the City?” asked Benbow, a strange panic seizing him.

“*I was*. After Arkheim, I wanted to flatten it, to raze it to the ground. I couldn’t, back then, because I didn’t own it. But I’ve been buying it up, block by block, for years. It’s all mine now: I’d just bought the last piece when that letter arrived.”

Garracker stared out of the window at the glittering towers. “I planned to knock the City down and start again. Build a new business empire, even bigger and better than this one. I had architects draw up designs, a mighty forest of steel and glass... Oh, I had great plans.”

“Had?”

“That letter stopped me in my tracks.”

Benbow’s eyes narrowed. “It’s a serious threat,” he said cautiously.

But Garracker waved a dismissive hand.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I get threats all the time. Small-time crooks, think they’re somebody. I determined to track down the sender, naturally, in order to deal with him. He’d been careless: inside the envelope he’d left a single hair.”

“A hair?”

“I had it analysed, of course. They checked its DNA against that of every known criminal in and around the City.”

“And?”

“The hair was mine,” said Garracker. “I had sent it to myself.”

Benbow followed his gaze through the window, past the gleaming office blocks. Across the Fringes, the grey towers of the City faced them, like a broken reflection in dirty water.

“The City Chieftain,” said Garracker quietly. “A boy after my own heart. A boy with my own DNA. One of my clones sent that letter, Benbow: a new Garracker, already building his own empire, sharpening his sword. The threat was bluff, though. He wouldn’t have the means to blow up anything bigger than a balloon.”

Benbow took a deep breath. “I wouldn’t be so sure.” Reluctantly, he told Garracker about the exploding crane. The man’s eyes widened.

“My machines,” he said. “They’ve just been waiting for my orders to move in – and you *saw* this boy?”

Benbow nodded. Garracker snatched the picture from his desk and thrust it under his nose.

“Me, aged ten. Is that the boy you saw?”

Benbow studied the photograph. The hair was the right colour, dark like the boy’s. The face, with its fierce stare, could be the same – but he wasn’t good at recognising human faces. They all looked so alike. He identified humans by smell as much as sight.

Surreptitiously, he sniffed the hand that held the photo. Whisky, banknotes, leather... but behind them all lay Garracker’s own scent. As Benbow inhaled, memory flooded back: the squirming body pinned beneath him amidst the straggly weeds, his leg collapsing, the boy wriggling away.

He recognised that scent. Garracker and the boy had smelt the same.

He nodded. “That’s him.”

The knuckles whitened round the picture.

“You had him,” whispered Garracker. “You had him and you let him go. I want him. I want all three of them. I don’t believe they’re dead. You’ll find them, Benbow.”

“Me?”

“Why do you think I had you cloned?” snarled Garracker. “For your beauty? Why do you think I paid for that damned leg? To see you dance? You and *your* clones, Benbow, will find *mine*. I know they’re hidden somewhere in the City. You’ll hunt them down and bring them here, to me.”

Chapter Six

Return to the City

Benbow wriggled under the rows of barbed wire that caged the City in. He slunk across the silent wasteland, invisible in the long brown grass and bitter spires of fireweed. Entering the ragged shadow of the Hopeful Insurance Building, he was back, at last, in the City.

Moss and ivy laced the rotten concrete towers. Weeds waved from rooftops. Above his head, a sapling grew from a high window ledge, where a seed had rooted: it leaned out like a terrified man about to jump.

At first the weeds and creepers seemed to be the only life here. Benbow saw no people. But some of the rope-walks were new; perilous woven bridges of rope, chain, and metal tubing, linking tower to tower. Strung across the chasms ten or twelve floors up, they swayed in the sunlight.

Down here in the shadows, though, the concrete canyons were as cold as wells. They were choked with the skeletons of rusted cars, long since plundered of seats, wheels, and engines. Some of these were recent additions – cars crashed by joy-riders, then abandoned, and invaded by busy families of rats.

Benbow picked his way along the street carefully, squirming through gaps in the jagged metal and clambering over rubble. His plastic leg was clumsy; and the leather pouch hanging around his neck, beside his badge, kept snagging.

A shout echoed high above him. Benbow saw a child run along a rope-walk and swing in through a window several storeys up. A moment later, a row of children's faces appeared in a lower window, staring, while a bunch of dogs came bounding out to meet him.

They did not look as friendly as the dogs he'd met back in the Fringes. There were four terriers, and two Great Danes. Although big dogs were useful for deterring strangers, they didn't survive easily in the City on their own. Terriers were better at rat-catching, and therefore better fed.

The Great Danes stopped to face Benbow, ready to spring at him, ears forward in warning.

"You're out of your way!" one barked.

"Just passing through," said Benbow mildly.

The dogs bared their teeth. "This is our territory. Back! Back!"

"I'm passing through," said Benbow, watching their legs. When he saw the first dog's muscles tense, he was ready. As it sprang, he stepped aside just enough. The Great Dane tried to twist round in mid-air: Benbow grabbed its shoulder in his jaws, over-balanced it, sent it sprawling and leapt on its chest. This time his leg held, and the Great Dane was powerless.

Glad to find his strength and skill were not all gone, Benbow raised his head to growl a warning at the second dog, and to reveal the police badge on his collar.

One of the terriers shook its head at the second Dane, and approached Benbow, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Police? I don't know you."

“Canine Officer Admiral Benbow. I’ve been away a long time.”

“I would have remembered that leg,” said the terrier.

“Naturally,” said Benbow. “The leg’s new. But I’m not.”

“There’s no trouble here. You don’t need to stay.”

“Just passing through,” said Benbow amiably. Standing aside, he let the Great Dane struggle to its feet. It slunk away with a surly backward glance. “Like I said, I’ve been away a long time. What’s new round here?”

“Nothing.”

“I want to know,” said Benbow gently.

“Nothing changes,” snapped the terrier. “How should it? We’re still cold, wet, and hungry. And we still don’t like police.”

“Any collapses lately?”

“Nothing serious. Nothing to bother *you*. More fires than usual. Children sick from bad water. Had to take two Out, to hospital. Don’t suppose we’ll see them again.”

Benbow glanced up at the shabby children peering from the window overhead. Clearing his throat, in gruff Human he called out:

“Children! If you want to leave the City, come to Eagle Square Police Station for assistance.”

The children jeered. A few small stones were pelted down at him.

“No chance!” called one.

“Think we’re stupid?”

“We don’t need you!”

“Harrumph,” said Benbow. Speaking Human loudly was a strain. “We’ll find good homes for you Outside,” he said, adding quickly, “homes with a small h.”

“Get lost!”

Benbow shrugged. The usual answer; he’d expected nothing different. Nodding to the terrier, he strolled away. The dogs watched him for a while, then disappeared into their tower. Benbow scrambled slowly onwards until he reached the shopping precinct.

Here stood vast department stores devoid of any contents except tenacious toadstools, stripped bare down to the last wire, bolt and hinge. Their walls, scoured by wind and rain, had been redecorated in mould, the floors re-carpeted with ferns and brambles.

Benbow trod carefully, not knowing what new-laid traps might lurk round here. Four times he halted as gangs of dogs and children appeared to confront him. By now they knew his name. News travelled fast in the City – faster than me, thought Benbow ruefully. Three times he had much the same conversation as before.

The fourth gang, though, wore masks.

“That’s different,” muttered Benbow. He hadn’t seen anything like this before. Strange, mottled helmets completely covered the children’s heads, with narrow slits cut in them for eyes and mouths. Scrawny greyhounds stalked around the gang, who wielded rusty posts like spears.

“Who are you?” said Benbow warily, snuffing in a sour, rubbery odour – the helmets were made of old vinyl flooring. It must be dreadfully smelly inside them.

“Get off our land!” shouted a burly figure, its voice muffled by its headgear. “Tomahawk? Get rid of him!” Another, taller, child strode forward, gripping its metal post fiercely.

Benbow looked hard at the burly speaker. He recognised that roly-poly shape. “Nile?”

“I’m not Nile. I’m the General!”

“Don’t you know me, Nile? It’s Admiral Benbow. Out of your territory, aren’t you? You used to live out east.”

Nile pulled off his helmet with difficulty, revealing a chubby, sulky face. “Thought you were dead, Benbow,” he said grumpily. “Thought that fire finished you off. Everyone said so.”

The taller boy shouted, “We are the Western Warriors! I’m Tomahawk! You’re on our land. Get out!” He swung his rusty spear around his head.

“Stow it, Tom,” said Nile heavily. “This one’s Police.”

“We don’t like Police!” hissed Tomahawk, thrusting the spear towards Benbow so that it dug into his shoulder.

Benbow didn’t move. “Western Warriors, eh?” he said. “Any connection with the City Chieftain?”

Tomahawk spat on the ground. “He’s our deadly enemy!”

“Why? What’s he done?”

“Thief,” growled Nile. “He stole my territory.”

“Who is he? Where can I find him?”

“Everywhere. Now go away. See him off, dogs.”

The greyhounds skittered warily up to Benbow.

“Have to chase you away,” muttered one of them apologetically. “You know what he’s like. Have to bark at you now. Sorry.” And they woofed Benbow up the road and out of sight.

Benbow shook his head as he plodded towards Eagle Square. Warrior gangs were new to the City; he hoped there weren’t any more of them. But he met no-one else until he reached Burger Hall, his last stop before the Police Station.

Burger Hall had once been Benbow’s favourite place to sit, eating a quiet lunch of rat while he waited for a message from the Station. Through the Hall’s long-shattered windows, he could see the hard red chairs and tables still in place inside; they had confounded looters, being concreted into the floor. Now a rat crouched on Benbow’s usual table, nibbling a potato.

A potato? Benbow growled softly to himself. Where had it got a potato? Potatoes were valuable; a large one was worth three rats...

No time to puzzle over it now. He was almost there. He rounded the corner, and, his legs a little shaky, sat down on his haunches to look.

There it was. Across the square, in a rare patch of sunshine, stood the Police Station. Home.

In his past life as an undercover agent, he'd always had to skulk inside in darkness – this was the first time he would enter it by daylight. In there waited the roaring, coughing stove, his basket with its red check blanket, the tired, cheerful banter of Elise and Junior and the other dogs.

But now there would be three new dogs – his clones. It would be like living in a hall of mirrors. Benbow groaned.

As he watched, the Station door was flung open, and Tonto the cat hurtled out with an aggrieved yowl. Behind him came a girl with a ragged shock of red hair, carrying an armful of bedding. She began to beat cushions and shake blankets.

A boy followed – her brother, to judge by his mop of identical red hair, which was even wilder than hers. One of his eyes was oddly black: was that a bruise or dirt? From this distance, Benbow couldn't tell. The boy lugged out a tub of soapy water which he tipped into the gutter.

New housekeepers, making the Station ready – for him?

“Hero's return,” muttered Benbow, as a massive volley of barks rang out from the Station. He frowned. He didn't recognise those voices. There were three of them, yet the barks were all the same, over-flowing each other like ripples on a beach: three dogs with one voice...

My clones, thought Benbow, his stomach lurching. Do I really sound like that? Time to meet them. Gritting his teeth, he plodded up to the faded, peeling Station door.

Chapter Seven

New Dogs at the Station

“Admiral Benbow!” cried the red-haired boy. He began to run forward, but then abruptly halted. Benbow saw that the black eye was a leather patch; around it, the skin was raw, pink and stretched. A smell of antiseptic hung around him – a prickly hospital odour.

Benbow frowned, as something tugged at the corner of his mind. He nodded curtly, and went in.

Elise pattered down the hall to meet him. The collie's muzzle was greyer than he remembered from ten months back; her voice was huskier, as it tried to penetrate the chorus of frantic barking from upstairs.

“Benbow! At last. Thank goodness! We had a message to say you were coming.”

Benbow saluted his Head of Station. “Officer Admiral Benbow reporting for duty.”

“Yes, yes. Just go and sort them out, I beg you!” said Elise. “They've only been here a week, and they're driving me crazy!”

Benbow leapt up the stairs two at a time. As he bounded into the dormitory, the raucous barking stopped.

Three dogs stood there, with their front paws in a single dog-basket. Tall dogs, all the same patchy grey and tan, gawky with youth, stiff with surprise.

“My basket,” said Benbow. The six paws were lifted out in silence. Benbow stepped into his basket, turned round twice, sniffed the blanket – musty – and lay down.

Only then did he look at them properly. Strangers’ faces stared back. Benbow seldom got to see a mirror. Just as well, he thought wryly, if that’s what he looked like. Odd set of the jaw. One ear was crooked. The dogs were nearly his height, but skinnier. Made him feel heavy and old.

“Don’t you have your own baskets?” he asked them gruffly.

“They have beanbags, and they have blankets,” said Elise, plodding wearily through the door, “but mostly they just have arguments.”

“Do they indeed? There’ll be no more of that,” said Benbow severely. He felt like his own grandfather. “Names?” he barked at them.

Elise gave a short, warning cough. “They were named by their foster-homes,” she said. “Brought up separately, you see; that’s half the trouble. This one’s Star of Araby.”

Star of Araby seemed to be a fraction taller and leaner than the other two. He stretched out his front legs, cocked a haughty ear, and looked down his nose at Benbow.

“I didn’t ask to be cloned,” he said. “I’m not exactly thrilled about being a copy. Especially of—”

“Right, next,” said Benbow briskly.

“This is Huck Finn McCool,” said Elise. “No, I don’t know why either.”

“Don’t you ever groom yourself, McCool?” asked Benbow, noting the young dog’s matted coat with disapproval.

“Nope. Grooming’s for poodles.”

“And police dogs. Get your coat clipped. Next?”

The third dog bounced forward eagerly. “I’m Daffodil.”

Benbow looked at Elise.

“I’m afraid so,” she said.

“Daffodil anything?”

“No, just Daffodil,” replied his clone, tail wagging at double speed. “And may I say what a great honour and privilege it is to—”

“Yes, right, thanks,” said Benbow. “We’ll take that as said. Araby, I didn’t ask to be cloned either. Sit down, all of you.”

They sat, Daffodil most promptly, and Araby last and with reluctance.

“Elise? A word.” Benbow beckoned to his Head of Station. He led her just beyond the doorway so that his clones would not overhear.

“Elise,” he said quietly, “there’s something wrong with them. They’ve got no smell!” It made them seem like phantom dogs, not fully real. All dogs had their own distinctive scent: but not these ones.

Elise smiled. “They smell all right, Benbow. They smell of *you*. That’s why you can’t detect it – you can’t smell yourself. They did smell different when they arrived – they each had their own scent. Araby smelt of horses, and Daffodil had a definite whiff of shampoo, and McCool of cheese and onion pie. Home smells. After a week here, they all smell the same.”

“They smell of me? You’re sure?”

Elise nodded. Benbow took a long breath. If he had had any doubts before, that killed them. These really were his clones. He whirled back into the room, and barked at them, suddenly angry, though he did not know why.

“Sit up straight, cadets! We’ve got a job to do.”

“Oh, good!” Daffodil sat up eagerly, his tail thumping the floor.

“What, already?” said McCool.

“I didn’t ask—”

“That’s enough,” said Elise, interrupting Araby. “There’s no rush, Benbow. Plenty of time. You’ve only just got here, after all.” She gently licked his coat to calm him. Benbow realised that he was trembling slightly.

“They gave me a shock too, Benbow,” Elise murmured in his ear. “They’re disconcerting, I know. Take your time. Have some dinner first. Then you can talk to them.”

Benbow shook himself, trying to release the tension from his limbs. “What is for dinner?” he asked. “Rat?”

“Better than that, thanks to those two young humans outside. They took over the housekeeping a few weeks back.”

“The red-headed children?”

“They’ve been working wonders,” said Elise. “They’ve scrubbed the whole place, cleaned the stove, stopped the leaks, and we only eat rat four times a week now. They’ve got pork for us today, since it’s a special occasion. Heaven knows how – it must have cost them thirty rats at least.”

“Or ten potatoes,” murmured Benbow thoughtfully. He looked at the pups. “In that case, I’ll tell everyone about our assignment over the pork. And then we’ll go out on patrol. Been on patrol yet?”

“Not yet, Admiral!” panted Daffodil.

“Nope,” said McCool. Araby said nothing.

“I wasn’t going to take them,” said Elise.

“Then I will,” decided Benbow. “I’ve got some visits to pay, and questions to ask. And the first person I want to see is the Recycler.”

Chapter Eight

The First Patrol

Benbow prowled restlessly through the shabby, familiar rooms of the Station. Everything looked the same and yet felt different. Though comfortably full of pork, he was ill at ease.

Was it he who had changed, or the Station? Some of the old dogs, like Junior, were still there; but others, new to Benbow, acted as if they owned the place, making him feel as raw and awkward as his clones. He would have to pretend a confidence he didn't feel, when he took the pups out on patrol.

"Please can we come too?"

Benbow glanced at the speaker. It was the red-haired boy with the eye-patch; his taut, scarred face looked down in confusion. But the older girl behind him spoke up boldly.

"You won't remember Wilf, Admiral Benbow, but you rescued him from the fire. He was the third child in the building. And I'm Natty. We came to see you in hospital once."

"I remember," said Benbow. Wilf looked up again quickly.

"We tried to visit you in the convalescent ward as well," said Natty, "only they wouldn't let us in, so we sent you some flowers."

"Indeed," said Benbow, gazing regretfully at Wilf. He felt responsible for those dreadful scars. If only he could have got the boy out faster... "All right," he said. "Tag along if you want."

"Me too," purred Tonto, the Station cat, who managed to look sleeker and better-fed than any of the dogs.

"Oh, no. Why?"

"Old times' sake," said Tonto silkily. Although he spoke Cat, and Benbow replied in Dog, they understood each other well. "Just want to see how you do. No offence, Benbow, but you look past it to me. Slow. Clumsy. Arthritic. You know?"

Benbow sighed. There was no point in refusing, since Tonto would do what he liked anyway.

But it made for a long procession that finally set out on patrol: four dogs – Daffodil proudly carrying Benbow's pouch on his collar – two humans, and a lofty cat. Discretion was impossible, for the clones yapped excitedly as they trotted along. Benbow thought that everyone would hear them coming from miles away; but decided that it didn't really matter on this first patrol. There would be plenty of time to instil silence and secrecy into his pups later on.

Would they be fast learners? Had *he* been a fast learner? He didn't know. It was weird to see yourself in pup-hood – especially three times over. He scrutinized the younger dogs as they trotted along the wide, deserted, rubble-littered street.

“This is totally surreal!” said McCool. He gazed skyward at a row of brick gargoyles that grinned down from the roof of a ruined bank. “I was brought up in a small town, y’know. This place is amazing. Why do humans build things so big? And then just leave them lying around when they fall down?”

“Maybe they’re saving them for later,” suggested Daffodil. “Like a bone.” Araby gave him a scornful glance.

“Hey,” said McCool, stopping at the entrance to an alleyway, “someone’s cleared a track through the rubbish down there. Wonder where it goes?” He began to lope down the narrow passage.

“Come back here!” roared Benbow with furious alarm. McCool halted in surprise to look round at him.

“Keep your fur on!” he said. “Only wanted to—”

McCool never finished his sentence. With a huge leap, Benbow sprang on him, hauling him away by the scruff of his neck.

A second later, a concrete boulder plunged to the ground where McCool had just been standing. It landed with an earth-trembling crash; jagged shards flew through the air.

“Where did that come from?” gasped McCool.

“Third-storey window. You went through the trip-wire,” said Benbow grimly. “Some people round here are very possessive about their territory.”

“You should have warned us!” barked Araby indignantly.

“I’m warning you now,” retorted Benbow. “Rule One: Follow me. Don’t veer off down strange alleys or into buildings unless I tell you. Rule Two: Look where you’re going. Rule Three: Be polite to everyone – including me, Araby, I might add.”

Tonto snickered and sat down to wash his paws.

“Whose trip-wire was it?” asked McCool, abashed.

“Greenspan’s, probably,” said Benbow. “At least, this used to be his territory.” He looked inquiringly at Natty.

“Still is,” she said with a nod.

“Greenspan, Angel, and Nile. Remember those names. They’re the big three – the leaders – or at least they were when I was last here. They’ve each got gangs of up to two hundred children, and as many dogs. Though Nile’s gang seems to have shrunk,” said Benbow, remembering the group of Western Warriors. “There are dozens of smaller bands too. No-one knows how many.”

“We used to be in Angel’s gang,” said Natty. “Before the fire.” She put an arm around Wilf.

“But I haven’t seen anyone!” said Daffodil, mystified. “Where are they all? There are no children or dogs anywhere!”

“The gangs live high up, not at ground level. Too many rats down here. Come on.”

Benbow set off again, leading them deeper into the City. This time the three cadets stuck close to his tail.

All was quiet. No strange dogs came out of shattered doorways to challenge them; no children jeered from broken windows. His troop was too big, and too obviously Police. Police dogs had never been popular with the gangs – although it was the police they came running to, thought Benbow, when fire or collapse threatened their homes.

He felt increasingly unhappy. As an undercover dog, he had been used to travelling in secret. Today, he felt like a tourist guide.

“That used to be the cinema,” he grunted. The young dogs examined it dutifully. Its floor had collapsed: starlings roosted noisily within.

“Bus station.” The bus stops were still standing, bent over at curious angles. The remains of a dozen burnt-out buses looked even more depressing than Benbow had remembered.

“Museum.” That was still intact. Its two hundred year old stones had proved tougher than many newer buildings. Fluted columns paraded across its frontage in an unbroken line.

“Lots of cats round here,” remarked McCool. Cats were rare in the City, because of the dogs; but here, dozens of them twined in and out of the Museum’s pillars, their backs arching indignantly at the sight of the patrol.

Benbow frowned. “You’re right. That’s strange. Know any of them, Tonto?”

“Certainly not!” said Tonto with disdain. “They’re common alley cats.”

Benbow sniffed thoughtfully. Behind the stench of cat fur lay a dry, rough, scorched odour: paper smoke... and a hint of burnt rat.

“Ask them what’s burning,” he said.

“No offence,” said Tonto huffily, “but do your own dirty work. *You* ask them.” He stalked away up the road.

“I will!” offered Daffodil, but Benbow shook his head.

“You won’t understand what they say.”

“I know Cat,” said Araby. “There were plenty of them in the stables where I used to live. Racing stables, naturally: a very high-class place.”

“I’m sure,” said Benbow. “But the cats can wait. It’s the Recycler we’ve really come to see.”

“Who is the Recycler?” asked McCool.

“Been here for ever.”

Wilf piped up. “In the Colg.”

“The Colg?” This time it was Benbow’s turn to be puzzled. “What’s the Colg?”

“The College,” explained Natty. “The sign’s broken. I’m teaching him to read.”

Benbow studied her. She was probably about thirteen, he thought, though small for her age, slight but determined. “Who taught *you* to read?” he asked.

“My big sister,” said Natty. “She brought me to the City after our mother went to jail. They were going to send us to a Home, but we ran away and sneaked under the wire, and Angel’s gang took us in.”

“Hear that? Mother in jail,” muttered Araby significantly.

“She stole a Christmas hamper,” said Natty, “because we were hungry.” She stood very straight, and Wilf gently stroked her arm.

“She’s probably out by now,” said Daffodil anxiously, “and missing you!”

