Opening extract from

Mortal Engines

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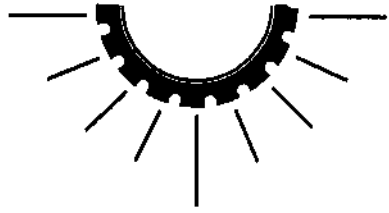
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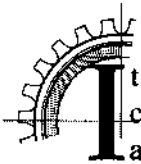
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PART ONE



1
THE HUNTING GROUND



It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea.

In happier times, London would never have bothered with such feeble prey. The great Traction City had once spent its days hunting far bigger towns than this, ranging north as far as the edges of the Ice Waste and south to the shores of the Mediterranean. But lately prey of any kind had started to grow scarce, and some of the larger cities had begun to look hungrily at London. For ten years now it had been hiding from them, skulking in a damp, mountainous, western district which the Guild of Historians said had once been the island of Britain. For ten years it had eaten nothing but tiny farming towns and static settlements in those wet hills. Now, at last, the Lord Mayor had decided that the time was right to take his city back over the land-bridge into the Great Hunting Ground.

It was barely halfway across when the look-outs on the high watch-towers spied the mining town, gnawing at the salt-flats twenty miles ahead. To the people of London it seemed like a sign from the gods, and even the Lord Mayor (who didn't believe in gods or signs) thought it was a good beginning to the journey east, and issued the order to give chase.

The mining town saw the danger and turned tail, but already the huge caterpillar tracks under London were starting to roll faster and faster. Soon the city was lumbering in hot pursuit, a moving mountain of metal which rose in seven tiers like the layers of a wedding cake, the

lower levels wreathed in engine-smoke, the villas of the rich gleaming white on the higher decks, and above it all the cross on top of St Paul's Cathedral glinting gold, two thousand feet above the ruined earth.



Tom was cleaning the exhibits in the London Museum's Natural History section when it started. He felt the tell-tale tremor in the metal floor, and looked up to find the model whales and dolphins that hung from the gallery roof swinging on their cables with soft creaking sounds.

He wasn't alarmed. He had lived in London for all of his fifteen years, and he was used to its movements. He knew that the city was changing course and putting on speed. A prickle of excitement ran through him, the ancient thrill of the hunt that all Londoners shared. There must be prey in sight! Dropping his brushes and dusters he pressed his hand to the wall, sensing the vibrations that came rippling up from the huge engine-rooms down in the Gut. Yes, there it was – the deep throb of the auxiliary motors cutting in, *boom, boom, boom*, like a big drum beating inside his bones.

The door at the far end of the gallery slammed open and Chudleigh Pomeroy came storming in, his toupee askew and his round face red with indignation. "What in the name of Quirke. . .?" he blustered, gawping at the gyrating whales, and the stuffed birds jigging and twitching in their cases as if they were shaking off their long captivity and getting ready to take wing again. "Apprentice Natsworthy! What's going on here?"

"It's a chase, sir," said Tom, wondering how the Deputy Head of the Guild of Historians had managed to

live aboard London for so long and still not recognize its heartbeat. "It must be something good," he explained. "They've brought all the auxiliaries on line. That hasn't happened for ages. Maybe London's luck has turned!"

"Pah!" snorted Pomeroy, wincing as the glass in the display cases started to whine and shiver in sympathy with the beat of the engines. Above his head the biggest of the models – a thing called a blue whale that had become extinct thousands of years ago – was jerking back and forth on its hawsers like a plank-swing. "That's as may be, Natsworthy," he said. "I just wish the Guild of Engineers would fit some decent shock-absorbers in this building. Some of these specimens are very delicate. It won't do. It won't do at all." He tugged a spotted handkerchief out of the folds of his long black robes and dabbed his face with it.

"Please, sir," asked Tom, "could I run down to the observation platforms and watch the chase, just for half an hour? It's been years since there was a really good one. . ."

Pomeroy looked shocked. "Certainly not, Apprentice! Look at all the dust that this wretched chase is shaking down! All the exhibits will have to be cleaned again and checked for damage."

"Oh, but that's not fair!" cried Tom. "I've just dusted this whole gallery!"

