

· CHAPTER ONE ·

REUNION

It was midday and Undertown was bustling. Beneath the pall of filthy mist which hovered over the town, fuzzing the rooftops and dissolving the sun, its narrow streets and alleyways were alive with feverish activity.

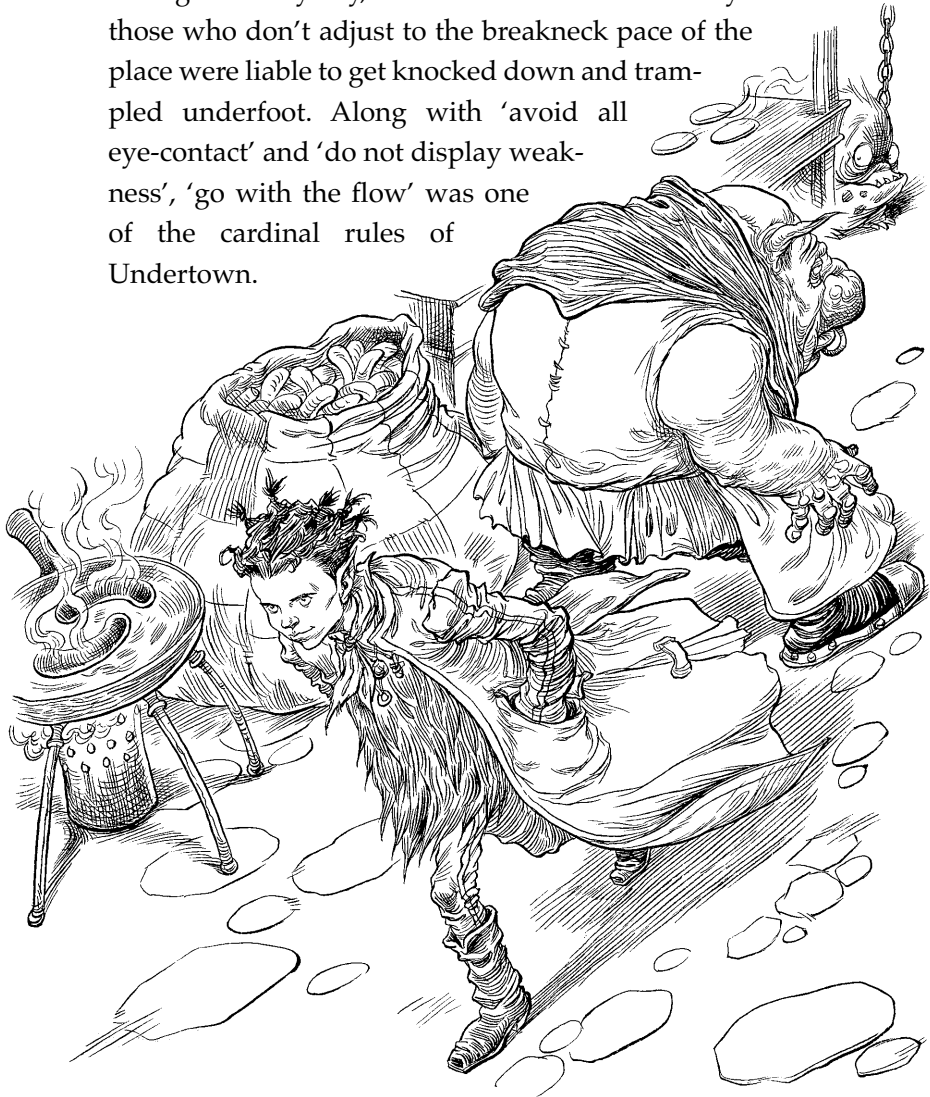
There was ill-tempered haggling and bartering; buskers played music, barrow-boys called out unmissable bargains, beggars made their pitiful demands from dark, shadowy corners – though there were few who paused to place coins in their hats. Rushing this way and that, everyone was far too wrapped up in their own concerns to spare a thought for anyone else.