“I went back once, to our old flat, but she wasn’t there. I think they sent her somewhere else. I couldn’t find her.” Natty’s voice began to sound odd, and Benbow gave Daffodil a warning shake of the tail.

“There’s the College Gate,” he said. “Let’s go in.”

Over the iron gates hung a dilapidated sign:

“City College of Higher Education.”

Inside the gates – which had been much repaired and strengthened – a pair of sturdy Dobermans barked furiously, not stopping even when Benbow displayed his police badge.

“Enough, dogs,” said a voice, and the Dobermans instantly stilled. “Go away. I’m closed.”

“Recycler? This is police business. We need to talk to you.”

A small, bent woman came into view behind the gates. She was not much taller than Natty, though much, much older. She was dressed in a variety of layers: coats, shirts and skirts, all of them carefully patched. A pair of hard, bright eyes inspected the troop of dogs.

“Benbow? I heard that you were back. All right,” said the Recycler. She slid back bolts, unpadlocked chains, and slowly the gates swung open.

Chapter Nine

The Recycler

The Dobermans retreated reluctantly, standing aside to let the police dogs enter the Recycler’s yard.

Once a car-park, it now held no cars, not even wrecked ones. Instead, it was crammed with planks, poles, tyres, tubes, pipes and bricks, all piled into mountains several metres high. Between the mountains rose smaller hills: plastic trays, coils of rope, wire netting; and a miniature forest of upturned chair legs. A rat dived into a burrow between two stacks of tiles.

The three pups twisted their heads to look around in amazement.

“Who buys all this stuff?” asked Araby.

“People. Dogs. There’s a whole lot more inside.” Benbow nodded at the broken shell of the College building.

“This place is a health hazard,” whispered Daffodil in horror. “Have you seen the rats?”

“The whole City is a health hazard,” said Benbow wearily, as he followed the Recycler. The old woman had disappeared behind a mound of radiators and was busy untying a tangle of wire with deft hands. Her quick, decided movements reminded Benbow of a robin. She didn’t pause in her work as he addressed her.

“What’s the going rate for a potato these days?”

“Two and a half rats,” said the Recycler. “But the price is coming down. Did you want some? I can get them.”

“Where from?”

“That would be telling.”

“What about paper?”

“Paper? Ah, that’s expensive,” said the Recycler, shaking her head. “Has to be imported from Outside. I’ve got a box or two in stock.”

Benbow called Daffodil over, and removed Garracker’s letter from the pouch around his neck. He held the sheet of paper out to her with the writing face down. “What about this sort?”

She gave it an indifferent glance. “Yes, I stock that. New leg, Benbow?”

“Newish. Are you sure about the paper? Take a good look at it.”

She sighed, took the sheet of paper and turned it over. Benbow saw her face stiffen. Smelt alarm.

“You can’t read that!” yelled Daffodil. “It’s classified! Isn’t it classified, Benbow? She’s reading it! Stop her! Can I arrest her? Please?”

“Not now, Daffodil.”

“But I’m dying to arrest someone!”

“Not this someone,” said Benbow. “You know who wrote that letter, don’t you, Recycler?”

Her face gave nothing away. “No. The message... startled me, that’s all.”

“Why? It’s addressed to Garracker. You don’t care about Garracker. But perhaps you know the City Chieftain?”

“Don’t know anyone of that name.” The Recycler began to walk away. Araby jumped up and sprinted into her path, where he stood with his teeth bared, growling.

“Cut it out, Araby,” said Benbow.

“She’s not co-operating!”

“I said cut it out.” He eyed Araby sternly until the younger dog put his ears down and took a slow step backward.

Benbow turned his attention back to the Recycler. “All right. Forget the message. But you do sell paper. A lot?”

“Not much. Not much call for it.”

“Sell any for fuel, to burn?”

She looked startled. “Of course not! That’s wasteful. If you want fuel, I’ve got coal and wood.”

“What about matches?”

She pulled a face. “I can let you have a box for a price. They’re rationed, since I had a load stolen.”

“Who by?”

“How should I know? Somebody broke in lately, climbed the gate. I’ve not been able to get supplies in since.”

“Not like you to be so careless,” Benbow commented.

“I wasn’t careless. I was asleep. So were the dogs.” She glared at him.

“All right. Never mind. Just put the letter back in Daffodil’s bag, please.”

The Recycler obeyed. She looked hard at Daffodil, and then at Araby. “Your sons, Benbow? They’re very like you. I didn’t know you had pups.”

“Not sons. Close relatives. There’s a third one somewhere.” Benbow glanced around for McCool, who was nowhere to be seen. Wilf and Natty were playing on a tall heap of tyres close to the College building; Natty was trying to encourage Wilf to climb the black pile.

“Look, they’re bouncy! You can’t hurt yourself!” she cried, bumping down the heap to demonstrate. Wilf began to clamber slowly up, teeth gritted in painful determination, as if it was an unwelcome job he had to do.

Benbow turned back to the Recycler. “Got any children here at the moment?”

“Two girls – Helga and Tate. They’re out on an errand.” She frowned at the tyres. “If you’re thinking of that pair, I can’t take any more on.”

“That’s all right,” said Benbow. “Those two already have a home.” He eased his artificial leg with a grimace. “Mind if I sit down for a moment?”

“Does it hurt?”

“Sometimes,” agreed Benbow, wincing bravely. “Could I have a bowl of water, please?”

“Of course.” The Recycler hurried inside the College.

“I’m so sorry, Admiral!” said Daffodil anxiously. “I didn’t know your leg was hurting! You should have said. Shall we go back to the Station? We’d better go now. I’ll call the others–”

“No!” snapped Benbow. The Recycler was returning with a bowl, which she laid on the ground before him. As he drank, she fingered his plastic leg.

“Nice piece of kit,” she remarked.

“Yes. And no, you can’t buy it.”

“Battery-driven? If you need new batteries, I can get them. I’ll exchange for any currency except rat.”

“Tinned dog-food?”

“Certainly,” said the Recycler.

Benbow shifted his leg and sipped his water. “So how are all your other children doing?”

“Well, now.” She counted on her fingers. “Leo and Clifton are working for Greenspan, and Sid’s with Nile. Mary and Annet are in a small gang over west now. Carlo fell off a rope-walk, had to be taken Out to hospital, never came back. Jessie, Ken and Astor–”

“Hang on!” barked Araby. “How many children has she got? Humans don’t have litters, do they?”

Benbow closed his eyes.

“They’re not mine,” said the Recycler. “I adopt. A child or two at a time, for a year or two at a time. Sometimes they adopt me. They help around the yard.”

“I see,” grunted Araby. “Slave labour!”

“Araby,” said Benbow quietly, “please go away, find McCool, and tell him to meet us at the gate. You can take your time.” He shrugged apologetically at the Recycler. “You were saying. Jessie, Ken and Astor...?”

“All grown up. Gone Outside.”

“That’s a lot of children, over the years.”

“Thirteen, including the latest pair,” said the Recycler with a touch of pride. She almost smiled.

“They’ve all survived?”

The smile went out abruptly, leaving her face bleak. “All but Zola. Died in a fire five months ago. I’d only had her a few weeks. Clever girl. Quiet.”

“Another fire? I didn’t hear about that one.”

“Been a lot of fires this year,” said the Recycler, sounding tired.

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. But the dogs keep watch. No-one’s going to burn *my* yard.”

“You think it’s a fire-starter, then?” asked Benbow, alarmed.

“How should I know? Have you had enough water? I’ve got things to do.” She snatched up the bowl, as sharp as an angry sparrow.

“Thanks, Recycler.” Benbow lumbered to his feet. “See you around. Come along, Daffodil.”

Once out of her earshot, he asked Daffodil, “Well? What do you think of her?”

“I don’t know,” said Daffodil nervously. “I thought only children lived in the City – but she’s old.”

“She’s the only adult human allowed to stay. If any others come in, the gangs kick them out. They tolerate the Recycler because she’s always been here, and she’s useful.”

“She seems nice,” said Daffodil tentatively.

“*Nice?*” Benbow considered. “No. Not *nice*. But she’s on the right side.”

“Who’s on the wrong side, Admiral?”

“Fire,” said Benbow. “Famine. Cold. Illness. Loneliness, and Fear.”

Daffodil blinked. “What about the City Chieftain, Admiral?”

“Ah! She knows who he is.”

“Does she?” Daffodil stopped dead. “Then can’t I go back and arrest her, Admiral? *Please?*”

“No, you can’t. McCool! Araby!” he barked. The other dogs sauntered over to meet him.

“Admiral? Why do you think she knows the City Chieftain?”

“Because when she saw the letter,” Benbow said, “it wasn’t the contents that shook her. She froze before she had time to read the message. No, she recognised the handwriting.”

“So?” growled Araby.

“So she knew the writer, very well. In fact, she probably taught him to write. Which means it was one of her own children.”

“But she told us all about them,” protested Daffodil.

“She told us about twelve of them,” corrected Benbow. “She’s had thirteen under her wing. Now, if we can just find a way to discover the name of the thirteenth, the one she didn’t mention—”

“Dowie,” said McCool.

Benbow gaped at him.

“I’ve been talking to her dogs,” said McCool. “Do you know, she calls them Dog One and Dog Two? Looks after them well, though. We were chatting about food, and they said they used to live mostly on rat, but now they get real meat, because a boy who once lived here has hit the big time and sends them pork. He’s taking over from Nile, they said, and he’s becoming one of the big three: Greenspan, Angel and Dowie.”

“Dowie,” repeated Benbow. “Good work, McCool. Now, if we can just discover where to find this Dowie—”

“I know.” That was Natty.

“You know Dowie?” asked Benbow in a kind of despair.

“No,” said Natty. “But there’s only one place in the City that sells pork.”

“Where?”

“The Police aren’t meant to know,” said Natty doubtfully. “The gangs wouldn’t like it.”

“It’s all right to tell *him*.” Wilf looked trustingly at Benbow. “We bought our pork for your dinner at the Town Hall.”

“At the Town Hall?” repeated Benbow, puzzled. “How much did it cost?”

“Twenty-five rats,” said Wilf proudly. “I caught them all myself.”

“My word,” said Benbow. He wondered whether he should feel put out at having all his detection done for him, or worried about his slowness. He decided he had better just be pleased instead.

“Excellent,” he announced. “Well done, everybody! We’ve got what we came here for. Let’s move on out.”

Chapter Ten

Accident in the Alley

“Where to now?” asked Daffodil eagerly.

“Back to the Station,” said Benbow. All three pups whined with disappointment.

“But we haven’t seen anything yet!” complained Araby.

“I thought you’d show us the whole City, Admiral!” pleaded Daffodil.

“There’s an interesting smell down *that* street,” said McCool – and before Benbow could stop him he was lolloping away. At once Daffodil and Araby dashed after him, yapping enthusiastically.

“Wait!” barked Benbow. “Slow down!” But he knew the young dogs were full of energy that they needed to expend somehow. They leapt over the litter of the streets, barking at rats, chasing each other, revelling in the chance to run.

“I suppose it won’t hurt for once,” muttered Benbow, as he plodded behind with the two children. Not so long ago, he would have been happy to join the romping pups. Now he felt slow and stiff, and very conscious of his artificial leg.

Suddenly the clones halted. A volley of identical barks echoed down the street.

Benbow’s hackles rose. An interesting smell? McCool was right. *Very* interesting. It was a smell that made a part of Benbow – the wild, ancient, wolfish part – awaken eagerly, while his civilised self winced and thought, “*Uh-oh...*”

“Stay back!” he ordered the children sharply, spurring himself into an awkward run until he caught up with his clones. They stood by an alley lined with broken fire-escapes. Its shadowed floor was cluttered with mangled, rusty cars half-hidden under weeds.

Something else was there, half-hidden, too.

Two bodies lay sprawled upon the ground. Not dogs, not children: men. They had been dead for several days. Glancing upwards, Benbow saw the broken rope of the snare that had caught one man; the other had probably run forward to free him, then hit the trip-wire, and fallen under an avalanche of concrete...

A few soggy banknotes lay on the ground nearby. Seeing them, Benbow recalled the mongrel he’d met in the Fringes, who had told him the tale of the murdered shopkeeper. The two robbers had escaped into the city... and now they would never come out.

Daffodil was twitching with alarm at the gruesome sight. “We’ve got to help them!” he yelped, starting to run down the alley towards the men.

“They’re long dead,” said Benbow. “Don’t go near them! Come back, Daffodil! There’ll be another–”

There was a quiet click and an echoing clang. Benbow felt sick. Daffodil looked down blankly.

“Something’s got me,” he said in surprise. A set of jagged metal teeth had snapped around his leg like a hungry crocodile’s jaws.

“Man-traps,” shouted Benbow furiously. “Didn’t I tell you to be careful? Didn’t I tell you not to go down any alleys?” He felt weak with fear and anger, imagining a three-legged Daffodil. It mustn’t happen.

“Ow,” moaned Daffodil. “It’s hurting. Help me, Admiral! Oh, I’m sorry! Get me out, please!” He turned up his head towards the sky and began to howl.

“Stop yowling!” cried Araby fiercely. “Don’t be such a baby!”

“All right,” said Benbow. “Calm down, everyone. There’s no need to shout.” Hearing the anger in Araby’s voice, he realised how furious he must sound himself. Daffodil was becoming more distressed.

Benbow took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. “Don’t worry, Daffodil!” he called. “We’ll get you out.”

Warily he studied the ground before him. He could see another tripwire hidden in the weeds, but was that the only one? He began to pick a careful path towards Daffodil.

“Natty – follow me!” he commanded. “Tread exactly where I tread.” He would need human fingers to unlock the trap. Natty tiptoed after him cautiously as he picked his way across the rubble.

“Take it easy, Daffodil,” he said gently as he approached the whimpering dog, and forced himself to look at his leg.

It wasn’t as bad as he had feared. The teeth of the trap were wide, and Daffodil’s leg was slender. It was caught fast, but not too badly injured. Although the skin was gashed, the bone shouldn’t be broken.

Natty tugged at the trap’s jaws in vain. “Can’t get it open,” she panted. “I need a lever.”

“Oh, please hurry!” moaned Daffodil, trembling all over.

“I’m trying!”

“Here – try this,” said a new voice above them. A boy leapt down the fire escape, jumping over gaps in its rusted stairs. He thrust out an iron bar at Natty; then, seeing Benbow’s badge, he halted. “Police?” he said uncertainly, and looked as if he was about to run away again.

“Don’t go! We’re friends!” cried Natty.

The boy frowned at her. “I know you! Didn’t you use to be in Angel’s gang?”

“Yes, last year. I’m Natty and that’s Wilf. Give us that bar!”

“I’m in Angel’s gang now too.” The boy put two fingers to his mouth and whistled. More feet clattered on the fire escape.

“Who is it? Who’s caught?”

Benbow knew that voice. Looking up, he saw a small figure topped with a cloud of fine hair, a halo of straw-gold against the shadows. His heart lifted gladly.

“Hallo, Angel,” he said.

“Benbow!” she cried. “And Natty! What are you doing here? No, don’t tell me now – let’s get that dog free first.”

She ran lightly down the steps to help Natty and the boy. Working together, they slowly prised open the creaking man-trap, until Daffodil lifted his paw out with a moan.

“Your trap?” Benbow asked Angel gruffly.

“No. This isn’t my territory, Benbow. We just came over the rope-walks to see what all the barking was about. The trap is probably Dowie’s, and meant for Outsiders. Only an Outsider would be silly enough to come down here.” She looked askance at the two bodies. “Can you get rid of those, Benbow?”

“I’ll see to it,” he promised. He gave her hand a quick, inconspicuous lick, and Angel smiled.

“My leg hurts,” said Daffodil faintly.

Angel gazed at him with puzzled interest. “He’s very like you, Benbow! So are those two others.”

“Same breed,” said Benbow, not wishing to elaborate. He was not sure if Garracker wanted the cloning kept secret.

“Same mixed-breed, you mean! How strange. You’re really very like...” Angel sounded suspicious.

“Daffodil, can you walk?” asked Benbow, turning to the pup, who was quivering.

“I think so,” he murmured.

“This way, then – carefully! Don’t step anywhere until I tell you.”

Under Benbow’s guidance, Daffodil slowly limped back up the alley to the road. McCool offered him a friendly sniff, while Araby gave him a critical frown.

“Idiot,” he muttered.

“We can clean your leg up at my base,” said Angel. “It’s two blocks further down. I’m afraid we can’t carry you, though. You’re too heavy.”

“I’ll walk,” said Daffodil feebly, and walk he did, limping and moaning gently until Araby told him in a rough undertone to shut up.

Angel led them down a ruined street to an ivy-clad, weather-beaten office block. As she pushed open the door, they could see children and spaniels in the lobby, huddled around an ancient stove.

Daffodil staggered in and collapsed just inside the door, panting heavily.

“Fetch some water and clean cloths. Quickly!” commanded Angel; and the children scattered to obey.

Bending her golden head over Daffodil, she carefully began to tend his wound. Natty and Wilf knelt down to watch and help if necessary. Meanwhile McCool galloped upstairs to explore.

“Shall I call him down?” asked Benbow, but Angel shook her head.

“There’s no need. He’s welcome to look around. We’ve got nothing to hide.”

Daffodil moaned beneath her hands, and Benbow gave the pup’s ear a quick nuzzle with his nose. He wasn’t sure why. He didn’t feel any great affection for these pups who had been thrust upon him – these dogs with no smell, who looked so weirdly like his younger self, yet seemed so different to him.

He sighed, glancing over at Araby. The young dog stood looking around the bleak room with a haughty, disapproving glare. Was I so self-assured at his age? wondered Benbow. Surely not...

After a few minutes, McCool came galloping back, clattering clumsily down the stairs.

“Lots of dormitories up there,” he reported to Benbow. “Not as bad as you’d expect. Cold, but tidy. Folded blankets, clean water in buckets. Looks all right.”

“I know. Angel’s a good leader.”

“How’s Daff?” McCool wandered over to nose at his brother. No, not just brother, Benbow thought: triplet. McCool was a little bigger and a lot scruffier than Daffodil, but that was the only outward difference.

Angel, winding a bandage round the stricken leg, looked up and studied McCool for a while before she answered.

“The wound looks worse than it is,” she said. “It’s not too deep, though it’s bled a lot. He won’t end up like you, Benbow.” She nodded at his artificial leg.

“Good,” said Benbow tersely, but with intense relief.

“It’s just infection that I’m worried about,” she added. “I’ve got no antiseptic to put on it.”

“I have! We’ve got Wilf’s ointment back at the Station,” said Natty, “and loads of spare bandages to dress his leg with, haven’t we, Wilf?”

“All my old ones,” he answered.

Angel sat back on her heels to look at him compassionately. “How are you now, Wilf?” she asked.

“Fine,” said Wilf with determination in his thin, scarred face. “I like it at the Station, with all the dogs. It’s fine.”

“And what brings all these police dogs over this way?”

“We’re searching for Dowie, one of the gang leaders,” said Benbow. “Do you know him?”

Angel went quite still, looking from Wilf to Benbow. “Who wants him?”

“Garracker.”

“Ah.” Angel let out a breath. “That doesn’t surprise me. Dowie’s been throwing his weight around. I suppose he’s annoyed Garracker?”

“Garracker doesn’t wish him any harm,” said Benbow carefully. “He just wants to... talk. Negotiate, you might say. Where does Dowie live?”

“The Town Hall.”

“The Town Hall? He *lives* there?”

“He owns it. He’s moved in, just like Lord Mayor, with all the trappings.” Angel sounded faintly amused. “It’s a whole lot grander than this place, I can tell you.”

“Nothing wrong with this place,” said Benbow. “But if you ever want to try life Outside, just say the word.” He knew it was pointless to ask her, but that was his job.

“Yes, yes, I know. Thank you, Benbow, but not just yet.” Smiling, Angel patted Daffodil’s leg. “That’ll do till you get home,” she told him. “Natty can clean and dress it daily for a week, and you’ll be fine.”

“Will I?” said Daffodil plaintively.

“Certainly. You’ve escaped lightly! It’s lucky you’re thinner than Benbow.”

“No, I’m not!” burst out Daffodil. “I’m exactly like the Admiral!”

Angel laughed. “You look like a younger version of him, but you can’t be exactly alike, you know.”

“I can! I’ve got to be!”

“Why?” asked Angel curiously.

“Because I’m his clone! We all are!”

Angel let Daffodil’s leg fall. “Clones?” she said, in an odd voice. “You’re his clones?”

“All three of us!” said Daffodil proudly.

Angel stood up, wiping her hands. “I knew there was something wrong. Cloned police. Whatever next?” She stared at the dogs in shock and disbelief.

“We didn’t ask to be cloned,” said Araby harshly.

“It’s unnatural. I’m not sure it should be allowed.”

“It isn’t,” grunted Benbow.

Angel stared down at Daffodil as if he had turned green and sprouted tentacles. “You weren’t *born*. You were *made*, in a laboratory.”

“Only to start with,” said McCool. “I think we were born too, y’know. I do remember having a mother.”

“A surrogate mother!”

McCool shrugged. “So what?”

“That’s monstrous,” said Angel. “If you mess around with nature, you make monsters. How could you do it, Benbow? How could you let them?”

“I wasn’t told,” said Benbow; but it did not appease Angel. She gazed down at Daffodil with an appalled glare.

“Get up, clone. You can walk.” Daffodil stood up, tail drooping miserably. “Get out of here,” she said in a low, cold voice. “Go back to the Station. Go on, Benbow. Shoo. Scram. Beat it. What are you waiting for?”

“The cloning wasn’t his idea—” began Araby, before Benbow nudged him.

“Leave it, Araby. It’s time we went.”

“Natty? Wilf? You still have a home here, if you want one,” Angel said.

Natty looked at Wilf.

“No, thanks,” said Wilf. “I told you, I’m happy at the Station.”

“I hope they’re not going to clone every dog there,” said Angel icily.

“I’m the only one,” said Benbow. “Goodbye, Angel. Thank you for your help.”

He left with head and tail upright, although he felt wretched. He wondered why one human’s disapproval should make him so unhappy. Doggie instinct, he told himself fiercely, to be severely quashed. Police dogs couldn’t afford soft-hearted Doggie instincts.

But as Benbow walked away, he longed for a hand to stroke his fur, and scratch him between his ragged ears. He yearned to see a smiling face framed by a golden cloud of hair.

Chapter Eleven

Rat Hunt

Next morning, a chill lay over the City. Mist curled in cold ribbons around the Police Station, making the dogs shiver as they emerged into the damp, grey dawn.

“Where to this morning, Admiral?”

“We’re going to the Town Hall, to find Dowie.”

“Oh, good! Can I arrest him, please?”

“No, Daffodil,” said Benbow patiently. “We’re just going there to buy some pork. But first we need currency.”

“Currency? You mean money?”

“No: *rats*. It’s rat-catching time, everyone!”

“But I don’t know how! I’ve never met a rat,” said Daffodil anxiously, holding up his bandaged paw.

“Really? Where I was raised, the stables were full of rats,” drawled Araby.

“They’re hardly difficult to kill.”

“Then you can show us how it’s done,” said Benbow.