He knew at once that he had made a mistake. Old Chudleigh Pomeroy wasn't bad as Guildsmen went, but he didn't like being answered back by a mere Third Class Apprentice. He drew himself up to his full height (which was only slightly more than his full width) and frowned so sternly that his Guild-mark almost vanished between his bushy eyebrows. "*Life* isn't fair, Natsworthy," he

boomed. "Any more cheek from you and you'll be on Gut-duty as soon as this chase is over!"

Of all the horrible chores a Third Class Apprentice had to perform, Gut-duty was the one Tom hated most. He quickly shut up, staring meekly down at the beautifully buffed toes of the Chief Curator's boots.

"You were told to work in this department until seven o'clock, and you *will* work until seven o'clock," Pomeroy went on. "Meanwhile, I shall consult the other curators about this dreadful, dreadful shaking. . ."

He hurried off, still muttering. Tom watched him go, then picked up his gear and went miserably back to work. Usually he didn't mind cleaning, especially not in this gallery, with its amiable, moth-eaten animals and the blue whale smiling its big blue smile. If he grew bored, he simply took refuge in a daydream, in which he was a hero who rescued beautiful girls from air-pirates, saved London from the Anti-Traction League and lived happily ever after. But how could he daydream, with the rest of the city enjoying the first proper chase for ages?

He waited for twenty minutes, but Chudleigh-Pomeroy did not return. There was nobody else about. It was a Wednesday, which meant the Museum was closed to the public, and most of the senior Guildsmen and First and Second Class Apprentices would be having the day off. What harm could it do if he slipped outside for ten minutes, just to see what was happening? He hid his bag of cleaning stuff behind a handy yak and hurried through the shadows of dancing dolphins to the door.

Out in the corridor all the argon lamps were dancing too, spilling their light up the metal walls. Two black-robed Guildsmen hurried past, and Tom heard the reedy voice of old Dr Arkengarth whine, "Vibrations!

Vibrations! It's playing merry hell with my 35th Century ceramics. . ." He waited until they had vanished around a bend in the corridor, then slipped quickly out and down the nearest stairway. He cut through the 21st Century gallery, past the big plastic statues of Pluto and Mickey, animal-headed gods of lost America. He ran across the main hall and down galleries full of things that had somehow survived through all the millennia since the Ancients destroyed themselves in that terrible flurry of orbit-to-earth atomics and tailored-virus bombs called the Sixty Minute War. Two minutes later he slipped out through a side entrance into the noise and bustle of the Tottenham Court Road.

The London Museum stood at the very hub of Tier Two, in a busy district called Bloomsbury, and the underbelly of Tier One hung like a rusty sky a few feet above the rooftops. Tom didn't worry about being spotted as he pushed his way along the dark, crowded street towards the public Goggle-screen outside the Tottenham Court Road elevator station. Joining the crowd in front of it he had his first glimpse of the distant prey; a watery, blue-grey blur captured by cameras down on Tier Six. *"The town is called Salthook,"* boomed the voice of the announcer. *"A mining platform of nine hundred inhabitants. She is currently moving at eighty miles per hour, heading due east, but the Guild of Navigators predicts London will catch her before sundown. There are sure to be many more towns awaiting us beyond the landbridge; clear proof of just how wise our beloved Lord Mayor was when he decided to bring London east again. . ."*

Eighty miles per hour! thought Tom in awe. It was an astonishing speed, and he longed to be down at the

observation deck, feeling the wind on his face. He was probably already in trouble with Mr Pomeroy. What difference could it make if he stole a few more minutes?

He set off at a run, and soon reached Bloomsbury Park, out in the open air on the tier's brim. It had been a proper park once, with trees and duck-ponds, but because of the recent shortage of prey it had been given over to food production and its lawns grubbed up to make way for cabbage-plots and algae-pans. The observation platforms were still there though, raised balconies jutting out from the edge of the tier where Londoners could go to watch the passing view. Tom hurried towards the nearest. An even bigger crowd had gathered there, including quite a few people in the black of the Historian's Guild, and Tom tried to look inconspicuous as he pushed his way through to the front and peered over the railings. Salthook was only five miles ahead, travelling flat out with black smoke spewing from its exhaust-stacks.

