



CHAPTER 1

A KNIFE THROUGH WATER

Above an endless ocean, in a place where thoughts faded like the setting sun, there was a far-reaching mist as grey as death's shadow. In the depths below, no fish swam, or whales vented, and the seabed remained desolate and hushed as a lost memory.

The immense cloud folded and billowed soundlessly, and within the inky gloom, on a craggy island, something waited. They knew that the flash and snarl of sky-burn was coming. They could feel it in the prickle of their leathery skin, and every cell of their body could sense the electrical charge building.

The darkness was broken by a radiant blaze and, in the blink of an eye, they took flight.

Arthur and Maudie Brightstorm were both unusual yet usual children. For one thing they had no parents and their family home had been taken from them unfairly, yet they had each other and had found an unlikely family in the crew of a sky-ship. For another, at thirteen years old they had travelled to the furthest point humans had ever been in the Wide, frozen South Polaris, driven by the desire to find the truth and clear their family name.

Maudie was pragmatic and considered – it was one of the things that made her an exceptional young engineer – while Arthur, although a bright, bookish boy, had a history of acting before thinking things through. At times this meant that the twins would find themselves in risky situations, such as now as they skulked through the streets of Lontown in pursuit of a tall figure who slipped through the night like a knife in water.

Arthur had caught sight of him not ten minutes before as he'd stared thoughtfully out of his bedroom window at the midnight-quiet Archangel Street. The

man had come from the south end and had hurried north, looking around nervously and fumbling with something small in his hands. Finding his manner suspicious, Arthur had resolved to follow and find out what this particular man was doing out so late. Maudie went along, mostly to stop Arthur from being too reckless.

Their quarry stopped and looked over his shoulder.

Maudie pulled Arthur to a standstill beside a tall wall. "What's he up to?" she whispered.

They watched as the figure turned before a grand, white-stone house, perfectly symmetrical in its arched windows and pillars, then ascended marble steps that glistened in the night like polished bone.

Arthur squinted into the darkness and murmured, "Who lives there?"

"I'm not a walking Lontown address book, Arty."

"I was just thinking out loud. I mean, it's Montague Street, so it's surely someone important."

Their muscles became rigid as the man, lit by a street pitch-lamp, turned to look over his shoulder again and scanned the street. They pushed their bodies against the bricks, hearts thudding.

“This was a bad idea,” Arthur whispered.

“*Your* bad idea. It was *you* who woke *me* up.”

“You didn’t need much persuading; your feet were in your shoes before I could even find mine!” he hissed.

The figure they were pursuing was Smethwyck, devoted assistant of Eudora Vane – the eminent explorer and the woman who had killed their father.

But they were far enough away, and well hidden in shadow, so Smethwyck looked away and fumbled with the object he was holding, cursing as one of his sleeves became momentarily hooked on it.

“Unnecessarily flouncy,” Arthur whispered.

Maudie stifled a snigger and strained to see what it might be. “It looks like some sort of lock pick.”

There was a *clonk*, then the door opened. After a brief look over his shoulder, Smethwyck disappeared inside.

“He’s broken in. Come on, let’s get a bit nearer,” said Arthur.

They rushed across the street to stand behind a laurel hedge close to the door.

After several minutes, Smethwyck reappeared grasping a bundle of what appeared to be books. He

clicked the door shut, glanced around, then headed back down the street.

When he was a safe distance ahead, Arthur and Maudie moved from behind the hedge and followed him through several streets until he turned and crept up the path of a large, detached house.

Arthur whispered, "Come on, let's get across the lawn. There's a light on."

Maudie nodded. There was only a thin sliver of moon that evening, so she felt confident they wouldn't be seen.

They jumped the ornate railing and hurried towards the great house like a pair of foxes scurrying in the night. They stopped behind a voluminous rose bush, just short of the huge windows that were open to the warm night air, snow-white drapes blowing softly outwards in the breeze. The glow of pitch-lamps inside lit the grass with an orange glow.