“Oh, no,” said Araby coolly. “I’ll leave the demonstration to you. *You’re* the expert. It’s your job to tell us what to do.”

“Come on, then,” said Benbow glumly. He enjoyed catching rats even less than he enjoyed eating them. “Let’s go round to the tip.”

Behind the Station festered a rubbish tip carefully nurtured by the Police dogs, for it provided much of their food supply. Its rotting slopes were tunnelled like a rabbit warren, but instead of bright-eyed bunnies, it swarmed with sleek brown rats.

To Benbow’s dismay, Elise, Junior and the other Station dogs came out to watch the hunt. Even Tonto the cat sauntered over.

“Dear me,” he said, his green eyes glinting. “Are you sure you’re up to this, Benbow?”

Benbow, who wasn’t sure at all, swore under his breath. He would have to get this right.

He began to dig into one of the tunnels. His artificial leg wasn’t as good at digging as the old one had been; but his efforts had the desired result. Rats were startled into darting out of their holes, to scuttle across the surface of the tip.

Benbow pounced on a fat, unwary one. To his relief, he caught it neatly and managed to kill it before it could slither away from his plastic grasp.

“Bite through the back of the neck,” he told the younger dogs, trying not to pant. “Now you have a go.”

He sat up at the side of the rubbish heap to watch them. Junior joined in the hunt, while the other Station dogs barked encouragement; but Elise lay down beside Benbow.

“I’m too old for rat-catching,” she murmured.

“Nonsense!” said Benbow, but he gave her a worried glance. He’d noticed that Elise looked older and wearier than he remembered. What would happen when she retired? He couldn’t imagine the Station without Elise in charge, keeping everyone organized, using her grizzled wisdom to calm the dogs down.

Perhaps Junior could take over? He watched Junior, a leggy lurcher, dispatch three rats with difficulty. Though enthusiastic, he was too clumsy to be really good at this job. And possibly not clever enough either, thought Benbow, seeing Junior trying to chase four rats at once and losing all of them.

Nearby, Daffodil darted frantically on three legs, torn between fear of the rats and his avid desire to catch one. He didn’t seem to be succeeding so far.

McCool lolloped after a couple and caught them as if by accident, acknowledging the crowd’s cheer with a casual nod. Then he lost interest and began to nose through the rubbish tip after a trail of his own.

By now it was not only the Station dogs who were watching the hunt. They had another audience: of children who leaned, yelling encouragement, from the upper floors of Burger Hall. Benbow barked a greeting in return.

Then he noticed a less welcome sight. A gang in battered, smelly helmets were marching across the Square towards the dogs. The Western Warriors... Benbow sighed. He didn’t want a confrontation.

“I don’t like them either,” said Elise quietly. “Those helmets and weapons are something new. We don’t need fighting gangs in the City. Life’s bad enough as it is.”

“People have always squabbled over territory.”

“That’s different. Nobody gets hurt; not badly, anyway. And there’s plenty of room for everyone. But this lot are just looking for a fight.”

Benbow stood up, ready to face the Warriors if they started to cause trouble. But it seemed they had only come to jeer.

“Got nothing better to fight than rats?” shouted the tallest Warrior from behind a mottled, greenish helmet. Benbow recognised Tomahawk’s voice.

“Rats is all they can manage! They can’t catch anything bigger!” mocked the fattest Warrior. Benbow knew that voice; and that shape.

“Come and help us, Nile!” he said. Nile shook his head and backed away.

But Tomahawk yelled, “You want to see a real fighter at work? Then just watch this!” Leaping up on to the tip, he pounced swiftly on a fleeing rat, and caught it bare-handed. Stunning it smartly against a brick, he tossed it over to Benbow’s feet.

“Better’n any dog,” cried Tomahawk. “At *anything*.” He threw himself onto another rat that had escaped Araby’s grasp, and wrung its neck before jumping down from the heap and swaggering back to the gang.

“Very good,” said Elise evenly.

“Anyone can catch a *rat*,” said Tomahawk. “We’ve got better things to do. Come on, Warriors!”

“Hey,” said Nile.

“You don’t want to hang around here, do you, Nile?” demanded Tomahawk. “Watching mutts run after mice?”

“Guess not,” said Nile. “Come on, then. Follow me.”

“So who are they really following?” said Elise quietly as the gang strolled away, laughing.

“Show-offs,” growled Junior. “Got no time for that lot. See Araby? He’s good.”

Benbow turned back to the pups. He had almost hoped that Araby would fail to catch any rats, thinking it might teach him a lesson in humility. But Araby, eyes half-closed in revulsion, killed rats with grim efficiency. His only rival was Tonto, who caught six very quickly, and then sat down to wash.

“Too easy,” yawned the cat. “No offence. I’m sure you’re all doing your poor best.”

Since the remaining rats had now burrowed into the depths of the heap, where only Tonto could follow, Benbow called a halt.

“Seven,” panted Araby, coughing in disgust. “I hate rats.”

“Two,” called McCool.

“None.” Daffodil’s tail wilted. “Perhaps it’ll be easier when my leg’s better.”

“Four!” Wilf ran up to display them proudly, two limp bodies dangling from each hand. “I snared them! I’ve got traps set all round the Station.”

“They’re his own design,” added Natty. “They work really well.”

Benbow looked at Wilf with new respect. “Good hunting, Wilf!” On an affectionate impulse, he leaned over and licked the boy’s bright hair.

“Don’t!” Wilf shrank away, dropping the rats to put his hands to his head.

“Sorry,” said Benbow, berating himself inwardly for letting the Doggie instinct break out again. He really should know better. He lowered his voice to a rumble as he commanded, “Right, dogs! Let’s load these up on the trolley and head for the Town Hall.”

Daffodil’s tail wagged. “At once, Admiral! And on the way, will you tell us all about your greatest arrests?”

“Oh, what bliss,” muttered Araby.

Junior winked at Benbow. “Wonder where he gets that sarcastic streak from? Must be your fault, Benbow.”

“Naturally,” said Benbow.

The children piled the small brown corpses onto a battered shopping trolley, which Wilf began to haul down the street. Its wheels were crooked, making it difficult for him to steer straight. But when Natty tried to help, Wilf pushed her away, to her obvious distress.

Benbow said quietly to her, “Your brother can manage by himself, you know.”

“He’s—” Natty paused. “He’s not very strong.”

“He’ll get stronger. How old is he?”

“Nine or ten. Ten,” she said. “He’s changed since the accident. Things worry him. He gets anxious. He needs to know I’m close.”

“I understand. But not too close!” advised Benbow. “Wilf has to do some things on his own. You can’t always protect him, Natty.”

“I know,” said Natty with a sigh. He knew that she was thinking – as he was – of the day when it would be time for her to leave the City. That time came to every child: sometimes not until fourteen or fifteen, but never older. It was an unwritten rule.

Wilf’s trolley rattled over the uneven roads, with the dogs following, until at last the white stone spires and great dome of the Town Hall came into sight. Pigeons fluttered from its roof, wings clapping, but none settled on the ground; for pigeons made good eating, and had grown wise.

“Whoa there!” said Benbow when they were still some distance away. In front of the Town Hall, by the dry fountain, sat a boy and a dog – look-outs, he guessed. This was a new development since he had last come this way. He motioned to his companions to crouch down out of sight.

Then he himself sat up, just high enough to let him look out at the look-outs. After a few minutes a girl came scurrying over from Princess Street. She paused to speak to the look-outs: when they nodded at her, she ran up the broad steps into the Town Hall.

Two boys appeared from the opposite direction; then two more. Soon Benbow had counted ten children and six dogs entering the Town Hall. It was time for him to follow.

“Remember the plan, everyone?” he growled. “Wilf will go in at the main entrance with McCool, since he looks the least like a police dog.” McCool grinned. He still hadn’t had his coat trimmed, and was scruffier than ever.

Benbow went on. “I’ll follow them. Araby, you go round the back and keep an eye on the other exits. Daffodil: wait here with Natty. At any sign of gangs approaching, or other trouble, just howl.”

“Will you storm in and arrest everyone?” asked Daffodil, his tail thumping eagerly.

“Not if I can help it,” said Benbow. “Wilf and McCool are just going in to buy some food. They’ll keep the meat-seller busy, so he’ll have no chance to run away when he sees my badge. McCool, be ready to back me up.”

“What will you do to him?”

“I’ll demand to inspect his trading licence and threaten him with regulations. If I kick up enough fuss, he’ll tell me where Dowie is.”

Araby’s lip curled. “His trading licence? Regulations? Is this what being a police dog is about?”

“Yes,” said Benbow. “Ready, Wilf? Off you go.”

Wilf and McCool walked towards the Town Hall steps, while Benbow followed some distance behind. The look-outs glanced keenly at Wilf with his trolley full of rats. He gave them a wave and they nodded to let him past.

As he trailed after them, Benbow snuffed curiously at an unknown smell in the air. It was a strong, green, sickly-sweet odour that he couldn’t identify, but that grew stronger with every step as he approached the Town Hall.

The boy at the fountain looked first at Benbow’s leg, and then at his badge. He whistled shrilly. Quickening his pace, Benbow galloped up the steps and inside the Hall.

There he had to stop and stare. He couldn't believe his eyes.

It was a *market*. Dozens of stalls spread across the chipped marble floor of the great hall. A bustle of dogs and chattering children milled around them, inspecting the wares.

There wasn't just pork for sale here; there was pigeon meat, and pigeon eggs. And potatoes. And turnips. Strings of onions dangled from a pair of carved stone lions: crates of mushrooms were piled against a headless statue. Benbow had never seen so much fresh food in the City before. Most of the inhabitants lived on tins, pilfered from Outside, along with the occasional stale loaf and box of cereal... and of course, rat. There were no rats for sale here.

He saw Wilf haggling with a gangly boy at the meat stall, who didn't seem impressed by the trolley load of dead rats. Meanwhile McCool snuffled hungrily at the meat: between the two of them, they held all the boy's attention.

But across the hall, two burly mastiffs and a small white bull terrier were marching purposefully towards Benbow. He shook his police badge free of his fur and pretended not to notice them, as he swiftly shouldered his way over to the meat stall to address the seller.

"I demand to see your—"

A loud crackling noise broke across his words. Benbow froze. So did everybody else. The noise sounded like a handful of pebbles clattering on the marble floor – but it had come from the ceiling.

The market fell quiet, as children and dogs looked around in bewilderment. The bull terrier growled uneasily.

There was another ear-splitting crackle above their heads, like the first clap of thunder before the deeper boom. As swift and jagged as black lightning, a thin line raced in zig-zags across the stained plaster ceiling, as if drawn by a giant invisible pen.

Benbow drew a horrified breath, and barked as loudly as he could:

"OUT! OUT! EVERYBODY OUT!"

The black line in the ceiling widened. More ragged lines fled from it. Flakes of plaster began to fall on him like snow.

The frozen crowd moved all at once. Children and dogs tripped over each other as they charged for the exit. The gangly meat-seller tried to bundle up his meat, until Benbow sprang at him, teeth ripping his jacket.

"Leave it! Get out *now!*" Then he saw Wilf standing stock-still, gazing up at the pattern on the ceiling with open-mouthed fascination. "Move!" he barked. McCool lunged at Wilf and barged him towards the door.

"Out! *Out!*" Benbow raced across the hall, herding panicky children, as a strange, hard snow began to fall. The plaster shower thickened to a flurry – and then became a blizzard. A moment later, it was an avalanche.

There were no more drifting flakes. Instead, huge chunks of plaster tore away from the ceiling and smashed into the floor. A lump hit the bull terrier, knocking it senseless. Benbow dashed over to grab it by the scruff of its muscular neck.

As he dragged the dog across the plaster-strewn floor, black specks began to fall amongst the white. Benbow smelt the dark, raw, living smell of soil, and the cold tang of potatoes.

And then something leapt on his back. For a bewildered moment he thought another dog had pinned him down – but his attacker was bigger than any animal. It was as heavy and smothering as a dozen wet blankets. It was *earth*.

Benbow sprawled helplessly across the bull terrier, nose between his paws, trying to keep an air-space open. He was weighed down by a cold, black quilt of earth, enclosing, cradling, crushing him. More soil rained down with a sound like the patter of soft feet in the dark.

As the earth pushed him down, he had a terrible sensation that he had been here before. His mind flew back ten months to that dreadful day of the fire: the children's screams, the crash of the girder falling on him, the agony of his trapped leg, the greedy flames licking ever closer...

His heart thumped in panic. He tried to paw his way out, but he could not move. Earth hugged him tight with clammy arms. He was buried alive.

Chapter Twelve

Buried

Benbow lay motionless. He had no choice. All he could do was to try and protect the pocket of air around his nose with his paws. A steady trickle of soil was running in to fill it.

He heard muffled sounds above him, through the heavy quilt of earth. Rescuers? Would they reach him in time? The air-pocket was getting smaller by the second, and he had to share it with the unconscious bull terrier beneath him.

The soil shifted. Benbow's heartbeats pounded through his head like a drum beating the moments away. How much longer did he have? He couldn't breathe. Then, at last, came the unmistakable scrape of a spade.

Benbow tried to call out, got a mouthful of earth, and forced himself to be still. His lungs ached tightly. As spades rasped above him, his head spun, and lights flashed inside his eyelids. Despite himself, he began to heave and gasp, choking on soil.

A blade scraped his back, and the weight above him lifted. Hands rummaged for his coat, grasped it and pulled him free into the light and air.

Benbow took great shuddering breaths, drinking air in. He collapsed on to his side on a black carpet of earth, and found himself staring eye to eye at a potato. He lay there until his dizziness slowly passed, leaving him trembling with remembered fear.

A rough tongue licked his neck. Benbow rolled an eye upward and saw Daffodil: or was it Araby?

“Where’s McCool?” he whispered. “Wilf?”

“They’re safe, Admiral. McCool got Wilf out in time.”

“Another dog buried here with me,” murmured Benbow.

“They’re digging her out now.”

Benbow tried to sit up. His legs wouldn’t move: he felt as feeble as a new-born pup. Daffodil’s tongue licked him consolingly as he lay panting.

Nearby, children floundered in the soil, attacking it with hands and spades. As Benbow stared at a pony-tailed girl, recognition flashed on him: that was the girl who’d climbed the fence before the crane exploded...

She threw down her spade and pulled at a leg protruding from the soil. The gangly meat-seller emerged in a shower of earth, lay still for a minute, and then twitched into coughing life.

At last Benbow managed to roll over and get to his feet. His plastic leg had slipped out of place, and he spent some time adjusting it, willing his shaky body to calm itself. Araby was glowering at him from the door, cold and angry, though Benbow could not think why.

A sudden hush fell over the crowd, and he turned to see the cause.

It was the boy who had blown up the crane.

It was Garracker.

It was a little Garracker, a ten-year old version, but moving with the same assured swagger, while the crowd stepped back respectfully. Natty, looking terrified, clung to Wilf and pulled him to her side.

“Dowie,” rasped Benbow at the boy. “Police.” He raised his head stiffly to reveal his badge.

Dowie showed no interest. “Where’s Trugg?” he demanded. The bull terrier snuffled over to him, sneezing, and Dowie picked her up. “Are you all right, Trugg? Good girl! Is there anyone else under there, Camilla?”

“Don’t think so,” answered the pony-tailed girl.

“Where are the look-outs? How many people came in? Count everyone here, and make sure the numbers match.” He put Trugg down. “We’ll need sacks. Clear all this soil out, put it outside in the fountain. But not the potatoes: bag them up, and take them to the Council Chamber. Everyone all right? Nobody hurt?” He gazed around enquiringly, and paused at Wilf’s damaged face.

“Those are old scars,” said Natty fiercely. “He’s fine. Come on, Wilf, we’ll help shovel.” She dragged Wilf away.

Turning to Benbow, Dowie held up his hands. He didn’t look at all shaken by the avalanche of soil and plaster: just regretful. “All right, officer,” he said. “I admit it wasn’t such a good idea, growing potatoes upstairs. It did solve the rat problem, though. And it’s legal. Not illegal, anyway. So what are you doing here?”

Although he spoke calmly, there was steel in his voice. Benbow knew that he had been recognised from the chase before the crane blew up. That datted leg again...

“I want to talk to you in private,” he said huskily. His throat was sore.

Dowie scowled. "If it's about a certain explosion – you can't prove I had anything to do with it."

"It's not."

"Benbow just saved Trugg's life," said McCool, with a friendly sniff at the bull terrier, who drew back affronted.

Dowie looked at Trugg and nodded slowly. "All right," he said. "We'll talk upstairs."

"Upstairs?" Benbow glanced up at the huge hole in the rotten ceiling. Through it he could see another, loftier ceiling, and wondered if that was equally rotten.

"Don't worry," said Dowie smoothly. "The potato crop was only on the first floor. And the pigs are all in the basement, so *they're* not going anywhere."

He headed for the stairs. As Benbow moved, the three clones followed him automatically, like pins drawn after a magnet. Dowie stopped and stared at them.

"What is this?"

"They're part of what I need to tell you," said Benbow.

Dowie raised an eyebrow, but continued without comment up the grand staircase.

It was still grand, despite the years of slow decay. Its heavy banisters were freshly polished; the faded carpet had been neatly patched. The walls beside the stairs were hung with portraits of long-forgotten mayors and mayoresses, their paint peeling, though the gilded frames looked newly scrubbed.

"Found all this stuff stowed in the basement," said Dowie over his shoulder. "I think it gives the place some style, don't you agree? A bit of class."

Benbow did not have enough breath to answer. Three floors up, he had to stop and rest.

"For goodness sake," muttered Araby impatiently.

"Are you all right, Admiral?" whispered Daffodil.

Benbow nodded. He felt a little dizzy from his recent burial, and his paw was throbbing. But he mustn't show weakness. So he forced himself on, until at last they stood in a small, circular, sunlit room: they were inside the dome right at the top of the Town Hall.

Dowie leant against an over-sized mahogany desk, with Trugg at his feet. Folding his arms, he frowned at Benbow. "Well, Officer? What's all this about? Explain."

Benbow fished the creased letter from Daffodil's pouch. "You sent this note to Garracker." He could hear himself wheezing like an old dog. "Garracker told us to track down its writer. Don't worry! He means you no harm."

Dowie spread his hands innocently. "That old letter? That was months ago. I was younger when I wrote that – a bit wild and immature. I'm doing things the sensible way now."

"Like blowing up a crane?" enquired McCool.

Dowie smiled at him. The smile of a shark, thought Benbow, just like Garracker's. "That was Camilla, my explosives expert. We were merely experimenting... just in case Garracker should decide to use those bulldozers on the City."

"He won't," said Benbow. "Not now. He's changed his mind. He wanted us to find you."

Dowie's eyes narrowed. "Why? I don't understand. You said Garracker means me no harm – but why else would he want to find me?"

"Because you're his clone," said Benbow.

Dowie stared in speechless disbelief. Trugg laid back her ears and growled.

"He had you cloned eleven years ago," said Benbow. "Then last year he had *me* cloned, to find you. These dogs are the result." Briefly, he related the tale as Garracker had told it, wondering what would happen if Dowie didn't believe him. Or if, like Araby, he simply hated the whole idea of being a clone?

But Dowie's incredulous gaze slowly thawed into an exultant grin. Trugg's tail began to wag.

"I'm Garracker's son! I *knew* I was someone special!"

"Clone," growled Araby. "Not son."

"Clone, son... it's all the same. I'm his heir, aren't I? And Garracker owns everything. The lot. How do I get to meet him? How soon?"

"As soon as possible," said Benbow. "But you're only one of three. Have you any idea where the other two clones might be? Have you ever seen, or heard of, anyone who looks like you?"

Dowie shook his head. "No. Believe me, I would have remembered if I had."

"I know the Recycler kept you for a while. Where were you before that? Somebody must have picked you up when you were abandoned as a baby. Who found you?"

"No-one. I found Nile's gang, so I'm told: I just crawled in one day, and they adopted me. That was before Nile took over."

"Would anyone else remember that day?"

"Come on, Benbow, it was years ago!" said Dowie. "There's no-one in the City over fifteen, except the Recycler, and she takes no notice of anything outside her yard. Nobody would remember it now."

Benbow pondered. Dowie was probably telling the truth as far as he knew it. However, he might not be in a hurry to find two other clones to share his good fortune... If you could call Garracker good fortune.

"Have you any got leads about the other clones? Any clues as to where they might be?" asked Dowie. He looked satisfied when Benbow reluctantly shook his head.

"Nothing yet." One down, two to go, thought Benbow, but Dowie was the easy one. Garracker wanted all three clones. And Dowie wasn't going to help him find them.

Chapter Thirteen

Garracker Visits

Dowie went to Prospect Towers, and Garracker was pleased.

Three days later, a tank churned through the City streets, heaving over rusted cars and broken walls until it juddered to a thunderous halt in Eagle Square, outside the Police Station.

As the dogs spilled out to look, the hatch of the tank opened. Garracker climbed out, cigar perched in a smiling mouth. On seeing Benbow, he threw his arms wide.

“Benbow, my friend! I knew you wouldn’t let me down. Dowie’s perfect. A real chip off the old block. Sharp as a knife, a born leader! He’s had no education, of course, and his teeth are bad, but I’ll see to all that. Can I come in?”

Benbow looked at Elise, who shrugged. He nodded warily.

The Station was furnished for dogs, not people. Garracker sat on the least rickety chair like a king upon his throne, surrounded by his canine subjects. Benbow felt that he should offer him a drink: but he had no beef tea, or indeed tea of any sort, and Garracker was not likely to take kindly to a suggestion of cold rat soup. So he said nothing.

Garracker smiled on him; then scowled at Wilf.

“Send that brat out, can’t you?” he muttered. “His face gives me the creeps.”

McCool ambled over to Wilf. “How about a game of ball outside, kids?”

“We’ve got no ball,” objected Natty.

“We’ll play potato, then. Come on.” McCool shepherded the children outside.

“To business,” said Garracker, folding his arms: a larger, smarter, version of Dowie in the Town Hall dome. “You’ve found one clone, Benbow, and I’m pleased. But what about the others?”

Benbow glanced at Elise. “It’s your case,” she murmured. He sighed, knowing that his answer wouldn’t satisfy Garracker.

“We’ve been searching the City for them,” he began, “and asking around. We’ve questioned members of most of the gangs, but no-one remembers any foundling babies – or if they do, they’re not saying. The trouble is, nine years is too far in the past. Most people old enough to remember that long ago have left the City.”

“Then find them Outside.”

“That’s impossible.”

Garracker frowned. “Nothing’s impossible. You’re not giving up! If you can’t cope, perhaps I should send some men in to take over?”

“They wouldn’t last long in the City,” said Benbow.

“Hah!” Garracker’s eyes glittered. “What about soldiers? Tanks? I think they’d cope, Benbow my friend. I could hire an army that would take this City apart! I’ve already been strongly tempted, but for one thing – if my other clones are anything like Dowie, they’d fight back. I won’t risk them getting killed.”

“But you’d risk the lives of all the other children, wouldn’t you?” barked Araby. “You don’t care about *them*, only about your clones!”

Garracker glared at him. “How dare you speak to me like that?” he snapped. “Are all your pups as insolent as this one, Benbow?”

“Araby is young,” said Benbow.

“He’s a young fool!”