Getting from a to b as quickly as possible, being first to nail a deal, obtaining the best price while undercutting your competitors – *that* was what succeeding in Undertown was all about. You needed nerves of steel and eyes in the back of your head to survive; you had to

learn to smile even as you were stabbing someone else in the back. It was a rough life, a tough life, a ruthless life.

It was an *exhilarating* life.

Twig hurried up from the boom-docks and through the market-place – not because he was in any particular hurry himself, but because the frenzied atmosphere was contagious. Anyway, he had learned the hard way that those who don't adjust to the breakneck pace of the place were liable to get knocked down and trampled underfoot. Along with 'avoid all eye-contact' and 'do not display weakness', 'go with the flow' was one of the cardinal rules of Undertown.



Twig was feeling uncomfortably hot. The sun was at its highest. Despite being obscured by the choking, foul-tasting smoke from the metal foundries, it beat down ferociously. There was no wind and, as Twig dodged his way past the shops, stands and stalls, a bewildering mix of smells assaulted his nostrils. Stale woodale, ripe cheeses, burned milk and boiling glue, roasting pine-coffee and sizzling tilder sausages . . .

The spicy aroma of the sausages took Twig back, as it always did – back to his childhood. Every Wodgiss Night, in the woodtroll village where he had been brought up, the adults would feast on the traditional tilder sausage soup. How long ago that now seemed, and how far away! Life then had been so different: self-contained, ordered, unhurried. Twig smiled to himself. He could never return to that life. Not now. Not for all the trees in the Deepwoods.

As he continued across the market-place, the mouth-watering aroma of the sausages grew fainter and was replaced with a different smell – a smell which triggered a different set of memories altogether. It was the unmistakable scent of freshly tanned leather. Twig stopped and looked round.

A tall individual with the blood-red skin and crimson hair of a slaughterer was standing by a wall. Hanging round his neck was a wooden tray overflowing with the leather talismans and amulets on thongs which he was selling – or rather *trying* to sell.

‘Lucky charms!’ he cried. ‘Get your lucky charms here!’

No-one was paying him any heed, and when he went to tie the charms around the necks of the passers-by each attempt was greeted with an irritated shake of the head as the goblin or troll or whatever hurried past.

Twig watched him sadly. The slaughterer – like so many of the Deepwoods folk who had listened to rumours that the streets of Undertown were paved with gold – was finding the reality quite different. With a sigh, he turned and was about to move on when, at that moment, a particularly mean-looking cloddertrog in tattered clothes and heavy boots brushed past him.

‘Lucky charm?’ the slaughterer said cheerily and stepped forwards, leather thong at the ready.

‘Keep your murderous red hands off me!’ the cloddertrog roared and shoved the outstretched arms savagely away.

The slaughterer spun round and crashed to the ground. The lucky charms went everywhere.



As the cloddertrog stomped off, cursing under his breath, Twig hurried over to the slaughterer. 'Are you all right?' he asked, reaching down to help him to his feet.

The slaughterer rolled over and blinked up at him. 'Blooming rudeness,' he complained. 'I don't know!' He looked away and began gathering up the charms and returning them to the tray. 'All I'm trying to do is scratch an honest living.'

'It can't be easy,' said Twig sympathetically. 'So far away from your Deepwoods home.'

Twig knew the slaughterers well. He had once stayed with them in their forest village, and to this day, he still wore the hammelhornskin waistcoat they had given him. The slaughterer looked up. Twig touched his forehead in greeting and reached down with his hand once again.

This time, with the last of the charms back in place, the slaughterer took a hold and pulled himself up. He touched his own forehead. 'I am Tendon,' he said. 'And thank you for stopping to see whether I was all right. Most folk round here wouldn't give you the time of day.' He sniffed. 'I don't suppose . . .' He checked himself.

'What?' said Twig.

The slaughterer shrugged. 'I was just wondering whether *you* might care to buy one of my lucky charms.' And Twig smiled to himself as, unbidden, the slaughterer selected one of the leather talismans and held it out. 'How about this one? It's extremely potent.'

Twig looked at the intricate spiral tooled into the deep-red leather. He knew that, for the slaughterers, the

individual designs on the charms each had its own significance.