The room was sumptuously decorated with elaborate gilded mirrors, plump, kingfisher-blue and ruby-red cushions, gold cornices, and lush plants, the likes of which Arthur noted were not from anywhere near Lontown.

“Do you think that chandelier is crystal and diamond?” he whispered.

“And I’m betting that’s real gold. The luxury is actually hurting my eyes, Arty.”

A man they didn’t recognize walked to the fireplace, looked at his pocket watch, then adjusted the mantel clock. On the sideboard beside him, although it was difficult to see clearly from the distance, there appeared to be photographs of individuals in various locations: mountain-tops, snowy plains, jungles – and one rather horrible picture of a man holding up the head of a dead animal, possibly a North Polaris bear, Arthur guessed. When the man had finished with the clock, he turned and stood in thought. There was something familiar about him, but Arthur couldn’t place what it was. He was elderly with a pin-sharp look about his eyes, white hair cropped short. The wrinkles of age concentrated around his eyes and the bridge of his nose as though formed by many years of very careful and calculated thought. He was immaculately dressed in a double-breasted suit, with diamond cufflinks and a pale pink shirt. One hand held a bejewelled cane, although he appeared to have no weight bearing on it, and the

other hand was tucked into his jacket pocket, the thumb resting outside. His chin was slightly tilted upwards. He oozed superiority.

Then the door opened, and Eudora Vane walked into the room with the force of a strong gust of wind, looked at the clock, then dropped into a chair.

The twins exchanged a glance, something like a roll of the eyes mixed with horror, as they both recognized the similarity.

Maudie whispered, "He *must* be her father."

"You know what that means." Arthur took a breath. "He's our . . . *grandfather*."

They had no memory of any of their grandparents. On the Brightstorm side, their grandfather had died many years before they were born, and their grandmother had passed when they were very young, although in the photographs they'd seen their Brightstorm grandfather had their father's kindly eyes, their grandmother his infectious smile. Eudora Vane, they learned not long ago, was their mother's sister.

"Waiting is tedious," Eudora huffed.

"For goodness' sake, stop slouching." Her father's voice was as trimmed and precise as his appearance.

“There’s no one here,” she complained, but sat up straighter, nonetheless.

“Forget yourself within your own four walls and forget your standing in society. It’s a slippery slope, especially in these times . . . as well you know.”

Eudora narrowed her eyes. “Do you really believe that he was on to something? The tiresome Eastern Isles are only good for one thing and that’s the pomerian puffback and. . .” She paused and shrugged. “The Eastern Isles are not good for anything now.”

Arthur and Maudie glanced at each other. This probably had something to do with Ermitage Wigglesworth. Notable explorer and the author of numerous books on exploration, Wigglesworth had gone missing in the Eastern Isles. They’d seen it reported in the *Lontown Chronicle* when they’d returned from South Polaris. The crew they belonged to, the Culpepper crew, was planning to set off in search of him next week. There wasn’t much reward money, it would barely cover their costs, but the call to adventure was too irresistible for all of them.

Eudora’s father strolled towards her. “I’ve no doubt he was on to something. Wigglesworth can’t help but put his snivelling nose into everyone’s

business. He was the most annoying lickspittle at universitas, always snooping and listening in on conversations, jotting things incessantly in his journals. He was useful if you wanted to know something, but if he hadn't been born into sovereigns, I would've squashed him like a fly – in fact, I think I did on a few occasions.” He stared into space as though reliving a memory, a small grin on his lips. “Speaking of flies. . .”

Footsteps echoed loudly beyond the door. Smethwyck stepped inside and dipped his head to each of them. “Thaddeus. Eudora.”

“You took your time,” said Eudora bluntly.

“There's something different about Eudora, but I can't put my finger on it,” Arthur said, his voice almost silent.

Smethwyck put the pile of books he'd taken from Montague Street on the table.

Without a word of thanks, Eudora and Thaddeus began eagerly looking through them.

Arthur leant in towards Maudie and whispered, “From their conversation just now, I think we can assume it was Wigglesworth's house he broke into. I wish we could see what's in the books.”