Araby leapt to his feet. Benbow said quickly, “He’s not yet learned diplomacy. Araby – please go outside and join McCool.”

Araby stood for a moment with his head down, staring at Garracker, one fang just showing beneath his curling lip. Then, to Benbow’s relief, he stalked out.

Daffodil sat mute and rigid. Elise, however, stretched her limbs out with the tired calm of age, quite unbothered.

“Officer Benbow is doing his best to find your clones,” she told Garracker patiently. “He’s worked hard on this case. Give us another month. If he still hasn’t succeeded in tracking down the other clones by then, you can assume they’re dead.”

“They are not dead.” Garracker’s fists clenched.

“Wishing will not give them life,” said Elise.

“They are not dead! I know it. I feel it. They are *me*, and I feel their presence in my blood and bones. They are in the City somewhere, and you will find them, Benbow. And if you fail, your clones will pay the price!”

This time it was Benbow who sprang to his feet. With his ears flattened, he snarled a deep warning at the man, baring all his teeth. Garracker leapt from his chair and backed away towards the door.

“No,” said Elise – but Benbow was too angry to think. He let instinct take over, running like wildfire through his body. How dare this arrogant man threaten three innocent pups who had done him no harm? He wanted to seize Garracker and shake him like a rabbit.

He snarled again. Garracker picked up the chair.

The door crashed open behind him. Araby charged in, barking frantically. “Benbow! Benbow! Emergency!”

With a mighty effort, Benbow forced himself to pull his attention away from Garracker.

“What emergency? Where?” he rasped, trying to dampen down his rage.

Araby’s hair was standing on end. “Fire! There’s a fire in Burger Hall! Smoke’s pouring out of the windows!”

“What? It mustn’t reach my tank!” cried Garracker. “Out of my way!” Throwing down the chair, he strode past Araby. He stopped in the doorway to glare at Benbow. “*Find my clones*. That’s all you have to do. Just remember who is the dog here, and who the master!”

“Don’t tell me my job,” growled Benbow, but Garracker had gone. Outside, the tank roared into noisy life.

“I hope it blows up!” snarled Araby.

“With him inside,” agreed Benbow.

“Enough!” said Elise. “Benbow, there’s a gang of children living in the tower block above Burger Hall, on the upper floors. You’re the only ones who can help – all the other dogs are out on patrol.”

“I’m on it,” said Benbow. He galloped outside in time to see Garracker’s tank thunder off in a trail of dust, heading away from the black cloud of smoke that frothed from Burger Hall.

“Benbow! Where are the fire engines?” cried Daffodil.

“Fire engines?” he said grimly. “What fire engines?”

“The big red things...”

“No fire engines in the City,” said Benbow. “No firemen: no policemen: no ambulances. Nothing but us dogs. Haven’t you worked that out yet? Everything that goes wrong, we have to fix.”

“But then how do we put out the fire?” wailed Daffodil.

“We don’t,” said Benbow. “We can’t. We get everyone out of the building, and let it burn.”

And with luck, he thought, the whole blazing pile won’t collapse on top of us and pin us down... Fear crawled across his skin. Again, he had to push the dreadful memories away. He couldn’t afford fear now.

“Look!” yelled Daffodil. “Up on the roof!”

On top of the building stood six distant figures: five children, waving wildly, and a small dog. Benbow heard their faint, frantic shouts, as Natty came running over.

“I tried to get in, but the stairs are on fire!” she panted. “There’s a heap of rubbish burning on a landing. Sumitra’s gang are up there, and they can’t get down! They’re trapped! We’ve got to save them, Benbow!”

Chapter Fourteen

Fire

Racing over to the foot of the smoking tower-block, Benbow bellowed upward to the children on the roof.

“Sumitra! Can you get across to the next building? Where’s your rope-walk?”

A thin wail floated down to him. “It’s broken! We’re stuck here! *Help!*”

“Natty, Daffodil: run back to the Station,” commanded Benbow. “Fetch the rope-walk from the chest in the back room. And bring the cat.”

“Tonto?” asked Daffodil in surprise.

“No! The catapult.”

“I know,” said Natty, sprinting away. Daffodil ran after her.

“Now,” said Benbow, “we need to get into the building next door.”

“McCool’s already gone in,” Araby told him.

“Then go in after him! Try to find a route up to the top, and report back. Quickly!”

Araby sprinted off, diving into the neighbouring tower block. Benbow sniffed at the smoke drifting in lazy billows from Burger Hall, and felt a deep unease.

He smelt burning carpet – nothing strange about that, for old carpet still lay mouldering in some buildings – but why could he also smell burnt *paper*? And there was another, underlying stench that made his hackles rise: the sour, rough stink of alley-cats.

Araby reappeared. “McCool’s found an unblocked staircase next door.”

“And here’s the rope-walk,” said Benbow, seeing Daffodil dragging it towards them by his teeth, loud and lumpy in a sack. Together the dogs hauled the heavy sack into the next-door building and lugged it up the stairs. It was ten flights to the top, and by the time they got there Benbow was wishing he’d retired.

“Let’s get this across quickly,” he panted, as they emerged through a hatchway onto the flat roof. Smoke billowed up around them. Here they were almost level with the stranded children on the roof opposite, who shouted at them across the gap.

“Help us! Hurry!”

“Hang on. We’re coming!” Benbow called. “Help me pull the sack off, Daffodil. Take one end, Araby – Araby? What’s wrong?”

Araby stood by the hatchway, shivering, with his tail between his legs. McCool glanced at him, then took the end of the rope-walk and dragged it over to the roof’s edge.

“Araby?” queried Daffodil anxiously. “What’s the matter? Are you ill?”

Araby gave his head a small, tight shake and didn’t answer.

“Vertigo,” grunted McCool. “Fear of heights. Leave him – he can’t help us. Hey, you over there!” he shouted in Human across the smoky chasm between the buildings.

From the roof of Burger Hall, the children yelled back. “Be quick! The fire’s just below us!” They sounded scared, thought Benbow, but not panicky. Not yet.

Natty attached one end of the rope-walk to the stump of an old flagpole. Benbow unwound the rest of it: a long, clattering rope ladder with metal piping for rungs.

Daffodil was quivering with excitement.

“Do you jump across, Admiral, with the end in your mouth?”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Benbow. “We use the cat.”

Swiftly he threaded the loose end of the rope-walk into the catapult, and set the spring. Aiming it carefully, he released the catch. With a mighty PYOING the rope-walk sprang like a cluster of flying snakes across the gap. The children on the far side scrambled to retrieve it, and hooked it over a ventilation shaft.

A moment later, the smallest girl was clambering on all fours across the swaying, rattling bridge. Three more children followed, clinging like monkeys to the rungs as the rope-walk jangled. Then just one girl was left, along with the dog – a small, shivering mongrel.

“Come on, Sumitra!” Natty shouted.

“That dog can’t cross,” said McCool under his breath.

“She’ll have to carry him,” said Benbow, and indeed Sumitra was trying to pick up the dog, which wriggled and howled in protest. Behind her, a sudden flame licked up from the ventilation shaft, darting skywards like a lizard’s tongue.

Benbow cursed himself. "I should have told Natty to bring the dog sling," he groaned. "I forgot all about it, and there's no time now. They can't cross like that! She'll fall – or the dog will!"

Clutching the dog in both arms, Sumitra set an experimental foot on the first rung. The rope-walk shuddered and rang like a peal of bells. Benbow began to bark a warning; but a shout forestalled him.

"Stop, Sumitra! Stop!"

Benbow was amazed. It was Wilf who had shouted – Wilf, who never spoke above a murmur. He was scampering along the rope-walk – almost running – with a sure-footedness that made Benbow blink.

When he reached the far side, Wilf pulled off his ragged sweater, and knotted the sleeves together. Ignoring the bursts of flame that now belched from the ventilation shaft, he looped the sleeves around his neck, then tucked the sweater's collar in his belt.

"Give him here!" he said, taking the unwilling dog from Sumitra and stashing it into the improvised sling against his chest. Sumitra set off across the swaying rope-walk unhindered, and Wilf followed her, more slowly and carefully this time, with the dog howling all the way.

"Well done, Wilf!" As soon as he had crossed, Natty ran to meet him and lift the dog out of the sling. It snapped at her fingers, yapped angrily at Wilf and then raced after its human companions, who were already climbing down the hatchway.

"Well! They didn't even bother to say Thank you!" huffed Daffodil. "I was brought up to always say please and thank you for everything!"

"That explains a lot," Benbow muttered.

"Hey, you there!" scolded Daffodil as the last head disappeared down the hatch. "Can't you even stop to thank us?"

"No time!" cried Sumitra. "Get out now, before he fires this building too!"

"Who?"

"The fire-starter!"

"Fire-starter?" asked Daffodil blankly. But Benbow barked in sudden consternation. He should have known. The smell of burning paper – that wasn't natural.

"Downstairs, everyone! Leave the rope-walk, we'll retrieve it later. Quickly, Natty! Hurry, McCool! Araby? Wake up!"

Araby still crouched, immobile, in the middle of the roof, as far from the edge as possible. An occasional shiver ran across his flanks. He stared at Benbow with miserable eyes.

"Araby!" barked Benbow. "Snap out of it!"

"C'mon, bro," said McCool more gently. "We're all going down together. Down, OK? You'll be all right as soon as you're back inside." He nudged Araby into trembling movement, and the dogs descended in a line, re-entering the darkened building.

Once they reached the stairwell, they began to race down it. Wilf stopped to wait for Benbow, whose leg made descending the steps slow and awkward.

“You go on,” he gasped. “Don’t wait for me.”

But at the next floor down, he found that all the dogs had stopped. Sumitra’s gang was here too, in a frightened huddle on the landing. A large pile of rubbish was burning fiercely, blocking their path. The children shrank back from the flames’ mad, crackling dance.

Then, in the shadows on the far side of the fire, Benbow saw something that made the hair on his neck bristle. Through the smoke he glimpsed a boy, bobbing and swaying, copying the dance of the flames: a boy who brandished a blazing stick in wild triumph.

“The fire-starter!” Sumitra whispered.

Benbow was filled with a rage so great that he forgot his human voice. With a furious *woof* he leapt across the fire. The artificial fore-leg might be hopeless at descending stairs, but it did not affect his ability to jump.

Sailing through the flames, he landed just in front of the dancing boy. His jaws snapped with a crunch that would have broken bone – but met instead the boy’s flaming brand. Benbow saw a dirty, soot-smearred face, heard a squeal, smelt the disquieting reek of *cat* – and then his own fur burning.

He let go and dropped to the ground, rolling over to extinguish the flames on his coat. Spent matches lay scattered on the floor around him. Before he could get back to his feet, the boy screamed wordlessly, and jumped down the stairs three at a time.

Leaping up, Benbow started after him, and then halted. He wouldn’t be able to keep up with him down the stairs; and more to the point, the other children were still trapped on the wrong side of the flames.

He turned round and barked. “Carpet! There’s some on the next floor up. Fetch it!” McCool was already dashing away. He returned a moment later dragging a length of soggy carpet. The children up-ended it and let it topple on to the fire.

The flames sizzled away into acrid smoke and hissing steam. Scrambling over the fizzing carpet, the children dived through the smoke and clattered down the remaining stairs. Benbow followed as fast as his plastic leg would allow.

Too late now, of course. Far too late. When he got outside, there was no sign of the fire-starter.

“Who was it?” he asked Sumitra.

She paused briefly, shaking her head. “We don’t know. Not one of our gang. Not in any of the gangs.”

“Then who—” But Sumitra was already running off after her companions, the small dog yapping as they vanished into the maze of the City.

Benbow turned to his clones. “Circle the building!” he barked. “Two in each direction. See if you can find the fire-starter.” He paired up with Daffodil to snuff his way round Burger Hall, nose to the ground; but they failed to discover any trail.

“He had too much of a head start,” said Daffodil, his tail drooping gloomily, as they met up with the other dogs back at the starting point.

“We’ve had no luck either,” panted McCool. “Too much smoke everywhere: it’s masking all the other scents. And he must know all the short cuts and hidey-holes. I wish *I* did.”

“He’s gone,” growled Araby sullenly. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“Nothing we can do?” said Benbow sharply. “What sort of attitude is that? We’re police dogs! We can hunt him down!”

“But aren’t we meant to be looking for the clones?” asked Daffodil anxiously. “Garracker said—”

“I don’t give a rat’s snout what Garracker said! This is more important than any orders he gave us. There’s a fire-starter on the loose, and we’re going to catch him!”

“Garracker won’t like it,” muttered Araby. “What if he finds out?”

Benbow rounded on him, snarling so ferociously that Araby ducked. “We’re police dogs, not lap-dogs! If Garracker doesn’t like it, too bad! You think I’m going to watch these towers and all the children burn?”

“Oh, no,” said Daffodil in horror.

“We can’t do that,” declared McCool. “Can we, bro?” He nosed at Araby, who nodded slow agreement.

“Then it’s decided,” Benbow barked. “Forget Garracker. We’re going to find the fire-starter!”

Chapter Fifteen Cats and Smoke

“What are you looking for, Admiral?”

“Cats and smoke,” muttered Benbow, as he gazed up at the imposing stone walls of the Museum. They told him nothing.

It was the day after the fire in Burger Hall. Benbow had spent the previous evening retrieving the rope-walk and scouring the burnt-out building for clues to the fire-starter’s identity. Despite Daffodil’s help, he had found none.

So now he had little to go on but the fire-starter’s smell: the unnerving stink of cats and smoke...

That little would have to do. On a hunch, he had led his patrol of three pups here, to the Museum.

The squat old building looked as secure as a prison. Cats dozed in pools of feeble sunshine, sprawled in unlikely poses along the lower window-ledges. Behind the drowsing cats, the windows were solidly bricked up.

“He’s here, I’m sure of it,” said Benbow to himself. “But who is he?”

“Dog Two says they call him Slane,” said McCool offhandedly.

“Who?”

“Dog Two. I went to see him last night. You know, at the Recycler’s yard—”

“No, no, Slane! Who is Slane?”

“Oh... a boy who stinks of cat, lurks in corners, creeps around by himself, Dog Two says. A loner and a thief. He’s tried to get into the Recycler’s yard a few times, and the dogs have chased him off.”

“So Sumitra was right: this isn’t a boy from any of the gangs?”

McCool shrugged. “I guess not. Maybe none’ll have him.”

“Slane,” repeated Benbow thoughtfully, turning the word in his mouth like a bone. “He’d stink of cat all right if he lived here. But if he’s here, how does he get in?” He frowned at the doorway, which was bricked up as securely as the windows. The Museum had been closed down when the troubles started in the City, its entrances blocked so that it would not be looted.

And it never had been. It had stayed intact. There were no cracks, no holes: this place was impregnable. The dogs had trekked around it three times now, and found no opening. The Museum might as well have been a fortress.

Benbow snuffed in its smells of alley-cat and cold stone, interlaced with the smoke that he had noticed on bringing the pups here on their first patrol. But behind those expected odours lay another, dark, disturbing scent, as faint as a moonshadow, that made the fur rise up on Benbow’s neck.

“This is a wild goose chase,” muttered Araby, pacing restlessly up and down. “If there’s no way in, how could anyone be hiding here? And what about Garracker’s clones? What if Garracker finds out we’re not hunting for them any more? This is pointless.”

“Easy, bro,” said McCool. “The boss knows what he’s doing.”

“Oh, really?” snorted Araby. Daffodil glanced anxiously at Benbow, who pretended not to hear. He was studying the stone lions carved over the Museum door, trying to think why they looked familiar.

“Onions!” he said suddenly.

“Onions?”

“There were onions draped round a pair of stone lions inside the Town Hall. They’re the same lions – the Town Hall crest. We need to talk to Dowie.”

Benbow began to march in the direction of the Town Hall, while the baffled pups trailed after him.

“Talk to Dowie about onions?” muttered Araby.

Outside the Town Hall, two streets away, the lookouts waved them past. Inside the hall, they found the market back in place, its stalls set up on marble tiles swept as clean as if the collapse of the potato crop had never happened. Only the ragged hole in the ceiling told the story. Benbow glanced over at the stone lions, which this time were being used to hold clusters of string beans.

“What’s that smell?” asked Daffodil, his nose wrinkling. The sickly-sweet, clinging odour that Benbow had noticed last time still hung around the place.

As they headed for the stairs, the two huge mastiffs quickly strode forward to bar their way. Between them, the white bull terrier, Trugg, fixed the police dogs with a belligerent eye.

“We’ve come to see Dowie,” said Benbow. “Is he here?”

Trugg thought about it. “Yup,” she said, and twitched an ear at a mastiff, who promptly loped away up the staircase.

“Can we go upstairs?”

“Nope.”

“Shall we wait here for him?”

“Yup.” Trugg sat down on the lowest stair, watching them intently.

“Do you like it here?” asked Daffodil politely, after a moment.

“Yup.”

“Can’t you say anything but Nope and Yup?” demanded Araby in irritation.

“Yup.”

“Go on, then.”

“Nope.”

“Brains of a peanut,” grumbled Araby.

Benbow rounded on him.

“Shame on you, Araby! How unfair! You may speak excellent Human – but have you forgotten how to understand Dog? Don’t you know there are a hundred meanings to every Nope and Yup? And not every dog likes dogs who talk Human—”

“Nope.”

“–they think we’re uppity know-it-all poodles.”

“Yup.”

Araby’s ears flattened against his skull. But before he could answer, they heard footsteps hurrying down the stairs to meet them. It was Dowie: a happy, satisfied and generous Dowie.

“Benbow! My friend!” He threw his arms out wide in greeting, an echo of Garracker. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m glad to find you here, Dowie,” said Benbow. “I thought you might be with Garracker at Prospect Towers.”

“Ah, yes.” A faraway look came into Dowie’s eyes. “My other, older self. Older but not a great deal wiser. I’m enjoying myself with Garracker. He has some interesting plans. Well, so do I! I’m not moving out of the City just yet.”

“Do you get on well with him?” asked Daffodil wistfully. “It’s very important to get on with your family.” He cast a reproachful glance at Araby.

“Like a house on fire,” said Dowie, grinning.

“Speaking of which,” said Benbow, “we’ve got a fire-starter.”

Dowie’s mood instantly changed. His face turned dark. “I knew it,” he muttered. “Those fires in my warehouses – they weren’t accidental. Who is it? Do you know?”

“We think he’s called Slane, and may live in the Museum.”

“Slane?” Dowie frowned. “Filthy, stinks, bites people?”

“Probably.”

“How could he get into the Museum? It’s all bricked up. There’s no way in,” said Dowie. “Believe me, I’ve tried – I could use a good strong building like that.”

“I think there is a way in, and you may be able to help us find it,” Benbow answered.

Dowie sat down on the step next to Trugg and began to caress her absently. “Go on.”

“The Town Hall and the Museum were built by the same humans, long ago,” said Benbow. “They have the same stone lions. They’re made in the same style. They both belonged to the old Council before the City fell into ruin.”

“So?”

“So I wondered if there might be a way into the Museum from here.”

Dowie rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, now – there’s the old air-raid shelter, but it’s all blocked up.”

“Air-raid shelter?” whispered Daffodil. “What’s one of those?”

Dowie overheard him. “They’re places where people used to hide from bombs in war-time,” he said. “Long ago – I don’t know when. There’s one beneath the Town Hall. It’s a tunnel running off our basement.”

“If that links up to the Museum, it could be Slane’s route,” suggested Benbow.

“It doesn’t link up to anywhere. Like I said, it’s blocked. Anyway, if Slane was coming in and out that way, I think we would have noticed.”

“Can we look in your basement?” asked Benbow.

“I’ll take you down there.” Dowie stood up. “But don’t frighten the pigs.”

Trugg sprang to her feet and trotted briskly away from the grand staircase to a much narrower flight of stairs, which led down instead of up. As the dogs descended the damp stone steps, the sickly-sweet smell became over-powering.

“So that’s pig, is it?” muttered Benbow.

“Yup.”

“Well, that’s one smell I’ll never forget.”

“Nope.”

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Benbow saw that the basement was divided into a dozen doorless rooms. Pigs wandered from one room to another, grunting and snuffling in the gloom, and soon an interested herd had gathered to watch the dogs with intelligent eyes.

“Wonder if I could learn pig?” mused McCool, and he gave an experimental grunt. There was a chorus of replying grunts around him.

“Stop it! We’re looking for a tunnel,” said Benbow firmly.

“Here it is,” said Dowie, holding up a torch to a dark opening in the wall.

The tunnel was wide and low, and lined with slimy brick. The dogs entered nervously, but after a few steps they met a heap of stone blocks and wooden beams rammed against their path. The barrier left only the smallest of gaps, a narrow hole into nothing.

Benbow put his nose to the blackness, and sniffed, trying to reach beyond the overwhelming tide of pig.

“Wet brick,” he murmured, “black beetles, rats, there’s a toad somewhere... The air seems fresh. Too fresh for a dead end.” He paused, closing his eyes, and inhaled again.

“Smoke in the distance,” he said at last. “And cats. I’m sure of it.” He opened his eyes. “We need to get in there, somehow. Even if Slane didn’t get in through this entrance, it might lead us to another way in – or into the Museum itself.”

“It’s a dead end! Why are we wasting our time on it?” complained Araby. “I thought–”

“You thought what?” Benbow, tired of Araby’s complaints, turned round to stare at him.

“Well, that we had another job... that we... that Garracker...” Under Benbow’s steely gaze, Araby’s voice trailed away. He looked down at his feet.

“The Admiral knows best,” said Daffodil. “Admiral, who are you going to send through the tunnel?”

“Could Trugg squeeze through that gap?” asked McCool.

“Nope!” said Trugg indignantly.

“It’s too narrow,” agreed Benbow.

“What about a smaller dog, then?” suggested Daffodil. “A Yorkshire terrier?”

Benbow studied the narrow gap. “Maybe. But we couldn’t send a Yorkie in with all those cats. It wouldn’t last a minute!”

“What we need,” remarked McCool, “is another cat.”

“We have no cats here,” said Dowie. “The dogs won’t stand for it.”

“That’s it, then,” grunted Araby. “We’re stuck.” Daffodil put his ears down in disappointment.

But Benbow chuckled suddenly. “Oh, no, we’re not. You’re forgetting our colleague at the Station. Tonto!”

Chapter Sixteen

Tonto's Quest

"No!" hissed Tonto. His black and white fur stood up like the bristles on a broom. "Absolutely not!"

"But it's not dangerous. We only want you to have a little look down the tunnel, to see if there's another entrance," Benbow pleaded. "You won't meet anyone, except a few cats."

"Vulgar alley-cats," sniffed Tonto.

"It's worth a tin of cat-food," offered McCool.

"Hang on!" said Benbow in alarm. "Where are we going to get cat-food? The Recycler doesn't stock cat-food."

McCool shrugged. "Ask Garracker for some?"

"Just think of that, Tonto," said Daffodil. "A whole day without rat!"

Tonto's eyes narrowed. "I want a week."

"A week?"

"Paid in advance. Slinkypuss with salmon. I'll only do it for Slinkypuss. Eight tins."

"Eight?"

"Ten," said Tonto sleekly. "May as well round it up."

Benbow opened his mouth to protest.