'Those who wear this charm,' the slaughterer went on as he tied the thong around Twig's neck, 'shall be freed from fear of the known.'

'Shouldn't that be the *unknown*?' said Twig.

The slaughterer snorted. 'Fear of the unknown is for the foolish and weak,' he said. 'I

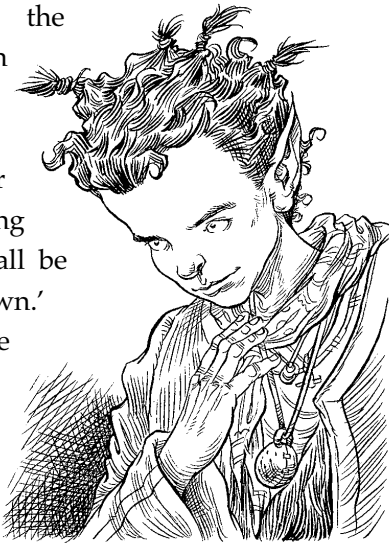
had not taken you for such a one. No,' he added, 'for my money, what is known is generally far more frightening. And speaking of money, that'll be six quarters.' Twig reached into his pockets. 'Unless,' the slaughterer added in a conspiratorial whisper, 'you've got any phraxdust.' He looked at the silver ball-shaped medallion hanging round Twig's neck. 'A speck would do.'

'Sorry,' said Twig, dropping coins into waiting blood-red palm. 'I have none to spare.'

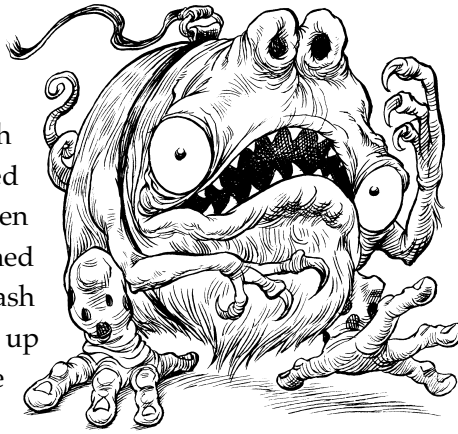
The slaughterer shrugged with resignation. 'Just a thought,' he muttered.

With the latest charm nestling amongst the others he had accumulated over the years, Twig continued on his way through the labyrinth of tiny winding alleyways.

He was passing a pet shop – heavy with the odour of damp straw and hot fur – when all at once, a small



vicious-looking creature rushed towards him, teeth bared. Twig started back nervously, then laughed as it reached the end of its leash and began leaping up and down on the spot, grunting



excitedly. It was a prowlgrin cub, and it wanted to play.

‘Hello, boy,’ he said, crouching down and rubbing the frolicsome creature beneath its hairy chin. The prowlgrin gurgled with pleasure and rolled over onto its back. ‘You big softie,’ said Twig. He knew it wouldn’t last. Fully-grown prowlgrins were both beasts of burden and the favoured guardbeasts of those with anything worth guarding.

‘Hey!’ came a rasping, yet insistent whisper. ‘What are you wasting your time with that bag of leechfleas for? Come over here.’

Twig looked round. Besides the prowlgrin, the front of the ramshackle shop had countless other creatures on display: furry, feathered and scaled, as well as some of the lesser trolls and goblins which were chained to the walls. There wasn’t one of them that looked as if it had just spoken.

‘Up here, Twig,’ the voice came again, more urgently now. A shiver ran up and down Twig’s spine. Whatever *had* spoken also knew him. ‘Over *here!*’



Twig looked up, and gasped. 'Caterbird!' he said.

'The very same,' the caterbird whispered, and shifted round awkwardly on its perch to face him. 'Greetings.'

'Greetings,' said Twig. 'But . . .'

'Keep your voice down,' the caterbird hissed, and its right eye swivelled round to the entrance of the shop. 'I don't want Flabsweat to know I can talk.'

Twig nodded, and swallowed away the lump in his throat. How had so noble a creature ended up in such squalid surroundings? The caterbird that had watched over Twig ever since he had been present at its hatching – who had dared to capture it? And why had it been placed in a cage barely larger than the poor creature itself so that it had to squat down on its perch, with its magnificent horned beak sticking out through the bars, unable to straighten up, unable to flap its wings?