“It must be good, because that grin on Eudora’s face is getting bigger by the second.”

Eudora and Thaddeus continued keenly flipping pages and exchanging narrow-eyed looks and raised eyebrows while Smethwyck stood on the outside like an excluded child.

Then Arthur realized what was different. “Where’s that vile insect of hers? Miptera.”

Maudie squinted. “Probably out bullying all the smaller insects.”

At that moment, they both heard the *clack-clack* of mandibles and the furious flicker of wings. Eyes suddenly wide, they looked down as a gust of wind blew the curtain to reveal the huge silver insect sitting on the window ledge looking their way.

“Clanking cogs – run, Arty!” Maudie hissed.

But before they could kick their legs into action, Miptera flickered her wings ferociously and sped in their direction.

The twins dropped and Miptera missed, flying into the rose bush. They both leapt up then pelted across the grass away from the house. They couldn’t hear Miptera chasing them, so they caught their breath behind a tree for a moment then risked

a look back. As they did, Miptera zoomed back inside through the open window, knocking it in her urgency with a sound like a glass being hit by a metal spoon. She flew hectically towards Eudora, but before she reached her, she was batted away by the swift hand of Thaddeus Vane.

“Can’t you get yourself a proper sapient? That creature is a disgrace.”

Eudora flinched but didn’t move to pick Miptera up. She stood, and her gaze moved to the garden. “Something’s made her uneasy.”

The twins held their breath as though somehow it might make them invisible. But then Thaddeus suddenly called Eudora excitedly, pointing at one of the books, and she hurried back obediently.

Arthur and Maudie saw their chance and rushed away into the night.

On the doorstep of four Archangel Street, Welby took his watch from his dressing-gown pocket, tutted and raised his large V-shaped eyebrows at Arthur and Maudie.

“We were putting the rubbish out?” Arthur suggested.

Maudie pursed her lips to contain what threatened to be a smirk at Arthur's feeble excuse.

Welby's eyebrows edged up another centimetre. "How very thoughtful of you. Perhaps we can make this your responsibility henceforth, as you are so very eager?"

"Actually, Parthena wanted a midnight stroll," he tried again. Parthena was their sapient hawk, a hyper-intelligent creature of the Wide with the ability to understand humans.

Welby gave an exaggerated yawn. "Parthena is in the dining room with Queenie. Next?"

Teasing Welby had become one of Arthur's favourite occupations since moving into four Archangel Street. But before he could try another silly excuse, Maudie pulled him along the staircase and said, "Sorry we're home late. We'd better get to bed."

Welby shook his head and shuffled back towards his downstairs bedroom. "You'll be updating Harriet in the morning then," he called over his shoulder.

Once upstairs, Maudie said, "Arty, you shouldn't joke too much. Remember, he's got moves!"

They both grinned. It was true. They'd been totally amazed in the sand dunes near the Citadel on their expedition south when they'd been ambushed. Welby had displayed quite an array of martial-art moves.

"He probably had training at whichever high-class Uptown school he attended," Arthur said, narrowing his eyes. "Perhaps he had a private defence tutor," he added in a Welby well-to-do way and made several slice movements with his hand. He liked Welby, but Welby could also be a bit judging of them. Actually, now Arthur thought of it, it was mostly of him, not Maudie. Welby liked ingenuity, and Maudie always had a tool in her hand of one kind or another, while Arthur often had what Welby referred to as "a glazed look".

They both laughed and sat on their beds.

"He probably still has lessons; he's been out every morning since we got back from the last expedition. I bet that's where he goes." Arthur flopped back on to his pillow. "At least we know whose house Smethwyck broke into. I wonder what was in the books?"

"Before you suggest it, I don't fancy going back to find out. Thaddeus Vane didn't seem particularly

welcoming.” Maudie wrinkled her nose. “I actually felt a bit sorry for Miptera.”

“Sorry for the creature that made us crash in the Everlasting Forest?”

“Well . . . maybe not. I can still hear the splinter of wood.” She shivered.

“Let’s see what Harriet thinks in the morning.”