"Done!" said McCool. Then he whispered to Benbow, "Best to agree before the price goes up again."

"Really?" grumbled Benbow. "Well, *you* can send a message to Garracker, telling him that ten tins of Slinkypuss are vital to our police investigations."

McCool looked taken aback. "Um, what reason shall I give him?"

"Say it's for Dowie. Garracker will do anything for Dowie. Go on, what are you waiting for? Hop to it!"

He glared at McCool until the younger dog backed away. "And your coat still needs a trim!" Benbow barked after him.

Tonto began to clean his whiskers. "No offence, dear Benbow, but have you noticed how your clones keep over-riding you? Inevitable, I suppose, when an elderly cripple tries to keep pace with three vigorous young pups. So sad." He sat down and licked his hind paws delicately.

Araby murmured to Benbow. "Can Tonto be trusted?"

"As much as any cat can."

"I don't want to be unfair to him," said Araby a touch hesitantly, "but is it safe to pay him in advance?"

"Where Tonto's concerned, you can be as unfair as you like. No, it's not safe. He's going to work for his Slinkypuss."

So, next evening, after ten tins of cat-food had been delivered to the Town Hall by tank, Tonto was escorted there by the troop of dogs. Natty and Wilf offered to accompany them; but Benbow shook his head.

“Why come out in the cold and dark?” he said. “You’re better off staying at the Police Station.”

“But we want to help you,” said Wilf.

“We want you to find the fire-starter,” added Natty.

Benbow gave each of their hands a quick, appreciative lick. “This trip may come to nothing,” he told them. “We don’t know that Tonto will find any useful leads.”

Privately, however, he prayed that Tonto would discover something. He was risking his reputation as the City’s best police dog on this hunch. And he was risking more than that: if it didn’t pay off, and Garracker found out...

He shook the nagging thought away as he followed the other dogs into the Town Hall.

When they reached the damp staircase to the basement, Tonto began to whine a protest.

“This place stinks!”

“Just think of Slinkypuss,” Benbow reminded him.

The basement was warm and rank, lit by yellow torches. They hustled the protesting cat past the rows of sleepy pigs to the tunnel. At its dark mouth lay a clump of tins, with Trugg resting her front paws on them.

“I said, in advance,” objected Tonto.

“You’ve got them in advance,” said Benbow. “Here they are. You can eat them as soon as you’ve done the job.”

“It’s dark,” sulked Tonto.

“Best time. Cats like the dark,” said Benbow.

Tonto glowered at the dogs. “No offence,” he hissed, “but you’re a load of insensitive bullies.” Trotting down the tunnel to the barrier of wood and rubble, he leapt lightly up to the hole in the tumbled stone, and slipped through it like a hand into a glove. He was gone without a sound.

“I’ll wait outside in case he finds another exit in the street,” said Daffodil eagerly.

“Good idea – though he’s more likely to come back here,” said Benbow, “pretending he’s explored all of the tunnel when he’s just been skulking on the other side of that hole. But I shall know by his smell.” He spoke loudly, directing his voice at the dark gap. “I expect Tonto to come back smelling of smoke and alley-cat. I shall stay here and wait for his report.”

“Me too,” said Araby. He looked at Trugg, and lowered his head submissively. “Would you like to keep us company?”

“Nope.” She stuck her tail high in the air and marched off.

McCool wandered away to grunt at some pigs, leaving Araby and Benbow together at the tunnel’s mouth. Araby lay down dejectedly with his nose on his paws.

“*That* didn’t work,” he said.

“Don’t expect to get everything right all at once,” said Benbow gently. He felt uncomfortably aware that he’d been hard on Araby lately – too hard, perhaps. His clone was still young.

“I don’t seem to be getting anything right,” Araby mumbled into his paws. “My foster-parents told me what a great police dog I’d be – as if I was born knowing everything about it. I thought it would be easy. But I’m not much good at all.”

Benbow sat down beside him. “You can’t tell that yet,” he said. “Nobody’s born a good police dog, even the clone of one. It’s experience that counts. You just need to learn how to handle situations.”

“Not doing too well so far,” said Araby in a muffled voice.

Benbow recognised his own tendency to mope when things went wrong. In his youth, he’d been inclined to dash headlong into tricky situations and then be crestfallen when things didn’t work out. He knew how Araby was feeling.

So he said bracingly, “I expect Trugg will come round. She’s got to maintain her dignity, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t thinking of Trugg,” said Araby. “I was thinking of – of – of up on the roof the other day.” His voice dropped to a husky whisper. “I just couldn’t move. Whenever I looked at the edge, my head began to spin, and I kept thinking I was going to fall off. I felt sick. It was terrible. I don’t understand why it happened. The others were all right. *You’re* not afraid of heights, are you?”

“I’m not keen on them, but they don’t make me...” Benbow paused, trying to think of a more tactful word than *panic*. “They don’t make me anxious,” he said at last. “Perhaps you got frightened by a high place when you were very young?”

“I once got stuck on the stable roof,” said Araby. “I don’t even remember how I got up there. I remember the groom had to come up a ladder to get me down, and then he nearly dropped me. It was awful.”

“There you are then.”

Araby shook his head. “It doesn’t help me to get over it. I feel so stupid, so ashamed. I can’t stand weakness! I hate being weak. Don’t you feel the same, with your—” He looked askance at Benbow’s plastic leg.

Benbow looked down at it too. “No. I don’t hate it. I’m stuck with it, so there’s no point hating it. It’s just a nuisance.”

Araby shivered. “I couldn’t stand it.”

“Just like you can’t stand being a clone?”

Araby turned his head away. “I know I’ve been rude,” he muttered. “It’s just that...” He swallowed. “I’ve always thought I was special; unique. My foster parents always told me so. And now I find out I’m identical to three other dogs.”

“But you’re not!” said Benbow. “Your being scared of heights just proves you’re different.”

“I don’t want to be different like *that!*”

Benbow wondered what words would comfort him. The best he could think of was, “I expect you’ll find a way to cope.”

“How will I?” groaned Araby.

A little desperately, Benbow racked his brains. “Practise heights. Start low. Look out of first-storey windows until it doesn’t bother you, then work your way up – second floor, third floor, and so on. I’m sure you’ll overcome your fear in time.”

“You really think so?” asked Araby more hopefully.

“Definitely.”

Araby sat up a little straighter. “In that case, I’ll try it.”

“You know, at first I couldn’t stand the thought of being cloned either,” Benbow admitted. “I hated the idea. I expected three interchangeable little Benbows, all alike in thought and deed – but you’re all different, and I don’t know why... Some of it’s down to your foster-homes, I suppose. But you’re just different, anyway.”

He pondered on the aspects of himself that he recognised in the clones. Araby had his pride and impatience, and McCool the careless curiosity of his youth... but Daffodil?

“Daffodil’s very like you,” said Araby, as if reading his thoughts.

“Is he? How?”

“Trying to do the right thing all the time.”

“I wish he’d stop calling me Admiral.”

Araby laughed. “Then why don’t you ask him to stop? I’ll tell you why – because you’re too polite. Just like him.” He stood up and shook himself, looking much more cheerful. “With all these pigs around, do you think they might have a bacon chop anywhere?”

“You could always go and ask.” Benbow watched Araby wander away. Not a bad-looking dog after all, he thought, if you ignored the strange mouth, and the lopsided ear... Lean and strong, well put together.

Benbow rolled over, feeling far from lean and strong himself. Yawning hugely, he opened his eyes wide and fixed them on the tunnel. He needed to keep watch for Tonto; his nose would give him no warning of the cat’s return. His sense of smell had already shut down, suffering from pig overload.

But his eyelids were drooping again when Daffodil barked him into wakefulness.

“Admiral! Admiral! He’s back!”

He stretched out his limbs and stood up. “Call me Benbow, Daff.”

“What? Oh! Right. Tonto’s back! He just walked in through the main door upstairs. He’s done it! He’s found another entrance!”

Calling to the dogs, Benbow ran up the steps to the marbled market hall, quiet now and empty of both wares and buyers. Tonto swaggered over, his whiskers twitching disdainfully.

“Nothing to it!” he sniffed. “If you dumb dogs had looked a bit harder you would have found the entrance yourself.”

“Where is it?”

“I want my Slinkypuss.”

“Your job’s only half done,” growled Benbow. “Show us the entrance, and you’ll get your tins.”

Tonto examined an elegant paw. “Actually, I’ve decided the Slinkypuss isn’t enough. I want to sleep in your basket tonight, Benbow.”

“You just try it,” retorted Benbow.

“And tomorrow night,” said Tonto, beginning to arch and huff. “Or I go straight home now.”

“Oh, all right! All right!”

“By the stove.”

“Yes! Just tell us where the entrance is!”

“I’ll take you there,” said Tonto, pattering away. He turned to look over his shoulder at them. “Well, are you coming or not? Dear me, you dogs are so slow.”

Before they could follow him, Dowie and Camilla came hurrying down the big staircase. “So your plan worked, Benbow!” said Dowie. “Trugg just told me. You’ve found a way into the Museum?”

“I hope so,” said Benbow. “We’ll try it now. With any luck, Slane might be asleep.”

“I’d like to come with you,” said Dowie regretfully. “But I’m going to Prospect Towers, to dine with my ancestor.”

“Garracker?”

“That’s right. For excellent food, and a bit of fun.” Seeing Benbow’s puzzled expression, Dowie laughed. “It’s so easy! I can make Garracker do whatever I want. He’ll dance to my tune like a puppet. I know all the buttons to press. But take Trugg with you, and Camilla.”

“Just in case you need anything blowing up,” said Camilla. She waved a large canvas bag with a grin. “It’s all here. Fuses, detonators—”

“Oh, be careful with that, please!” begged Daffodil.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I know what I’m doing. Shall we go?”

Outside, darkness had fallen. A single, spluttering oil-lamp lit up the fountain; beyond it, the night was a black wall dotted with an occasional flickering light, like a shifty eye. Those distant, scattered lamps and cooking-fires did nothing to light up the inky streets. The moon hid behind swirling clouds.

“We need torches,” said Benbow. “I should have thought of that.”

Even as he spoke, feet came running through the dark, and Natty and Wilf emerged into the lamplight by the fountain. They were carrying handfuls of torches, police dog issue, mounted on wide headbands.

“We thought you might want these,” panted Natty. She began to fasten the torches around the dogs’ heads.

“And we’re coming with you,” added Wilf. “You’ll need a hand if there’s any climbing or digging involved.”

Tonto sat down to groom himself. “No offence, Benbow, but your patrols are turning into a regular circus. What a fuss! All for some silly, grubby boy with a box of matches.”

“The Admiral – I mean Benbow – is doing *real* police work,” said Daffodil severely.

“He can do what he likes,” added McCool. “He’s a free spirit.”

“Is he?” said Tonto. “I thought he was Garracker’s little obedient doggie. No offence, Benbow. But if Garracker gets to hear about this, won’t that mean your jobs are on the line? Or even your heads?” He stared at Benbow, his eyes wide and gleaming in the lamplight. Nobody answered him.

“More to the point,” Tonto went on with a twitch of his tail, “when Garracker’s got rid of all you hopeless dogs, and the Station’s empty – where will *I* live, Benbow?”

Chapter Seventeen Through the Tunnel

Tonto ran ahead of them, his tail waving loftily. Trugg and Camilla hurried alongside the cat to stop him from slipping away. Wilf walked with his hand on McCool’s shaggy back, while Natty stayed next to Daffodil.

The children wore head-torches, like the dogs, but they were not bright enough to light up more than the ground at their feet. As they marched down Empire Row, the little pools of torchlight fluttered between hulking, silent shadows.

Tonto led the group in the direction of the Museum, but turned away from its stern façade. He trotted over to an ivy-covered ruin opposite, where shattered glass lay thick upon the ground beneath half-demolished walls. Delicately Tonto picked his way through a gap to stand inside the building.

“Hang on! This is the Library,” said Benbow, taken aback. “This can’t be the place. There’s nothing here but piles of rubble.”

“Nope.”

“Yes!” hissed Tonto angrily. “Downstairs!”

“There’s a downstairs?”

“What do you think that is, over there? No offence, Benbow, but are you blind?”

“Pretty much, in here,” said Benbow, turning his head until his torch lit up the remains of a stairwell.

Carefully he began to thread his way towards it through a tangle of ivy, brambles and hidden wires. There had been no books here for a long time: the shelves had been dismantled long ago. Now, amidst the bricks and glass shards littering the floor, he saw that snares were set for the unwary.

“Watch your step, everybody! Whose territory is this?” he asked Camilla.

“Dowie’s,” she said, frowning, “but those aren’t our traps. We don’t bother to protect this place. Why would we? There’s nothing here.”

“Nice design,” said Wilf, squatting down to inspect one of the wire snares.

Benbow peered down the stairwell. The steps appeared to have collapsed in a jagged heap of concrete. “Did you say downstairs, Tonto? Not even a rat could squeeze through there!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, dunderhead,” retorted Tonto. “No offence. I’m just a little stressed after my difficult and dangerous journey through that tunnel.”

“Dangerous?” asked Araby. “What was dangerous about it?”

“It was full of rats! Big, vicious ones. I had to keep chasing them off. Eventually I reached a fork where the tunnel divided. The air was moving, so I knew at least one branch must lead outside. I heard cats going to and fro, and from their talk, I learnt that the right-hand tunnel led into the Museum. So I took the left one, and I came out here.”

“What, you came up through that blocked stairwell?” said McCool.

“Certainly,” sniffed Tonto. “We cats can slide through holes you couldn’t even get your fat nose into.”

Benbow stared at the pile of broken concrete. “Maybe *you* can. But don’t tell me Slane uses that route.”

“I could blast a way through it,” suggested Camilla.

“No! That’s too noisy, and too risky.”

“You’re *all* blind, not just Benbow.” Tonto stalked nonchalantly through the thicket of brambles and snares until he reached a doorway hidden in the shadows of one corner. “There you are,” he said. “*That’s* Slane’s way.”

Wilf and Natty tiptoed over to the doorway, and Natty held her torch inside. “But there’s no floor!” she exclaimed. “There’s just a pit!”

“Dear me,” said Tonto, rolling his eyes. “It’s a lift shaft. For an elevator.”

“I can’t see any lift. Is there a ladder somewhere?” As Benbow and the others joined her, Natty shone her torch around the walls of the shaft. A couple of lengths of thin rope dangled down one side. “Slane couldn’t climb up and down that,” she said. “It’s much too thin. It wouldn’t hold his weight.”

“I know how it works!” said Wilf suddenly, leaning out into the lift shaft. Benbow, startled, clamped his teeth onto a mouthful of Wilf’s jumper, which stank of ointment and dog-blanket. Ignoring him, Wilf grabbed the nearest cord and tugged it downwards.

It came reeling down fast, while the further cord shot up, revealing a thick rope tied to its end. When Wilf pulled, the thicker rope travelled up the elevator shaft and over an unseen pulley at the top, to come back down into his hand.

“So Slane climbs up this rope?” said Daffodil.

“Yup,” said Trugg.

“No,” said Wilf. He hauled on the rope, arm over arm, until, as slowly as a snail, a platform came inching up the shaft. “He’s made his own lift,” he said happily. “It’s brilliant! Jump on!”

“Jump on?” repeated Benbow. The platform was an old door, tied on all sides with huge, balled knots. He didn’t fancy jumping on to *that*.

“It’s strong enough,” said Wilf. “Slane knew what he was doing.” He stepped carefully on to the platform, still gripping the rope tightly. “But not all at once,” he added. “Three of you of a time.”

Araby stepped on to the door. “I’ll go first. I’m not afraid of going *down*, only up.”

“I’ll come too,” said Camilla.

“Yup,” said Trugg. Gingerly they crossed onto the platform, which swayed a little as they sat down, but did not turn over and tip them off as Benbow feared it might.

Wilf remained standing and began to let out his rope, hand over hand. As slow and ponderous as a setting sun, the platform sank out of sight.

Benbow watched it gradually disappear into the darkness. It seemed to take forever; but at last a call came echoing up the shaft. “We’re at the bottom!”

The ropes started moving again. The sluggish platform, with Wilf hauling away, crept back to Benbow’s level. McCool, Tonto and Natty climbed on and were transported down.

Benbow and Daffodil were the last to go. Daffodil, visibly nervous, needed several attempts to step on to the platform.

“I don’t understand,” he whispered, “how Wilf can hold our weight. Why don’t we fall?”

“Technology,” whispered back Benbow, who didn’t understand either. “It’s a human thing.”

“Pulleys,” said Wilf confidently. “For every armful of rope I let out, we only go down a fraction. But we only weigh a fraction as much, because of all the pulleys. That’s why I can move all of us. It’s really clever. I’d like to make something like this.” His single eye shone in the torchlight.

“Well, well,” said Benbow. “The things you humans think of.” He couldn’t wait to reach the bottom, and hardly breathed until the platform landed with a soft thud. The others stood waiting for them, shadowy behind their lamps.

“Seen what’s down here, Benbow?” said Araby quietly.

Benbow swung his head round, sweeping an arc of torch-light over his surroundings. He was flabbergasted.

“Tonto – you never mentioned this!”

“Mentioned what?”

“Books!”

“Oh, those,” said Tonto with contempt. “Mouse food.”

Long ranks of book-filled shelving stretched away as far as the light would reach. Benbow tried to remember when he’d last seen a book in the City. Occasionally, at the Recycler’s, maybe, being sold as toilet paper, or fire-lighters...

There were a lot of fire-lighters here. Some shelves were half empty; books lay on the floor, ripped in two. Mice hadn’t done *that*.

“Come on,” said Tonto impatiently, diving between two rows of bookshelves. At the far end an open door led into a brick-lined passage. He scampered through, and the others followed.

Within a short distance, the brick walls changed to rough-hewn sandstone, clammy to the touch. They were in a long tunnel leading through the rock, which widened out at intervals to form small alcoves. At one of these, they passed the rusty bones of an iron bedstead that still held a mildewed mattress.

“Weird,” said McCool.

A little further along, the tunnel branched, as Tonto had promised. On the wall a stained notice read:

MUSEUM AIR RAID SHELTERS
A GENUINE WORLD WAR II EXPERIENCE
TOURS TWICE DAILY

On either side of them, tunnels ran off into blackness. The air was colder than stone.

Yet, away in the dark, Benbow thought he heard a faint flicker of human voices, and a snatch of song, that, as soon as he caught it, faded like the music on Elise’s radio when the batteries were flat.

“Can you hear something?” he asked.

“No,” said McCool. “Should I?”

But Araby said quietly, “This place is full of ghosts. My hair’s standing on end.”

Benbow realised that his was too. They hurried on without speaking, padding down the sandstone tunnel until it turned to brick again, and the fur on Benbow’s neck at last lay down.

Soon the brick changed to white tiles that reminded him so strongly of the hospital that his leg began to ache. This corridor was lined with doors. When they cautiously opened some, the torches shone on small rooms crammed with stuffed birds and animals, glass cases full of butterflies, and, in one, the grinning skeleton of a sheep.

Natty was enraptured by a closet full of sea shells. “Treasure!” she breathed. “Can I stay and have a look?”

“Not now,” said Benbow. “Later, maybe. But let’s keep going now. We need speed, and strength, and secrecy, if we’re to catch Slane unawares.”

Natty closed the door reluctantly, and they continued along the corridor. It ended at a wide stone staircase that led upwards into shadow. The place smelt of Museum – and of cats.

“Dip your lights,” said Benbow quickly, but too late. They had already been seen. Two cats whisked out of the darkness and fled up the stairs with angry wails.

“So much for secrecy,” said Benbow. “But we’ve still got speed and strength. *Charge!*”

He galloped upstairs as fast as his leg would allow; his clones soon outstripped him. At the top of the staircase, he stopped to catch his breath. The other dogs bounded forward, their barks echoing strangely, until he commanded, “Wait!”

They halted while he surveyed the space around him. He was amazed by what he saw. Even the library basement had nothing on this.

The torchlight pooled into a great chamber, glimmering on dozens of glass cases. Benbow had never seen so much unbroken glass inside the City. Ahead of him stretched a silent avenue of statues, graceful and pensive. They had entered the Museum.

The cats had disappeared. There was no point chasing around this vast space without some plan.

“Natty and Wilf – stay here,” commanded Benbow. “If you see Slane, shout out! Whatever you do, don’t let him get down the stairs!”

“I can set off a smoke bomb to flush him out,” offered Camilla.

“Smoke is the last thing we want. You go and keep watch at the far end of the room. Everybody else, spread out. One dog per aisle, starting at this side, moving quietly. Don’t bark unless you see something.”

The dogs loped off silently. With Trugg on his right, Benbow took a path between the ranks of statues. Their shadows swayed and trembled as he passed.

The hair on his back was bristling again; all his senses were quivering. The smell of cat was very strong. The statues seemed to watch him as he stopped to check behind each one. Black shadows slithered at the edges of the torch-light.

And then – without warning – something thudded onto Benbow’s back, tearing at his fur. Half a dozen furred, clawed bombs landed heavily on him, yowling. *Cats*.

Benbow snapped and snarled, twisting and shaking himself frantically to try and loosen their grip. As two cats were flung off, he batted them away with his paws; but more took their place, pouncing on him to scratch and bite unmercifully. Their claws gouged his back like thorns. One clung to his head and bit his ear.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Trugg pounding down the aisle of statues towards him. She leapt into the air and landed on his back. Benbow staggered under the sudden extra weight.

He couldn’t see Trugg: but he heard her jaws crunch. A dead cat was tossed away into the shadows. After the second crunch, the other cats fled.

“Thanks, Trugg,” panted Benbow, as the bull-terrier jumped down from his back. “After ’em?”

“Yup!” They charged off in pursuit of the fleeing cats. Wherever the cats hid out, Slane might be hiding too, thought Benbow, as he snapped at a furry tail ahead of him.

But his plastic leg was not up to this chase. Neither were Trugg’s legs, which though extremely strong, were short. The cats slipped away, melting into the darkness.

Benbow pulled up by the last statue in the row, panting in frustration and anger, not knowing which way the cats had gone.

“I think we’ve lost–”

A sharp blow crashed down upon his side. Benbow staggered, and heard a triumphant screech.

“Slane!” he gasped. It was the fire-starter all right; fierce and wild and filthy, with that worrying, smoky scent...

The boy danced awkwardly from leg to leg, waving a cudgel, uttering strange bird-like cries as if trying to frighten him away. Benbow sprang at his chest, aiming to throw him off balance and pin him down.

As he leapt, Slane swung his club. It hit Benbow with a speed and force that took him by surprise. The blow knocked him sideways: he landed awkwardly, tried to stand up, and his leg fell off.

Trugg let out a volley of loud, hoarse barks. Then, as Slane clubbed Benbow a third time, she hurtled towards him and buried her teeth in his ankle. Slane shrieked, dropped his stick and tried to run, with Trugg clamped to his shin.

Trugg was as effective as a ball and chain. The boy could barely move. Within seconds, he was surrounded by Benbow’s clones, all snarling threats at him. He backed up against a statue, moaning and shivering.

“Steady!” said Benbow, struggling to his three good feet. He shone his torch full on the boy’s wincing, twitching face, trying to see beneath the dirt, while his sense of smell sent a warning rocketing to his brain. “Don’t bite him!” he said thickly “He’s—”

His words were drowned out by a terrific crash. The dogs all ducked instinctively, and Slane set up a long wail.