'I'll soon have you out of there,' said Twig, pulling his knife from his belt. He thrust the thin blade into the keyhole of the padlock, and began jiggling it around feverishly.

'Hurry,' urged the caterbird. 'And for Sky's sake, don't let Flabsweat see what you're up to.'

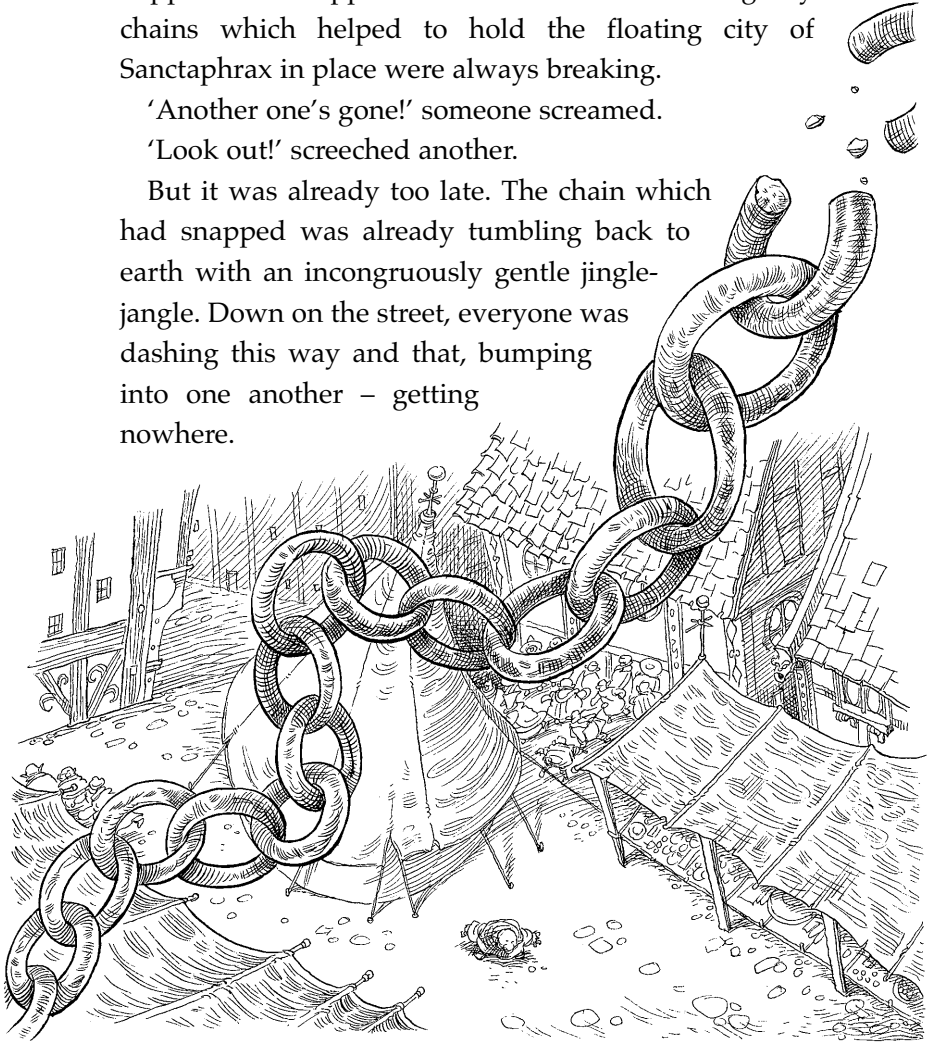
'Any second now...' Twig muttered through clenched teeth. But the padlock remained stubbornly locked. 'If I can just ...'

At that moment, the air suddenly resounded with a deafening CRACK! Twig immediately stopped what he was doing and spun round in alarm. He knew what had happened. It happened all the time. The emergency chains which helped to hold the floating city of Sanctaphrax in place were always breaking.

'Another one's gone!' someone screamed.

'Look out!' screeched another.