The wall of the Museum burst open. Its massive stones flew through the air in a slow-motion, silver shower, gleaming like huge hailstones in the moonlight.

Benbow swore, furiously. “Camilla and her blasted bombs! What does she think she’s playing at? I told her not to...”

The words died in his throat. From beyond the broken wall came a deep, harsh, throaty rumble. An engine: a *big* engine. More stones tumbled down.

Then through the gap surged a black and deafening monster with dazzling yellow eyes.

Garracker’s tank.

Chapter Eighteen

Slane

Benbow thought the tank would never stop. It reared and charged over the fallen stones without slowing. But at last, with a long, grinding squeal, it halted just metres from the dazzled dogs.

Its hatch opened and Garracker jumped down. Behind him, Dowie climbed out more stealthily, and slipped away.

Garracker advanced on Benbow, a looming black shadow silhouetted against the tank's headlights.

"I told you to *find my clones!*"

Benbow stared at him unwaveringly, and said nothing.

"What's going on?" roared Garracker. "What in the name of all the devils are you doing here?"

"Making the City safe to live in," answered Benbow quietly.

"I'll tell you who's not safe!" spat Garracker. "*You!* You and your misbegotten mongrel pups! You had orders, Benbow. Now Dowie tells me you're wasting your time chasing alley-cats around the Museum! What exactly do you think you're doing?"

"Finding your clones," said Benbow. He swung his torch round onto the blinking, shivering fire-starter. "Garracker: meet Slane. Clone number two."

Garracker froze, becoming as still as the statues all around him. Slane's eyes slid past the man, squinted at the tank, then shifted from dog to dog, as blank as rolling marbles. He scratched himself and began to moan quietly.

"*He's* not mine," said Garracker, his voice cracking.

"Take him home," answered Benbow. He felt as cold and tired as winter. "Clean him up. Have a good look. Clone number two, Garracker." He picked up his leg in his mouth and limped out of the tank's ruthless glare to strap it back on.

Daffodil whispered to him, "Did you know all along, Ad- Benbow?"

"I wasn't sure till now. I just knew there was something wrong about Slane's smell. When he jumped on me, I recognised it for certain. Beneath the dirt and smoke and cat, it's Garracker's."

Garracker appeared to be glued to the ground. But Dowie strolled out of the shadows where he had been muttering to Camilla, and walked over to examine Slane.

"Hallo, there," he said conversationally, putting his head close to the other boy's. His face sharpened, as if inspecting itself in a smeared and dirty mirror.

"I'm your brother," he said. "I'm Dowie. You may have heard of me. Or you may not. *Can* you hear? *Can* you talk?"

Slane was silent, eyes sliding, limp hands twitching.

"He can't talk," said Dowie lightly. "What a pity."

"Get out of the way!" said Garracker hoarsely. Pushing Dowie aside, he dropped on one knee beside Slane. "Son? Can you hear me? Say something! Say your name to me. Slane. Say it. You're Slane," he repeated.

Slane began to mumble and stutter. Benbow strained to hear words. There were none; only sounds.

"I'm afraid he won't be much use to you," said Dowie gravely. As he turned away from Slane and walked towards the dogs, he broke into a fierce grin.

"That'll teach him!" he muttered, to no-one in particular. "Thinks he can boss me around! Thinks he owns me! Do this, do that, go here, go there. Thinks he owns the City as well. Wants me to leave! No way! I don't like his office blocks. I like things the way they are." The smile of triumph collapsed into a resentful frown, as Dowie cracked his knuckles angrily.

Slane was still jabbering at Garracker, arms waving in loose gestures that Benbow couldn't understand. Garracker backed away from him. But when Araby moved closer, Slane hissed and spat.

"Barely human," said McCool soberly. "I wonder what happened to him? Who brought him up?"

"No-one, I'd guess," said Benbow.

"No. Cats, maybe."

Watching Slane, Benbow could believe it. What had the boy lived on, all these years? Rat? He shuddered.

Natty and Wilf stood beside him, staring open-mouthed. "Go home," he told them tersely. He didn't think the sight of Slane was good for them; and he felt dimly afraid of what Garracker might do.

But Wilf, gazing fascinated at the gibbering boy, said, "No, not yet! I want to hear what he says."

"Slane? He's saying nothing."

"He's almost talking," argued Wilf. "Listen to him! He made that lift, remember? And he made those snares. He knows things!"

Slane flapped his hands and mumbled, jerking his head at the tank.

"You like my tank?" said Garracker, speaking with desperate, measured care. "Come and take a look at it. Come and see my tank, Slane. Maybe you could have a ride." He grasped Slane's hand, and Slane took two hesitant steps forward.

"Whoops!" said Dowie. He sprang towards them, crying, "No, stop! That's not a good idea! Stay away from that tank, it's—"

There was a loud **WHOOMP**, and the tank appeared to leap sideways. When it settled again, the left side sat lower than the right. A lot lower.

"Wonderful girl, Camilla," breathed Dowie.

"My tank! *You've blown up my tank!*"

"Just teaching you a lesson," retorted Dowie. "You've been rampaging through my City too freely with that tank, knocking over everything in sight."

"It's not your City! It's mine!"

"Oh, yes? Your City, is it? Then tell me where Brewer's Yard is? Where does Angel live? How many gangs are there in Grindle Heights?" Dowie fired at him.

"How do you get from Bean Street to Lark Lane without a broken leg?"

"Shut up! Shut up!" roared Garracker.

“How many man-traps are there in the Pleasure Gardens?” yelled Dowie. Trugg stood in front of him and growled a deep warning at Garracker. Slane began to make a noise like a crow.

“Shut up, and shut your dog up, too!” roared Garracker. “I’m ashamed to have bred you! You’re no son of mine!”

“That’s right,” said Dowie fiercely. “I’m not your son. I’m *you*. And so is Slane. Look at him. That’s *you* – without your office blocks and tanks and safes full of money. Take a good look at yourself. Like what you see?”

Garracker was speechless.

“You may have made me,” shouted Dowie, “but you don’t own me, or the City! If you owned us, you’d look after us. Do you? No! You want to tear the City down and throw away its people! *I* look after the City. *I* own the City. So does Angel, and Greenspan, and Benbow here.”

“Hang on,” said Benbow, startled, “leave me out of it.”

“How could I look after you?” said Garracker hoarsely. “I’d lost you! I thought you were dead! But I didn’t abandon you. I found you, didn’t I? At great expense, too!”

Dowie’s lip curled. “Is that what bothers you? The expense? Well, don’t spend any more on *me*. You want a son and heir? Have Slane. He’s all yours. Trugg? Cam? Let’s get out of here.”

The three of them marched towards the gap in the wall. Camilla stuck her tongue out at Garracker as she passed. Dowie did not even look his way before climbing out of the Museum.

“How dare you?” yelled Garracker. “I made you! Dowie! Come back here – I *order* you!”

Then, cursing, he ran after Dowie, blundering past the broken hulk of his tank. Clambering up the tumbled stones, he jumped through the shattered wall into the moonlight.

“Garracker! Stop!” barked Benbow; but the man had gone. “He’s crazy!” he exclaimed. “Does he really think he can catch them, in the dark? He doesn’t know his way around. He’ll be lost in two minutes!”

“Shall I go after him?” asked Araby.

“No. Stay here and guard Slane.” Hobbling painfully – for he was stiff and sore where Slane had hit him, and his missing leg throbbled like a bad memory – Benbow lumbered to the wall and peered out into the night.

The moonlight glistened palely on the Museum’s shattered face, and gleamed on the tower-tops. But the streets below were wells of darkness where the moon could never reach. There was no movement in their black depths, only the hollow sound of clattering feet – Garracker’s, thought Benbow, judging by their heaviness and the way they stumbled, unused to the dark.

The footsteps faltered, then ceased altogether. There was a faint slither, and a rattle; and a scream ripped through the air.

“I’m coming!” barked Benbow, as he leapt from the wall. The man’s incoherent shouts began to echo round the silent towers. Running through the tiny puddle of light made by his torch, Benbow followed the noise to a side-alley shrouded in blackness.

“Get me down! Get me down!” yelled Garracker’s voice. Benbow shone his torch upwards. Garracker swung slowly through its beam, upside down, hanging from a rope around his ankle. Away in the shadows rang a peal of cold laughter.

McCool and Wilf came running up. Wilf gasped as he saw Garracker swinging like a giant pendulum.

“Don’t worry! I’ll cut you down!” he cried. Darting down the alley, skipping nimbly between the snares, he found the tethered rope that held Garracker. Its other end was attached to a lump of concrete.

“Watch out!” barked Benbow. But Wilf had already pulled out his knife, and was hacking at the taut rope that ran from the ground to an unseen anchor high on the wall.

“Get ready!” he cried as the strands of rope parted. An instant later Garracker came reeling down in a headlong rush, hit the ground and lay still.

Wilf bent over him anxiously. “Are you hurt? Let me get this rope off your leg.” He sawed at the loop, until Garracker sat up and pushed him roughly away.

“Leave it!” he shouted. The only thing that seemed to be hurt was his pride. “Stop crawling all over me! Benbow! Come and get this hideous brat off me!” Wilf flinched away. “Benbow? For crying out loud! Is this City full of idiots?”

“Only the one sitting in front of me,” growled Benbow.

“*What?*”

Benbow’s heart was thumping in fury. “You’re in Dowie’s territory.”

“Then get me out of it, damn you!” yelled Garracker. “I’ve had enough of this infernal stinking City! As soon as I’ve found all my clones, I’m going to raze it to the ground!”

“You’re going to *what?*” Benbow went rigid.

“I’m going to flatten this blasted City, just like I planned to all along. I only put my plans on hold while you found the clones! I told Dowie – and look at the thanks I get!” Garracker scrambled to his feet and whirled round to bellow furiously into the darkness. “Hear me, Dowie? I’ll tear this place down, brick by brick, whether you like it or not! Starting with the Town Hall!”

“You can’t,” said Benbow thickly, his voice almost failing him.

“Who’s going to stop me?”

Benbow was aghast. His City, lost forever! Yet he should have known that Garracker always meant to destroy it. He shook his head, ashamed of his own stupidity.

“Well, don’t just stand there! Get me out of here!” snarled Garracker.

Benbow paused. Loyalty was everything to him. It was his job, his instinct, and his pride. But loyalty to Garracker...? Why should he obey this monstrous human? Why shouldn’t he just abandon him, and let the City swallow him whole?

“Be loyal to the City,” he murmured. But what City? What would be left, at the end of all this?

“Get a move on, damn you!” yelled Garracker. “Take me home!”

Benbow turned away, and saw that the others had followed him from the Museum. Natty stood mute and horrified. Slane was the only unconcerned one there. With his head tilted back, he was staring at the moon.

Numbly, Benbow growled his orders. “McCool? Take Wilf and Natty back to the Station.” Slane gave a low moan as McCool and the two children disappeared into the night.

Then, accompanied by the other dogs, Benbow escorted Garracker and Slane through the silent midnight streets. He sensed a hundred unseen watchers in the dark around him, and wondered why nobody accosted them as they walked along.

But the gangs were either too afraid of Garracker – who swore continually under his breath – or too glad to see the back of Slane, who yowled like a cat, singing tunelessly in his one-man language.

“Benbow,” breathed Daffodil through the yowling, as at last they reached the City’s edge and began to cross the wasteland to the Fringes, “What will Garracker do with him?”

Benbow glanced at Garracker, gripping Slane’s shoulder in an iron hand. The man’s face in the moonlight was set as hard and grey as if carved out of steel. Slane twisted in his grasp, as silver and slippery as a fish.

Worlds apart, thought Benbow, and a chill ran through him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “And I don’t want to know.”

Chapter Nineteen

Benbow’s Dilemma

“You’ve found the fire-starter, and put an end to the fires. That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Benbow shortly.

“And after all, something had to be done with Slane.”

“I suppose.”

“If Slane wasn’t with Garracker, he’d just be sent to a secure Home,” said Elise consolingly. “Even Garracker can’t be worse than that.”

“Can’t he? Slane will probably end up in a Home anyway,” growled Benbow, “as soon as Garracker loses patience with him. Either that, or he’ll have an accident.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing.” He sighed deeply. “I’m tired, that’s all.”

“Then rest,” said Elise.

Since Tonto lay smugly in his basket, Benbow flopped onto the floor, as close to the stove as he could get. McCool sprawled at his side, and Daffodil lay at his tail. Junior and Elise completed the circle round the stove: already half-asleep, their eyes were dark liquid glints beneath low lids.

Only Araby sat up, aloof and apart. The sounds of dogs coughing and snoring came from the other dormitory.

Benbow shifted restlessly on the old, worn carpet. "I don't know what to do," he muttered.

"What d'you mean?" asked Junior drowsily.

"I don't want to be at Garracker's beck and call. But what can I do? Should I resign? What future is there for a three-legged police dog?"

"If you resign, then we all do," said Daffodil loyally.

"Speak for yourself," grunted Araby.

"I don't want you to resign, Benbow," said Elise, her breath rasping in her chest. "I'll be retiring soon. You'll be needed at the Station."

"I'm not indispensable," said Benbow. "There are plenty of others to take my place." He glanced round at his clones, suddenly feeling a great loneliness. Outwardly, they were *him*. But inwardly? They couldn't share his thoughts or worries. They didn't have his memories. How could they understand him?

"I don't want to find the third clone," he said miserably. "Three Garrackers are enough. Four could be disastrous. They'll all end up fighting. And whether we find him or not, Garracker's going to destroy the City anyway. There's no happy ending, whatever I do."

"Then don't worry about it," yawned McCool. "What happens, happens."

Elise laid her grey muzzle close to his. "Sleep, Benbow."

Benbow sighed and eased off his plastic leg. His bruises kept him awake for some time; and when at last he slept, he dreamt of rats. He often did, after eating rat for tea – rats nipped and scurried through his dreams. But this time, the rats were fleeing headlong with the cold patter of a thousand tiny claws, flowing through the streets in a grey flood.

Benbow dreamt he sat under the Hopeful Insurance Building, at the City's edge, and watched the rats pour out of the streets to spread across the Fringes. And then, in quite a leisurely way, the City began to fall. Top floors broke free of their towers and floated lazily to the ground. Buildings drifted downwards to land with a gentle, soundless crash. Dust billowed from the ruins like giant, swelling cauliflowers.

"The children!" thought Benbow in his dream. He tried to catch them as they toppled from the rope-walks, but his legs were paralysed. Children and dogs rained down upon him as the City collapsed. They lay in a great crying, howling pile in the middle of the Recycler's yard. And then there was nothing but rubble and a huge, white, dusty sky.

Benbow woke, gasping. He was filled with a desperate sadness; but at least he knew now what to do. He scrambled to his feet, clumsy with sleep. A pale dawn was filtering through the window.

"Up! Up!" he barked urgently, and the other dogs raised their heads in drowsy bewilderment.

“What is it?”

“Get up! Get moving! No time to waste! I need the City all together, *now!*”

“He’s gone crazy,” purred Tonto. “I thought he was on the edge. Now he’s flipped.”

“You’re still asleep, Benbow!” growled Araby. “You’re dreaming.”

“I’m not. Wake up, everyone!” he barked.

“Certainly not,” said Tonto. “This is far too comfortable a basket, although I have to say it smells disgusting. No offence.” He snuggled down again.

Benbow struggled to put on his leg, failed, picked it up in his mouth and hurried to the other dormitory where Natty and Wilf slept in a sprawl of dogs. The room stank of damp dog and Wilf’s ointment.

“Strap it on for me,” barked Benbow, dropping the leg on Natty, who was wrapped in a huddle of old blankets.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. There was a moan from underneath the bedclothes, and an arm emerged. Benbow saw a red, puckered shoulder, and as the blankets slipped away, a bare, stretched scalp.

He leapt backwards. “Who’s that?” he barked in startled Dog. Who was this bald child? But it was Wilf, after all, who started up in a flurry of bedclothes, staring at him with one good eye and one twisted eyelid. Seeing Benbow, he yanked a handful of red hair from under his pillow and jammed it on his head. Then, pulling out his eye-patch, he put it on with an unsteady hand.

“Sorry,” said Benbow sheepishly, in Human. “Sorry. Thought you were a stranger. Didn’t know it was a wig.”

Natty began to strap on Benbow’s leg, a little more roughly than usual.

“All the dogs in here are used to him,” she said.

“Yes, of course.” Embarrassed, Benbow ducked his head at the waking dogs, who were looking curious. “Sorry. So much has changed here. The hair’s very convincing.”

“It’s *my* hair,” said Natty. “I cut my hair and made that wig for Wilf, until his own grows back.”

“It won’t grow back,” said Wilf, “any more than my eye will, or Benbow’s leg.”

“But your skin’s better than it used to be,” said Natty.

“Because she keeps on at me,” said Wilf mildly, “wash and ointment, every day.”

Benbow nosed gently at the red wig and licked the bad side of Wilf’s face with affectionate apology. It tasted of hospital. Wilf reached up to give his nose a pat.

Then Benbow turned to face the startled dogs. “I want a message sent throughout the City. Tell everyone to come to the Recycler’s yard at mid-day. That’s *everyone* – all the gangs, big and small, all dogs and children.”

“What for?” asked Wilf.

“I want to talk to the whole City together. People won’t come to the Police Station, but the Recycler’s yard is large enough, and it’s neutral territory. Doesn’t belong to any of the gangs. It’s the best place to meet. You two children had better go and warn the Recycler that the City is about to descend on her.”

“Doesn’t she know?”

“Not yet.”

Natty and Wilf looked at each other.

“You want to tell her, or shall I?” asked Natty.

“I will. She’ll hate it,” said Wilf with a grin.

Chapter Twenty

The Gathering

“I hate this,” said the Recycler grumpily. “I don’t like *people*. I stayed in the City to get away from *people*.”

“Half of these aren’t people,” Benbow reminded her. “And the other half are pretty small.”

He gazed around the yard. Ragged, watchful children were perched on every mound of junk, their knees pulled up to their chins, their scrawny dogs sitting up beside them... Well over a thousand all together, he guessed, child and dog.

Daffodil asked shyly, “Who *are* you, Recycler?”

At first it seemed the old woman would not answer. She compressed her lips; but then, reluctantly, she muttered, “I was the College Caretaker. After it closed down, I couldn’t bear to leave. The College was my life. When they locked it up for the last time I stayed inside, hiding. I lived here until the first gangs moved in, and kicked me out.”

“The adult gangs?”

“Yes. But I waited. They left the College, and the City, in the end, and I came back here. Lovely and peaceful it was then. Not a soul to bother me, until the brats started to arrive.”

“But where did you get all your things?” asked Daffodil.

“That first gang burnt out the place, made a terrible mess. Well, you can see.” She nodded at the ruined walls. “I started to collect stuff to repair it, but the job was too big for me. Anyway, no-one wanted the College any more. They wanted my things though. So I started selling ’em. Didn’t bargain for *this*.” She glared around the yard at the seated children. “Did you have to ask everyone?”

“Everyone,” said Benbow, scanning the crowd. He thought they were all there. The dogs had done a good job at spreading the word.

He saw quick-tempered Greenspan, frowning and biting his nails amidst his gang, and Dowie, looking complacent, with Trugg and Camilla. Opposite them sat Nile, surrounded by his gang of helmeted Warriors; and with a glad lift of his heart, he spotted Angel, her cloud of hair haloing her head, and her sisters beside her.

Benbow trotted over hopefully with the pups pattering after him.

“Hallo, Angel,” he said.

“Go away, clone,” said Angel coldly, turning to her sister.

Benbow’s heart sank. But Daffodil, tail wagging, said, “*He’s* not a clone. I am.”

“You’re all clones, as far as I’m concerned,” said Angel, her eyes half-closed in distrust. “You’re all unnatural. Before we know it, the City could be over-run with Benbows.” Daffodil’s tail stopped wagging.

“Nice idea,” said McCool. “How about being over-run with Angels?” He looked at her sisters. “Never heard of identical twins?”

“Twins are different,” said Angel.

“So are we,” said McCool.

“It’s not our fault!” burst out Daffodil. “You can’t blame us for being born, only for what we do afterwards! Not that we’ve done anything yet, I mean nothing important, and anyway, I’m proud to be made out of the Admiral’s leg, and so would you be if you were...” Daffodil floundered to a standstill.

McCool said, “What he means is, you are what you are. Y’know?”

“No,” said Angel. “Why did you call us all here, Benbow?”

But Benbow moved away. He couldn’t speak to her. Instead, sick at heart, he barked to the crowd for silence. As the chatter subsided, he addressed them in his clearest Human.

“Thank you all for coming,” he began. “I believe this is the first time that everyone in the City has met together. It’s never happened before. Until now, we’ve gone our separate ways: we’ve been busy patrolling, and you, surviving. But things are changing in the City. Soon, no-one will survive here any longer – if Garracker has his way.”

The crowd murmured, as if in recognition of something they had long feared.

“Why now?” barked a Labrador.

“I’ll explain.” Taking a deep breath, Benbow related the events of the past few weeks in alternate Human and Dog. The crowd listened intently as he told them about Garracker’s cloning and its consequences: the quest for his lost clones, the finding of Dowie, and of Slane. All heads turned to gaze at Dowie, who did not seem to mind a bit; and all voices muttered at the mention of Slane.

“Dowie and Slane?” cried Angel incredulously. “They’re *clones*?” She stared at Dowie. “That means you’re Garracker.”

“No, I’m not!” protested Dowie. “I’m nothing like him! All right, we both like to make things work, we get things done. But I’m not him. He has no friends, just men who agree with everything he says. He doesn’t even keep a dog!” Trugg gave a short, appalled bark.

“But if you’re so different, yet you’re still his clone—” said Angel. She didn’t finish her sentence, but sat staring into space.

“Why are you telling us this?” asked Greenspan.

Benbow answered. “Because as soon as Garracker finds the last clone, he’s planning to destroy the City.”

At that, Dowie leapt furiously from his seat. “I won’t let him! I’ll blow up his machines before he can lay a finger on our City!”

“We’ll fight him to the death!” One of the Western Warriors jumped to his feet, waving a rusty iron bar. Tomahawk, causing trouble again, thought Benbow with vexation. He barked a fierce reproof at the helmeted child.

“Fight Garracker? He can buy explosives by the ton, and hire an army that would annihilate you Warriors! Don’t even think about it!”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” asked Nile sullenly.

Benbow hesitated, for he knew his audience would not like the answer. He growled the words deep in his throat.

“You have to leave. Every girl, boy and dog. If you leave the City, you’ll be safe. There’s no other way.” He waited for the protest: and it came, in a swelling wave of barks and shouts.

Benbow raised his voice. “If you leave now, we’ll find you all homes Outside. You’ll have food and warmth; you’ll get health care, you’ll be able to go to school—” But the surge of angry voices drowned him out.

“I’m not going into a Home!” yelled Dowie. “I’m my own master here!”

“That’s right! We’re all our own masters here!” yelped a terrier.

“We’ll fight for our freedom!” shouted Tomahawk. “Fight for the City!”

“You police dogs have always wanted us out,” cried Greenspan. “You’ve always been trying to force us to go!”

“That’s not true!” protested Benbow. “We’ve just given you the chance, if you wished.” Even now, he saw some wistful faces in the crowd: children who were weary of the City and who longed for homes Outside, he guessed, but were afraid to ask.

“I don’t want to leave either,” he told them, “but it’s the only sensible course to take. Life Outside will be better than you think. You’ll have proper meals, no more rat, a family—”

“Stop! Don’t listen to him! It’s all lies!”

It was a weak voice, faint and cracking, yet everyone fell silent as the speaker hobbled forward. He was a thin, pale boy, unknown to Benbow, and leaning heavily on crutches.

“Don’t listen!” he said, his voice breaking. “I’ve tried it. I’ve been Outside, in a Home. A Home with a capital H.” There was a sharp intake of breath from the crowd. Children who got put in Homes seldom came back.

“Who are you?” demanded Benbow

The boy gazed at him bleakly. “I’m Vermin. Scum. Not worth a name, outside the City.”

But the Recycler whispered incredulously, “Carlo?” and sat down heavily on a pile of planks. Then Benbow remembered her litany of children. Carlo, who fell off a ropewalk, got taken Out to hospital, and was never seen again...

Carlo regarded the Recycler with cold, accusing eyes. “You never came to get me,” he said. “Too busy with your things, I expect.”

“They wouldn’t have let me bring you back here,” said the Recycler, looking suddenly much smaller and older.

“They put me in a Home while my leg was still in plaster,” said Carlo. “The other kids beat me up and stole my crutches. My leg’s never healed properly. They stole my food as well. You know what they called me? City scum. Rat-boy. Dirt-brain. Homes? *Pah!*” He spat.

“No! That’s not right,” cried Benbow, horrified. “Homes aren’t like that!” Could they be? His brain whirled. Why would humans act like that? He was sure no dog would treat another dog that way.

Carlo laughed hollowly. “How would you know?”

Bewildered, Benbow had no answer. But Araby came to his rescue.

“You were unlucky. Foster homes are quite different,” he said. “They’re with real families. I’ve been in one, and they were good to me!”

“You’re a dog,” said Carlo bitterly. “Not a child. We’re not wanted. Nobody likes City children. We’re just freaks – we’re filthy rat-eaters. First chance to escape, I took it.”

Benbow felt as if the world had suddenly turned dark and strange. He thought of all those children he had persuaded to abandon the City and go to foster homes... Surely they were happy? Surely they would have come back if they weren’t? But he knew little of the world Outside.

Araby, at least, was still speaking confidently. “If you go Outside, it need not be for ever,” he told the crowd. “Garracker will rebuild the City. Eventually there will be new houses – schools – hospitals and playgrounds – who knows?”

But Dowie smiled without mirth. “Garracker’s not interested in homeless children,” he cried. “Yes, he’ll rebuild the City. He’ll build new office blocks full of businessmen making money. He’ll build banks and penthouses strictly for the rich. Maybe an art gallery as a monument to himself. The Garracker Gallery! He’d like that.” His smile twisted.

Araby sighed. “Why are you so attached to this City? It seems to me that it could do with some change: decent shelter and less rats, for instance, and a proper water supply. As far as I can see, it’s hell on earth.”

“It’s the hell they know,” said Benbow softly. He understood how they felt. This was his City, too. Its tangled smells and rotting towers and dark corners were a part of him. To lose the City would be worse than losing his leg. Yet he also knew that the City was a dreadful place.

“Don’t leave! Don’t go Outside!” cried Carlo harshly. “There’s nothing for you there!”

And looking at the children’s fearful faces, Benbow knew that he would never persuade them to leave the City now. His great plan had failed.

Chapter Twenty-one

The Warriors

“They won’t leave,” he said despairingly. “I can’t force them. But it’ll be too late to save them once the bulldozers move in. If they try to stay in the towers, they’ll be killed.”

Daffodil nuzzled him consolingly. “You did your best, Admiral!”

“Not good enough,” groaned Benbow. His head and his tail were both drooping when he heard Angel’s high, clear voice ring out above the chatter of the crowd.

“What about Garracker’s clones?” she called out. “He’s gone to all this trouble to track them down – surely he’ll listen to their wishes? Can’t Dowie persuade Garracker to leave the City in peace?”

“Hah! He won’t listen to *me*,” said Dowie. “We’ve fallen out. And you can forget about Slane: he’s a disaster area.”

The children fell quiet, looking at Dowie and thinking of his mirror image, Slane, a boy back to front and wrong way round, neglected even by the City, with no Recycler to house him, no gang to protect him, no dog to befriend him, no companions but the skulking cats.

“Well, what about this third clone, then?” demanded Greenspan. “Maybe he could persuade Garracker. Or we could find him and use him to hold Garracker to ransom! We could threaten to kill him if Garracker touches the City!”

“There is no third clone,” said Dowie. “The third clone is dead.”

“How can we be sure of that?”

For answer, Dowie jumped down from his perch and strode forward into the middle of the crowd. “Well?” he demanded. “Seen anyone else like me around? The whole City’s here. So is one of you my twin?”

The children twisted round to scan each others’ faces. The disappointed murmurs came floating back: “No... No.” But Benbow noticed that Angel’s gang were watching *her*. Slowly, Angel shook her head.

“There is no third clone,” repeated Dowie firmly. “I was lucky to survive. Slane barely did. The third clone didn’t make it.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” growled Benbow. His eyes narrowed as he gazed towards the Western Warriors, who were still wearing their helmets. Not only were their features hidden, but the angry grey stink of the helmets’ vinyl disguised their true scent. “We haven’t seen everybody’s faces yet!”

Dowie followed his gaze, and laughed derisively. “That crazy mob? That’s only Nile and his lot in fancy dress.”

“All the same. Nile and Nile’s gang, take off your helmets!” Benbow barked in command.

“We’re not crazy! We are the Western Warriors, and we don’t obey anyone but our General!” shouted Tomahawk. “We’ll fight you first!”

Benbow rumbled in exasperation. “*General Nile*, please remove your helmet, and order your warriors to do likewise.”

“Won’t,” said Nile, leaving Benbow flummoxed.

“Oh, I think you should,” said McCool. He stepped forward to stand next to Benbow. “You’re meant to be all brothers here in the City. And look at you, playing at being little soldiers, and messing everyone around. Let’s see your faces!”

“No,” said Nile uncertainly.

“You want a real fight?” asked McCool, his voice low and level. “I’ll give you a real fight.” His hackles rose and his tail stiffened; his lip curled back to show his snarling teeth. Benbow realised, with something of a shock, that McCool was not a dog he’d want to tangle with.

Nile evidently felt the same way. He took a step back. McCool took a step forwards.

Nile’s panicky voice shrieked out. “All right! All right! Warriors – take off your helmets!”

The Warriors looked first at the dogs, and then at their trembling General, and one by one began to obey. As the helmets thudded to the ground, Benbow scanned each grimy, sullen face. None of them looked anything like Dowie. At last the only one still helmeted was Tomahawk.

“You too,” growled McCool.

“I’m keeping my helmet!” yelled Tomahawk. “I’m a real warrior, and you’re all cowards. I’ll fight for my City. I’ll fight Garracker!” He swung his metal bar around his head until it sang.

”Put that down!” commanded Benbow. “You can’t fight Garracker and win.”

“We can if we’ve got weapons!”

“What, sticks and stones?”

“There are guns inside the College,” shouted Tomahawk. “We can fight Garracker with guns! Come on, Warriors – let’s go in and get ’em!”

And sprinting past the startled dogs, Tomahawk disappeared through the College doorway. Some of the other Warriors began to follow, but McCool leapt in front of them, snarling, “Stay where you are!”

“Guns? They mustn’t get hold of guns!” barked Araby, and he dashed into the College after Tomahawk. The other police dogs ran to help McCool, snapping at the Warriors until they huddled, cowering, against the wall.

“Guns?” repeated Benbow in alarm. “That’s not true, is it, Recycler?”

“Afraid so,” said the Recycler tightly. “The old gang years ago left them behind. I never knew what to do with ’em. Never touched ’em, just left ’em in the attics. One of my children joined Nile’s gang; he must have told Tomahawk.”

Benbow’s head reeled at the thought of fire-arms let loose in the City – the death and destruction that could follow. “But if Tomahawk gets hold of guns—”

“Benbow!” cried Natty. “Look up there!”

High on the ruined College walls climbed Tomahawk, balancing precariously on the crumbling brick of the roof. Something long and deadly glinted in the child’s hand. A shotgun.

Then Araby came into sight, scrambling cautiously over the ragged bricks. Benbow held his breath. They were a long way up.

“Stop! You’re under arrest,” barked Araby. “Drop the gun!”

“Don’t try and get me. If you do, I’ll shoot you,” shouted Tomahawk.

“Oh, be careful, Araby!” cried Daffodil. “Don’t look down!”

High on his jagged perch, Araby looked down – and froze. Benbow saw his ears lie back, and his whole body begin to shudder. His bark died to a whimper, as he slowly crouched back on his haunches.

Tomahawk yelled triumphantly. “Yah! Get down, *dog!* Do as I say, *dog!* Who’s in charge now? I’ll show you who’s boss around here!”

Brandishing the gun in one hand, he leapt wildly at Araby. But as he landed on the ruined wall, it broke beneath his feet. Bricks tumbled down, scattering children in all directions.

Tomahawk nearly fell along with the bricks. He lost his footing, dropped the gun and collapsed on his stomach with a surprised grunt. The shotgun flew through the air, turning lazily, and landed harmlessly near Benbow. Elise put her feet on it.

Half-lying on the wall, feet dangling, Tomahawk clung on with both arms. His legs flailed for a foothold.

“Help me!” he wailed. But Araby still crouched motionless.

“I’m going up after them!” cried McCool, and he raced into the College. Benbow stared upwards, afraid to bark in case he startled them and made things worse.

“Keep calm, Araby,” he whispered. All around him, dogs were whimpering in fear. One set up a mournful howl in accompaniment to Tomahawk’s frantic cries.

“Save me! Get me down! I can’t hang on much longer.”

Then Araby’s twitching muscles bunched. Slowly, he began to move along the crumbling wall. Crouching on its edge, he crept towards the shrieking Tomahawk. More bricks rattled down in their long drop to the ground. One gave way beneath Araby’s paw, sending him lurching to one side.

Benbow stopped breathing. But Araby regained his balance, and kept inching towards Tomahawk.

He reached the floundering child, and leaned over to grasp his collar in his teeth. Tomahawk grabbed frenziedly at Araby’s coat, almost yanking him off the wall.

“He’s too heavy for Araby to hold!” cried Daffodil.

Benbow saw Araby wince and brace his legs against the weight. Despite his strength, he was being gradually dragged closer and closer to the edge – yet still he clung on grimly to Tomahawk’s collar. Benbow felt as if the world had gone into slow motion. How long before McCool reached them?

Another brick plunged down, and Tomahawk cried out. Araby slipped further forward.

“He’ll fall!” cried Natty, her hands at her mouth.

But Araby didn’t fall.

He jumped.

Chapter Twenty-two

Fall

He sprang out in a great arc from the crumbling wall, taking Tomahawk with him. The child's shriek echoed through the air.

Benbow closed his eyes. This was worse than his dream. He couldn't bear to see the tumbling bodies land. He prayed that time might stop, that it might never happen.

But he could not shut out the children's screams. Nor the thud; nor the gasp; nor the silence.

Reluctantly Benbow opened his eyes. Araby and Tomahawk lay huddled on top of the heap of tyres. There was a groan. A tyre moved; Tomahawk sat up, and fell back again.

Benbow raced over to the pile and tried, unsuccessfully, to clamber up it. His paws could get no foothold. It was Natty and Wilf who scrambled past him to reach the fallen pair. They pulled at Tomahawk, who groaned again, rolled over and then slithered down the rubber heap to land at Benbow's feet.

As the broken helmet fell away, Benbow saw that Tomahawk could never have been the third clone. Wrong sex, for a start.

It didn't seem to matter now. The children had reached Araby, and were trying to move him.

"Careful," said Benbow huskily, as Araby's limp body came sliding down the tyres and lay still at the bottom. His eyes were closed.

"Araby?" Benbow bent over him. For an agonising moment, he could not tell if Araby was breathing. Then he saw the young dog's chest heave, and an eyelid flicker. As Benbow gently nosed at him, Araby murmured something, as if in sleep.

"What's that?" Benbow put his ear close to Araby's mouth.

"Thought tyres were *bouncy*," muttered Araby. "Felt more like rock."

Natty tumbled down the heap of tyres and knelt by Araby to run a practised hand over his body and legs. "I can't feel anything broken," she said at last. "But he may have cracked a rib or two. No, Araby, don't try to sit up!"

"Is Tomahawk all right?" Araby whispered.

"She's fine." Benbow licked his ear. "When I told you to practise heights, that wasn't quite what I meant."

"Bit drastic," mumbled Araby.

Benbow stood up. Relief made him suddenly angry, and he turned on Tomahawk.

"Idiot!" he barked. "You and your guns! You nearly got yourself killed!"

"I hurt all over," moaned Tomahawk, sitting up and dolefully shaking each limb in turn.

"You're lucky to be alive!" snapped Benbow. "Why couldn't you just take off that stupid helmet?"

"Don't want to be a girl," muttered Tomahawk. "I want to be a Warrior."

"I'll tolerate no Warriors in my City," declared Benbow. "The Western Warriors are disbanded – as from now! Get out of here!"

“Can’t move,” grumbled Tomahawk. “Why should I?”

The Recycler bent down to her and spoke. Although her voice was not loud, it was as thin and sharp as a needle.

“Because I say so,” she said. “And it’s not just the Warriors who need to leave.” Straightening up, she fixed the crowd with a piercing glare. “I’ve had enough. I want everybody out of my yard. *Now*. Well? What are you waiting for?”

Tomahawk pulled herself to her feet and stumbled over to her gang. The children slowly climbed down off their perches; the dogs stood up and shook themselves sheepishly.

“All of us?” asked Greenspan.

“All of you.” The Recycler stared at them icily until they began to shuffle towards the gate. Then her face twisted for a moment. “Except you, Carlo. You can stay here. You don’t have to leave.”

“I do,” said Carlo distantly, picking up his crutches.

“Hang on, Recycler—” began Dowie.

“Didn’t you hear me? I own this place, and I said GO.”

She looked less like a sparrow now than a hawk, glaring at him with a pitiless eye. Dowie’s gaze dropped. He began to follow the crowd that was trailing towards the gate.

“You’re not the owner, you’re the caretaker,” said Wilf boldly, to Benbow’s surprise.

“Go,” repeated the Recycler.

“Well, you are,” said Wilf as he ran out. “It’s not the same thing at all.”

Araby got shakily to his feet. McCool and Junior hurried to support him as he began to walk, staggering a little. Benbow followed with his head bowed.

“Wait,” said the Recycler.

He halted. But she was looking past him at someone else.

“*You*,” she said. “You – Nile. You look like a strong boy. You can stay and help me clear up this mess. Well? Didn’t you hear me?” For Nile was standing dumbstruck with his mouth open. “Pick up those tyres, and put them back on the pile. Neatly!”

Flustered, Nile lifted up a tyre. Meanwhile the rest of the City’s inhabitants slunk out of the yard in a long line. Last of all was Benbow, his tail between his legs.

Everything had gone wrong, he thought. His dream had nearly become a nightmare. He had achieved nothing.

Or almost nothing...

Chapter Twenty-three

The Third Clone

For Angel was waiting for him.

In the chill shadow outside the College wall, she murmured, “Benbow.”

He stopped. All the other dogs and children were drifting away into the shadows of the tower-blocks. Angel motioned her gang to go ahead. Then she slowly wandered over to Benbow, running a finger along the crumbling wall.

“I’ll be leaving the City soon,” she said.

“Why?” said Benbow. Something inside him was hurting.

“I’m getting old. I must be nearly fifteen... I want something else. I want – oh – soft beds, and warmth, and shops, and food that isn’t stolen. And I want to see, to learn.”

“Do you want me to find you a home?” asked Benbow dully.

“No. I’ll find my own. I need to go, Benbow. But I still care about the City.” She pulled a flake of brick from the wall. He watched it float to the ground.

“I didn’t understand,” said Angel softly. “I thought your clones were *you*, multiplied, like some vile magic trick. I didn’t realise, until I heard them talk: they’re all quite different... Then I learnt that Dowie is one too. And so...”

She paused. Benbow waited.

“And so I want to give you something.”

“What is it?” Benbow’s tail began to wag, unstoppably, by instinct.

“It’s this.” She knelt beside him, put her thin arms round his neck and hugged him: then kissed his ragged forehead and said, in a whispered breath, “Wilf is the third clone.”

Benbow’s tail stopped wagging. “*Wilf?*”

“You know he used to be in my gang? Years ago it wasn’t my gang, of course, but I remember them finding Wilf and Natty, and Natty’s older sister, who was sick. We took them in. At first we thought they were a family. But Wilf wasn’t their brother at all.”

“What?” Benbow couldn’t grasp it.

“Natty always claimed Wilf was her brother. But her sister told me he wasn’t really, they just found him somewhere. I didn’t think it mattered – I thought he was just another City stray, until I first saw Dowie and realised how alike they looked. Then I knew they must be related. I thought they were brothers, or cousins maybe. But it didn’t seem important then.”

“Does Dowie know?” asked Benbow sharply.

Angel shook her head. “No. I’m sure he doesn’t. He never met Wilf – not before the accident, anyway. Wilf was a loner, didn’t mix much. And of course he looks quite different now.”

Benbow tried to gather his thoughts. He felt as though the City he knew was shattering into a thousand flying fragments. Wilf – the third clone? How could he

have missed it? Why had he not scented it? But he'd never seen deeper than Wilf's scars, nor smelt further than his ointment.

"Does anyone else know?" he asked hoarsely.

"My sisters and a few of my gang, the older ones. I told them to say nothing. No-one else has guessed as far as I can tell. Wilf always kept himself to himself. He liked solitude better than company."

Benbow thought of Slane.

"He's always been quiet, has Wilf," said Angel, "though not so quiet as he is now. The fire changed him. He's lucky he's had Natty to protect him."

"Yes, he is." Something else occurred to Benbow. "Does *he* know he's the clone?"

"I'm certain he doesn't," said Angel. She smiled wryly. "There aren't many mirrors in the City. I doubt if he's ever seen his own reflection, except maybe in a puddle. But Natty must have realised. Natty knows, I think. And I think you need to know it too."

"Thank you," said Benbow.

She stroked his ears gently as she straightened up. "Goodbye, Benbow, my old friend. My sister Rose will take over when I've gone."

"Goodbye, Angel." There was a hollow space in Benbow's stomach. He watched her walk away, then trudged slowly back to where Daffodil was waiting patiently at a polite distance.

"Are you all right, Ad- Benbow?"

"I'm fine."

"You're sad."

"Yes. Angel's leaving." Though half his sadness was for Wilf. How would he feel about his new identity? How could Benbow tell him?

Daffodil gave him a quick, diffident lick. "Don't worry! You've still got us. Though I know we're not much use yet..."

"You're improving," said Benbow, and he licked him back. There was a comfortable companionship in walking home with Daffodil chattering by his side, as if he were a younger brother.

Back at the Station, they found Araby lying quietly, at Natty's insistence, in Benbow's basket. Tonto was complaining bitterly.

"Why is this dog in my rightful place? No offence, Benbow, but you're letting these big-headed pups take the Station over."

Benbow ignored him. "How are you feeling, Araby?" he asked.

"Stiff and sore."

Daffodil immediately began to fuss over Araby, offering him bones, and licks, and water; and for once Araby didn't snap back.

Benbow went in search of Natty. After hunting around the Station, he found her in the outhouse with Wilf, washing the dog-blankets.

"We're getting a bit low on rats, Wilf," said Benbow. "How are your traps doing?"

Wilf smiled. "I'll go and check them now!" He dropped the soap and hurried out.

Benbow was left alone with Natty, who was nervously dipping a wet blanket in and out of the tub. She looked at him sidelong.

“I know about Wilf,” said Benbow. “Angel told me who he is.”

“Oh! I thought she might.” Natty sounded choked up. “But he *is* my brother! He’s always been my brother, ever since I found him!”

“When was that?” asked Benbow gently.

“He was just a baby, and I was only about four... I was with my big sister Jo and our dog, Brewer. We were out one day, hunting rats, and I remember hearing this funny little mewling noise inside a building. So I went in, and there was a baby sitting in the middle of the floor, playing with a piece of wood.”

“Just the one baby?”

“Yes. Almost a toddler. He tried to stand up, but he couldn’t. He kept sitting down again. So I picked him up and cuddled him – I could just lift him – and he was so warm and soft and wriggly and he gurgled like a drain.” A tear ran down Natty’s cheek.

“He was so funny,” she went on. “Jo said we could keep him if nobody else claimed him, and he’s been my brother ever since. We caught hundreds of rats and sold them to the Recycler in exchange for milk. Then Jo got sick, and couldn’t get up...”

“And Angel’s gang found you.”

“Yes. Though of course it wasn’t Angel’s back then. They carried Jo Outside to a hospital, and they took me and Wilf into the gang. So you see he is my brother! He’s always been mine!” implored Natty.

“You’ve always cared for him,” said Benbow kindly. “But he doesn’t belong to anyone.”

She dashed the tears from her eyes. “I thought he’d died in that fire last year. When you dragged him out of the building, with his hair and clothes all burnt, I felt turned to stone because I thought he was dead. I wished I was dead myself. The police dogs took him away and I didn’t know where he was.”

Benbow did not know what to say.

“I went Outside and hunted in every hospital.” Her voice was hoarse. “I had to beg and sleep in the street. I didn’t care, all I wanted was to have Wilf back. Nobody told me where he was, but I found him. Nobody else cared. They were going to put him in a Home. But I got him back.”

“And you brought him to live at the Station.”

“He wanted to be near you,” said Natty, “and it seemed so important to him that I decided to ask at the Station for a job. He was shy of people, with his scars, but he’s been so happy here. Even happier, the last few weeks. I’ve seen the difference. And I know why it is.” She looked at Benbow meaningfully. “Wilf likes all the dogs, you know – but one of you, in particular, is very special to him.”

“Ah,” said Benbow.

“Yes. He loves McCool,” said Natty.

“Oh,” said Benbow.

“I don’t want to give Wilf up! He mustn’t go to Garracker!” cried Natty passionately. “He’d hate it! You’ve seen how cruel Garracker is. I don’t care if Wilf *is* his clone. You don’t need to tell him. You mustn’t make him go!”

“Hush, Natty,” said Benbow, for she was almost shouting, and he was worried that somebody would overhear. Natty blew her nose on the blanket, and dropped it back in the bucket, sniffing.

“Wilf doesn’t know?” he asked.

“I haven’t told him. I knew the truth as soon as I saw Dowie, in the Town Hall the day the ceiling collapsed – he had Wilf’s old face. It gave me a terrible shock. I’d never seen Dowie that close up before. But Wilf?” She shook her head. “He has no idea that he’s the third clone.”

“I do now,” said Wilf. He stepped through the door and flung a dead rat into the corner.