But it was already too late. The chain which had snapped was already tumbling back to earth with an incongruously gentle jingle-jangle. Down on the street, everyone was dashing this way and that, bumping into one another – getting nowhere.



The chain crashed down. A scream went up. Then silence.

As the dust settled, Twig surveyed the scene. The roof of the ironmonger's opposite had been stoved in. Two stalls were flattened. And there on the street lay an unfortunate creature, crushed to death by the weight of the falling metal.



Twig stared at the tattered clothes and familiar heavy boots. It was the cloddertrog. Perhaps you should have listened to the slaughterer after all, he thought, and fingered the amulet at his neck. Now it was too late. For the cloddertrog, luck had run out.

‘Ah, me,’ he heard the caterbird sigh. ‘The situation is reaching crisis point, and that’s a fact.’

‘What do you mean?’ Twig asked.

‘It’s a long story,’ he said slowly. ‘And . . .’ He paused.

‘What?’ said Twig.

The caterbird remained silent. It swivelled one eye meaningfully round towards the entrance of the shop.

‘Oy!’ came a gruff voice. ‘Are you intending to buy that bird, or what?’ Sliding the knife up his sleeve as he did so, Twig turned. He was confronted by a heavy-set character who was standing with his legs apart and his hands on his hips.

‘I . . . I just dodged in here when the chain broke,’ he said.

‘Hmm,’ said Flabsweat, looking round at the damage that had been caused. ‘A bad business it is, all this chain-breaking. And all for that bunch of so-called academics. What good do they ever do us? Parasites, the lot of them. You know what? If it was up to me, I’d cut *all* the chains and let Sanctaphrax fly off into open sky. And good riddance!’ he added bitterly, as he patted his glistening head with a dirty handkerchief.

Twig was speechless. He’d never heard anyone talk ill of the academics of the floating city before.

‘Still,’ Flabsweat went on, ‘at least none of my property’s been damaged, eh? *This* time. Now, are you interested in that bird or not?’ he asked wheezily.

Twig glanced back at the bedraggled caterbird. ‘I was looking for a talker.’

Flabsweat chuckled mirthlessly. ‘Oh, you’ll get nothing out of that one,’ he said scornfully. ‘Thick, it is. Still, you’re welcome to try . . . I could let you have it for a very reasonable price.’ He turned abruptly. ‘I’m with another customer at the moment,’ he called back. ‘Give me a shout if you need any help.’

‘Thick, indeed!’ the caterbird exclaimed when Flabsweat had gone. ‘The cheek! The audacity!’ Its eye swivelled round and focused on Twig. ‘Well, don’t just stand there smirking,’ it snapped. ‘Get me out of here – while the coast is clear.’

‘No,’ said Twig.

The caterbird stared back at him, nonplussed. It cocked its head to one side – as far as the cage would allow. ‘No?’ it said.

‘No,’ Twig repeated. ‘I want to hear that “long story” first. “The situation is reaching crisis point”, that’s what you said. I want to know why. I want to know what’s happened.’

‘Let me out, and then I’ll tell you everything,’ said the caterbird.

‘No,’ said Twig for a third time. ‘I know you. You’ll fly off the moment I unlock the cage door, and then I won’t see you again till Sky knows when. Tell me this story first, and *then* I’ll set you free.’

‘Why, you insolent young whelp!’ the caterbird shouted angrily. ‘And after everything I’ve done for you!’

‘Keep your voice down,’ said Twig, looking round nervously at the doorway. ‘Flabsweat will hear you.’

The caterbird fell still. It closed its eyes. For a moment, Twig thought that it was going to remain stubbornly silent. He was on the point of relenting, when the caterbird’s beak moved.

‘It all started a long time ago,’ it began. ‘Twenty years, to be precise. When your father was little older than you are now.’

‘But that was before you were even born,’ said Twig.

‘Caterbirds share dreams, you know that,’ it replied. ‘What one knows, we all know. And if you’re going to interrupt the whole time . . .’

‘I’m not,’ said Twig. ‘Sorry. I won’t do it again.’

The caterbird humphed irritably. ‘Just see that you don’t.’