“Wilf!” Natty looked aghast.

Wilf slumped to the floor. Drawing up his legs, he sat huddled, his face buried on his knees.

“I thought I was just me,” he mumbled, “and now I’m Dowie, and Slane, and Garracker. I don’t want to be any of them.”

Natty knelt and hugged him. “You’re not. You’re still my own Wilf! Nothing’s changed.”

“Everything’s changed,” said Wilf, his voice remote. “Now I’ve got to go to Garracker, and persuade him to save the City.”

“No! You don’t need to do anything!”

“I do.” Wilf looked up. His taut, scarred face was even more like a mask than usual. “Garracker’s waiting for me. I have to go and meet my maker.”

Chapter Twenty-four Invasion

“I’m not handing Wilf over,” said Benbow, back inside the Station with the dogs. “Not Wilf. Not to Garracker.” It was a new, odd feeling, this disobedience; as if a rope-walk had collapsed beneath him and left him running through the empty air.

“Your decision,” said Elise.

“He’s right,” said McCool. “No point handing Wilf over. Garracker’s going to knock the City down anyway. It’ll make no difference. Only cause Wilf heartache.”

“Maybe we could just tell Garracker that the third clone exists?” suggested Daffodil. “He wouldn’t destroy the City if his clone’s still hidden in it.”

“He’d want proof,” pointed out Elise.

“We could give Garracker something he could test, like Wilf’s hair.” Benbow remembered too late. “Or his nail clippings.”

“He’d say they were Dowie’s,” said Araby. “He’d want to see Wilf in the flesh.”

And there they paused. Garracker *had* seen Wilf in the flesh, and had told him to get out of his sight. What if he didn’t want this clone, with its ruined face and eye-patch? Benbow thought it all too likely. Two damaged clones – first Slane, now Wilf – might be too much for Garracker to take.

“Do nothing yet. Just wait,” advised Elise.

“Wait for what?” growled Benbow. “Wait for Garracker to send in his army of bulldozers?”

Yet he could think of nothing else to do. He told Wilf to do nothing either, but to see if Garracker made the first move. So Wilf stayed at the Station, looking serious and silent: while Benbow waited, day by day.

The days turned to a week, then two. Although Benbow’s ears were constantly pricked for the roar of tanks, all remained quiet. The dogs went back on patrol. Araby soon recovered from his fall, and was able to join them.

These days, since the gathering in the Recycler’s yard, more children came out to talk to the patrolling dogs, or just to say hallo. Voices sang down from the ropewalks:

“Morning Benbow Daffodil McCool and Ara-*bee!*” for suddenly everyone knew their names. Daffodil loved this, just as he loved being petted by the children. Araby didn’t mind it as much as Benbow expected, but McCool obviously hated it. He cringed whenever his name was called.

“What’s the problem?” Benbow asked him one grey morning. He fell back alongside McCool, the clone he felt he knew least well. For McCool was often absent from the Station, away exploring: nosing down secret alleys and poking into forgotten corners, sliding into conversations with strange dogs in which he seemed to learn a lot whilst saying very little.

He said little at the Station either. Whilst Daffodil was growing in confidence, and Araby was slowly unbending, McCool seemed to have got quieter. It worried Benbow.

“What’s the problem?” he repeated, softly so the others wouldn’t hear.

“Nothing,” said McCool. Two children sidled out of a doorway, plainly wanting a word with the police dogs. Araby addressed the older in a business-like way whilst Daffodil romped with the younger, who smiled and stroked him.

But McCool drifted away, peered through a dark window, and gazed longingly down a silent passage. Benbow limped after him.

“Aren’t you happy here?” he asked.

McCool shrugged. “It’s all right. The City’s interesting. But I feel like the Recycler: there are too many people. Rather be off on my own.”

“Yes, I’d noticed.”

“I’m not so good in a team,” said McCool apologetically. “I think better by myself.”

“You don’t care for going on patrol,” said Benbow.

McCool’s tail slumped. “I know I *should*. Think something must have gone wrong with my genes. All this walking around, taking names, noting crimes just bores me. Sorry.”

Benbow sympathised. He found the routine of patrols tedious too, and felt the pull of the City’s darkness and strangeness, its silent chasms full of secrets.

“You might be happier training for undercover work,” he said thoughtfully. “Tracking down criminals who sneak into the City. That’s what I used to do.”

“Really?”

“Before my leg stopped me. I enjoyed it. I think you might be good at it.”

“Undercover...” McCool fell silent. After a moment, his tail perked up a little. “Wouldn’t mind that,” he said.

Araby cantered over. “Two more who want to leave!” he reported. “I’ve told them to come to the Station tomorrow.”

“I hope we can get them a really good home Outside,” said Daffodil. “I’ve promised to visit that little girl to make sure she’s all right.”

Benbow nodded. That made fourteen children who had approached them, wanting to start a new life Outside, despite Carlo’s warnings. Benbow was determined to run checks on their foster homes, to make sure they were happy.

But most children were opting to stay in the City, no matter what Garracker might do; and Benbow knew that Garracker would do something, soon. The City was under threat. Fourteen wasn’t enough.

“Lunchtime,” he said, feeling depressed. Even the thought of rat and bacon pie failed to console him as he trudged towards the Station.

They never got there. Half way home, the dogs all halted as one, their ears twitching, listening intently. They looked at each other.

“Coming this way,” said McCool.

“Four of them,” added Daffodil, whom Benbow suspected of having the sharpest ears of the lot.

“Tanks?” guessed Araby.

“No... Different engine note. Tractors, maybe.”

“We’d better investigate,” said Benbow, reluctantly. He wanted his lunch.

The distant rumble was heading for the heart of the City. The pups raced away in that direction, not bothering to wait for Benbow. *Pups?* No, they were hardly that any more, he thought; they were nearly full-grown now. No chance of keeping up with them.

As he struggled through the littered streets, he cursed his leg automatically – then realised he didn’t mean it. Something had shifted in his world. He was used to his plastic leg: it had become part of him.

At Empire Row the young dogs halted, their bodies expressing alarm. On the horizon loomed four monsters: crane, digger, bulldozer, truck. They heaved and pitched over the rubble like warships over a petrified sea.

The invasion at last, thought Benbow.

Led by the bulldozer, the machines turned towards the Museum. Without even slowing, they charged straight at the Museum wall, through the ragged hole left by Garracker's tank. It sounded as if the whole City was exploding. The wall disappeared in a fountain of flying stones.

The dogs approached cautiously as the machines thundered into the Museum. Only the crane stayed outside. Children appeared, attracted by the noise, and trickling up to the Museum, pooled there to watch, along with a horde of interested dogs. Wilf and Natty came running to join them.

"We heard the noise over at the Station," panted Natty. "What's going on?"

"Garracker," said Benbow briefly, as Dowie and his gang arrived.

Dowie was furious. He marched over to the Museum with Trugg trotting at his heels, jumped on to the remains of the shattered wall and stood there, arms akimbo, while he yelled,

"Garracker? What the devil do you think you're doing? Get your machines out of my City!"

Garracker jumped down from the bulldozer's cab. He looked different: strange, and smaller, in dirty, creased blue overalls.

"Go away, little boy," he said. "I'm busy."

"Is that any way to talk to your clone and heir?" jeered Dowie.

"I've disowned you, Dowie. You're nothing to me."

"I'm everything! I'm *you*! You can't disown me!"

But Garracker had turned his back. "Just go away." He sounded distracted, as if he really didn't care what Dowie said.

Dowie spun round, his face as dark as a gathering storm. "Hear that?" He scowled at Benbow. "So he thinks I'm nothing, does he? How dare he!"

"You did blow up his tank," said Benbow.

"Nobody treats me like that. I'll show Garracker who runs this City! Disowned me, indeed, has he! Hah! We'll see."

Benbow felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Wilf, watching Dowie with wide-eyed curiosity. Dowie didn't even spare him a glance, but broke into a run, heading away down the street towards the Town Hall.

Wilf's hand tightened in Benbow's fur.

"Benbow," he murmured, "shall I go to Garracker, and tell him who I am?"

"Not now, Wilf. He's angry."

"No, he's not." Indeed, Garracker seemed to have already forgotten Dowie. He was giving directions to the men who had climbed down from the other cabs, and who were now unloading rolls of wire, posts and toolboxes from the truck. Under Garracker's instructions, they began to hammer posts into the ground.

Some of the braver children edged closer. The men eyed them with distrust, and cast nervous glances at their dogs.

“I’m going to talk to Garracker,” said Wilf, straightening up. His fists clenched and unclenched as he drew a long breath. Although Benbow could not smell his fear through the sharp yellow camouflage of his antiseptic, he knew Wilf was afraid.

“No, Wilf!” he said emphatically.

“No, Wilf!” echoed Natty in alarm.

“Stay here, Wilf,” pleaded Daffodil, with a shiver.

McCool strolled up, eased his shaggy back under Wilf’s hand, and leant against his leg. “Do what you have to, Wilf,” he said. “I’ll come too.”

“All right,” said Wilf. With McCool beside him, he walked through the throng of City dogs, past the wary men, and up to Garracker.

Garracker took no more notice of him than Dowie had. He was busy trying to get something out of the back of the truck. Something that didn’t want to come.

Something hidden under the tarpaulin, that Garracker coaxed, and wheedled, and chanted to in a low, sing-song voice; and finally, climbed in after, and dragged out.

Slane.

Chapter Twenty-five

The Return of Slane

“Get that fence up!” roared Garracker at his workmen. “Quickly! Stop gawping at him and get on with it, before he tries to run away. What are you waiting for?”

The men stopped staring, and hastily began to stretch wire netting between the posts, fencing Slane in from the watching crowd.

But Slane had no intention of trying to escape that way. He took one look at the mob of panting dogs and pointing children, and then bolted, with high-pitched cries, in the opposite direction. He shot past the ruins of the stranded tank, and darting between statues, disappeared from sight in the Museum’s gloomy interior. Benbow heard his distant wailing, like a lost seagull.

“Don’t follow him!” Garracker shouted to his men, who looked relieved. None of them had shown any sign of wanting to go after him.

Instead, Garracker himself hurried in pursuit of Slane, vanishing into the broken shadows of the Museum; and Wilf slipped past the bewildered workmen to run after them both.

“Come back, Wilf!” cried Natty, distraught. “Oh, Benbow, we’ve got to stop him!”

Benbow agreed with her. This wasn’t the time for Garracker to meet his latest clone. So together they pushed through the crowd: the workmen fell back at the sight of the police badge, and let them pass into the Museum.

They did not need to go far to find Slane. Garracker had managed to corner him against a cabinet. The boy was crouching on his haunches, rocking to and fro, while Garracker knelt beside him. When he reached out a hand, Slane spat, snapping his teeth, and lashed out wildly with both arms.

Garracker sat back on his heels. There were blue shadows under his eyes, like bruises. Wilf stood at a distance, watching.

“Can we help?” asked Benbow unwillingly.

“No,” muttered Garracker. “He’s already destroyed a whole floor of Prospect Towers. He won’t understand me. He won’t talk. I did think, just now and then, that... but it’s no good. He can’t speak. Breaks things. Won’t eat anything but rat. Doesn’t eat that half the time. Throws it around.”

Benbow studied Slane, who was beating his head against the cabinet behind him. His clothes were new and smart. His hair was neatly cut, except where a jagged slice implied that the barber had abandoned the job in a hurry. His face was clean.

Devoid of dirt, his resemblance to Dowie was obvious – but he did not have Dowie’s expression of cunning, triumphant calculation. He had no expression at all that Benbow could read.

“Thought he might be happier here,” said Garracker, who by contrast was unshaven and dishevelled. “Thought he might be pining. Thought seeing his old haunts might help. Wonder where he slept. Slane. Slane boy.” He spoke in a quiet, exhausted monotone, which Slane ignored.

Wilf looked at them inscrutably with his one good eye. Then he walked up to squat at Slane’s other side.

“Go away,” said Garracker tiredly. But Slane, instead of spitting at Wilf, reached out a hand to touch his vivid hair. He made a noise in his throat.

“You like it?” asked Wilf. He carefully removed the wig, and held it out to Slane.

Slane took it slowly. He turned it over, sniffed and tasted it, then put it on his head.

“Hair,” said Wilf. “Hair.”

Slane made a noise that wasn’t hair, but wasn’t entirely different. He widened his eyes and showed all his teeth.

“He likes it,” whispered Natty in distress. Slane took the wig off, put it on Wilf’s head, snatched it back and cuddled it.

“He should have a dog,” said Wilf. “Cats aren’t good for him.”

Garracker stared at Wilf. “Do you know Slane?” he asked hoarsely.

Wilf hesitated. “I did once.”

“I’ve seen you before. Who are you?”

“You’ve seen him at the Station,” Benbow supplied swiftly. “He lives there.”

“That’s it...” Garracker frowned at the fiery hair clutched in Slane’s hand. “I’ll buy you another wig. He’s keeping this one.”

“All right,” said Wilf. But Natty tiptoed up and slipped her ragged woollen hat on to his naked head.

“Ay!” said Slane, pointing at the hat.

Wilf shook his head. “No. Mine.” Slane accepted it, lost interest. Wilf took his limp hand. “Sleep,” he said. Putting his head on one side, he closed his eye and let his mouth fall open. He snored. Slane cackled, and then snored too.

“Sleep?” repeated Wilf. “Where do you sleep?” He pulled Slane to his feet.

“Look out!” cried Garracker. For Slane immediately began to run with long, jerky strides, Wilf clinging to his arm.

“After them!” panted Garracker.

Diving deeper into the Museum, Slane swerved round broken cabinets and pillars until he reached the remains of a staircase that climbed half-way to nowhere. Beneath it was a narrow alcove stuffed with rags. In a long, pitted stone trough, charred pages fluttered blackly.

“That’s a coffin!” said Garracker, aghast.

“It’s his fire-place,” said Wilf. “Those rags are his bed.”

Fumbling in the pile of rags, Slane pulled out a box of matches.

“No,” said Garracker. “Give them here!”

But Slane had already struck one, and held it to the paper in the old stone coffin. He produced a book from underneath the rags and carefully tore out pages, feeding them to the fire. Then he sat back and stared at the flames. His face eased. His limbs relaxed, and he sighed.

“He likes the fire,” said Natty softly.

“Fire is his mother. It’s his friend,” said Wilf, half to himself. “It warms him. It plays with him. It talks to him. He needs fire.”

“He needs to be watched,” said Benbow.

“He will be. Fire and a watcher: he shall have them both,” said Garracker. His voice was ragged but determined. “I’ll rebuild the Museum, I’ll get it cleaned out, make it fit to live in. He’s going to stay here.”

“Here?”

“Here, in his home. I’ll build him a schoolroom. I want him to speak. I’m going to employ special teachers. I’ve found one already – she said he should be in the company of children. Find me some children, Benbow.”

“The children aren’t–” Benbow began, but Wilf forestalled him.

“I could be one,” he said.

“Yes. Yes, I want *you*. He likes *you*,” said Garracker. “Find me some more. You can share his schooling. I’ll build rooms for you too, a dormitory, bathrooms. I’ll feed you, I’ll clothe you, whatever you need. I’ll get doctors in to keep him healthy, and you too, and the other children that you find for me. I want you to stay with Slane.”

Wilf gazed at Slane, who gazed into the fire, calm and rapt.

“He might like water,” said Wilf reflectively. “He might like a pool, and a fountain.”

“We’ll build it,” said Garracker. “We’ll pipe in clean water. Will you stay with him? I’ll make a playroom. I’m going to bring him toys, games. You can share those too.”

“Don’t overdo them,” said Wilf. “Not too many toys. Nothing noisy just yet. Get him a big quilt he can hide under. And balls and giant boxes he can play with. Things he can climb into. And a *dog*. He really does need a dog.”

Garracker glanced at Benbow. “Perhaps one of—”

“No,” said Benbow.

“I’ll find one,” said Wilf. “I’ll find one he’ll like, who’ll like him.”

“Yes,” said Garracker humbly. “Will you stay here with Slane? I want to hear him talk. I need to see him smile. Will you stay with him? Please. Whoever you are.”

“Oh, Wilf!” breathed Natty, stricken.

Wilf looked at her, and then at Garracker, and finally at Slane’s blank, uncomprehending face.

“All right,” said Wilf. “I’ll stay.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Evening

Far out in the City, bloodhounds were baying faintly as they started on their night hunt after rats. Inside the Station, Benbow had finished his work for the day. His clones were not yet back from patrol, so he was enjoying a moment’s peace beside the stove.

He chewed on a mutton-bone, donated by Dowie, and probably stolen. For once, Benbow didn’t care.

“That bone smells revolting,” remarked Tonto. He looked longingly at Benbow’s basket. “You can share my last tin of Slinky puss, if you let me sleep in your basket again.”

“No deal,” rumbled Benbow.

“Selfish mutt,” said Tonto. “No offence.”

“None taken,” said Benbow contentedly. He gnawed the bone a little longer, and then raised his head to ask Elise, who lay dozing by the stove, “How long do you think it’ll last?”

She opened her eyes. “This peace? Garracker’s goodwill?” She yawned. “Who can say?”

“I give it a month at most.”

A coal shifted, rustling, in the stove.

“I’m not so sure,” mused Elise. “It could last longer, if Slane doesn’t break Garracker’s heart...”

“Does he have one?”

“Oh yes,” said Elise. “Everyone does. He’s only just discovered his. Must be a bit of a shock, after all these years.” She gazed into the fire; its red coals glowed in her eyes. “I think he loves Slane – loves him hopelessly, despairingly.”

“*Garracker?*”

“It happens. It’s called parenthood.” Elise stretched and sighed. “Who knows? Because of Slane, he may come to value Wilf. Maybe he’ll learn that City children aren’t disposable. Perhaps, in time, he may even accept Dowie.” Her head dropped back wearily on to her paws.

Benbow was sceptical. A new home in the City might be possible, after all, for Slane and Wilf and a few others; but he had no faith in Garracker’s constancy. “I don’t see it,” he said.

Elise shrugged. “Who can look into the future? We’re all walking in the dark. You just do the best you can. Whatever happens, I won’t be part of it.”

Benbow felt a chill run through his belly. “Why not? Elise, where—”

“I’m retiring,” said Elise. “I’ve got a place in kennels ear-marked, by a farm, with willow trees, a pond. No more City streets. You’ll take over here, of course, Benbow.”

“Me?” said Benbow, shocked. “No, I can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Of course he can’t,” sniffed Tonto. “Ridiculous idea. The service needs young blood. And a full complement of legs.”

“For once, he’s right,” admitted Benbow. “I could do it for a while, but in the long term the Police Station needs someone younger, someone fit and fast, to be in charge...”

“Like one of your clones?” Elise suggested.

“A clone?”

“Why not? You could run the Station to begin with, and train him up in the meantime. In a couple of years, I think he’d make a good chief.”

Benbow’s mouth fell open. Elise sounded as if she’d worked it out long since.

“They’re all good dogs,” he said, wondering, “but which one do you—”

He was interrupted by doors banging loudly. Many paws thudded up the stairs, and McCool, Araby and Daffodil burst in. With them was a small, clumsy mongrel with a spaniel’s floppy ears and the alert eyes of a terrier. It fell over its own feet, got up again and stared at Benbow’s mutton bone as if it was trying to memorise it.

“This is Douglas,” said Wilf, coming in behind them. “I think he’ll do for Slane.”

“He wants to be with a boy,” explained McCool, “and he doesn’t mind who.”

“He’s not very clever, but he’s quite sensible,” said Wilf. “Doesn’t scare easily. Hates cats.”

At this point, Douglas switched his attention to Tonto, and gazed at him with the same hungry concentration he’d given to the bone. Tonto bristled, and slunk out of the room.

“Carlo and Tomahawk are downstairs in the kitchen, eating all our bacon,” said Araby. “Tomahawk’s offered to be one of the children who’ll live with Slane. It’s worth a try. She’s tough enough. Slane won’t be easy to live with.”

“He won’t be that bad,” said Wilf.

“Carlo too?” asked Elise.

“If we can persuade him,” said Araby. “He’s finding it hard back in the City, with that injured leg. But Garracker’s getting a doctor in... I thought Carlo might go back to the Recycler, but he’s too proud.”

“Anyway, she’s got Nile now,” McCool added. “Weird choice, but it seems to work. And it means there are no more Western Warriors. Since Nile went to the Recycler, they’ve all hung up their helmets.”

“So she’s still the caretaker,” said Daffodil. “I mean, she’s still taking care of– I mean – I don’t know what I mean.”

“I do,” said Araby. “She cares for a child or two, for a year or two. She does what she can.”

“Hmph!” said Benbow. “Wilf, why don’t you show Douglas the kitchen and give him something to eat? You can take him over to the Museum tomorrow and introduce him to Slane.”

“No, we’re going this evening,” said Wilf firmly. “I promised Slane. Come on, Douglas! Natty’s got some nice fresh rat downstairs for you.”

Douglas lifted an eager ear – which promptly fell over one eye – and trotted out obediently after Wilf. The other dogs stayed behind, flopping thankfully around the stove.

“Dowie’s in a good mood again,” said Araby. “I’m suspicious. I think he’s planning ways to annoy Garracker. Or it might just be because he’s started to grow beans on the Town Hall roof. I’m not sure, but I’ll find out.”

Benbow looked at Elise.

“Araby,” he said. She nodded.

“What?” said Araby. “I think he’s got chickens too, only he’s not letting on. Trugg told me about them – a load of squawking stupid birds that don’t know how to fly, she said, taking up half the ballroom.”

“Angel’s gone,” put in McCool. “Saw her crossing the northern Fringes, on her own. She said she had plans. She looked happy.” McCool sounded wistful. “How old do you have to be to train for undercover work?”

“One,” said Benbow. “Not long now.”

Daffodil said, “I’m worried about Natty.”

“Why?”

“She’s pining for Wilf. She can see him slipping away from her and she doesn’t want him to go.”

“Gotta take his own road,” said McCool.

“Wilf’s growing up,” said Elise, “whether she likes it or not.”

“Things change,” said Benbow. “All the time.”

“Yes, but what about Natty?” pleaded Daffodil.

“There are lots of children in the City who need looking after,” said Araby. “She’ll find another, or another will find her.”

“But it’s Wilf she wants now!”

“Then you be her companion for a while,” said Benbow. “Give her support. Make her feel needed. You’re good at that, Daff.”

“Am I?” said Daffodil eagerly. “Am I, actually?” His tail began to wag.

Araby looked at McCool and shook his head. “How can he be our identical twin?”

“He’s not,” said McCool. “We’re all just brothers. Shove over, bro, you’re blocking the stove.”

The five dogs snuggled closer to each other and the fire, yawned and dozed.

So is this parenthood? thought Benbow drowsily. I’m not a father, but I’m glad to have these pups around me. We seem to have become a family. A happy family, for now.

“I expect it’ll all be different tomorrow,” he murmured to Elise’s back.

“Something else will go wrong. The pigs will escape from the Town Hall. Slane will flood the Museum with his new fountain. Dowie will try to blow up Prospect Towers... but I don’t care.”

And he laid his head down by his plastic paw; and, lulled by the breathing of his brothers at his side, and the distant baying of his cousins far across the City, Benbow slept.

THE END

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