"Natsworthy!" called a braying voice, and his heart sank. He looked round and found that he was standing next to Melliphant, a burly First Class Apprentice, who grinned at him and said, "Isn't it wonderful? A fat little salt-mining platform, with C20 land-engines! Just what London needs!"

Herbert Melliphant was the worst sort of bully; the sort who didn't just hit you and stick your head down the lavatory, but made it his business to find out all your secrets and the things that upset you most and taunt you with them. He enjoyed picking on Tom, who was small and shy and had no friends to stick up for him – and Tom could not get back at him, because Melliphant's family had paid to make him a First Class Apprentice, while Tom, who had no family, was a mere Third. He

knew Melliphant was only bothering to talk to him because he was hoping to impress a pretty young Historian named Clytie Potts, who was standing just behind. Tom nodded and turned his back, concentrating on the chase.

"Look!" shouted Clytie Potts.

The gap between London and its prey was narrowing fast, and a dark shape had lifted clear of Salthook. Soon there was another and another. Airships! The crowds on London's observation platforms cheered, and Melliphant said, "Ah, air-merchants. They know the town is doomed, you see, so they are making sure they get away before we eat it. If they don't, we can claim their cargoes along with everything else aboard!"

Tom was glad to see that Clytie Potts looked thoroughly bored by Melliphant: she was a year above him and must already know this stuff, because she had passed her Guild exams and had the Historian's mark tattooed on her forehead. "Look!" she said again, catching Tom's glance and grinning. "Oh, look at them go! Aren't they beautiful!"

Tom pushed his untidy hair out of his eyes and watched as the airships rose up and up and vanished into the slate-grey clouds. For a moment he found himself longing to go with them, up into the sunlight. If only his poor parents had not left him to the care of the Guild, to be trained as a Historian! He wished he could be cabin-boy aboard a sky-clipper and see all the cities of the world: Puerto Angeles adrift on the blue Pacific and Arkangel skating on iron runners across the frozen northern seas, the great ziggurat-towns of the Nuevo-Mayans and the unmoving strongholds of the Anti-Traction League. . .

But that was just a daydream, better saved for some dull Museum afternoon. A fresh outbreak of cheering warned him that the chase was nearing its end, and he forgot the airships and turned his attention back to Salthook.

The little town was so close that he could see the ant-like shapes of people running about on its upper tiers. How frightened they must be, with London bearing down on them and nowhere to hide! But he knew he mustn't feel sorry for them: it was natural that cities ate towns, just as the towns ate smaller towns, and smaller towns snapped up the miserable static settlements. That was Municipal Darwinism, and it was the way the world had worked for a thousand years, ever since the great engineer Nikolas Quirke had turned London into the first Traction City. "London! London!" he shouted, adding his voice to the cheers and shouts of everybody else on the platform, and a moment later they were rewarded by the sight of one of Salthook's wheels breaking loose. The town slewed to a halt, smokestacks snapping off and crashing down into the panicked streets, and then London's lower tiers blocked it from view and Tom felt the deck-plates shiver as the city's huge hydraulic Jaws came slamming shut.

There was frantic cheering from observation platforms all over the city. Loudspeakers on the tier-support pillars started to play "London Pride", and somebody Tom had never even seen before hugged him tight and shouted in his ear, "A catch! A catch!" He didn't mind; at that moment he loved everybody on the platform, even Melliphant. "A catch!" he yelled back, struggling free, and felt the deck-plates trembling again. Somewhere below him the city's great steel teeth were

gripping Salthook, lifting it and dragging it backwards into the Gut.

". . .and perhaps Apprentice Natsworthy would like to come as well," Clytie Potts was saying. Tom had no idea what she was talking about, but as he turned she touched his arm and smiled. "There'll be celebrations in Kensington Gardens tonight," she explained. "Dancing and fireworks! Do you want to come?"

People didn't usually invite Third Class Apprentices to parties – especially not people as pretty and popular as Clytie – and Tom wondered at first if she were making fun of him. But Melliphant obviously didn't think so, for he tugged her away and said, "We don't want Natsworthy's sort there."

"Why not?" asked the girl.

"Well, you know," huffed Melliphant, his square face turning almost as red as Mr Pomeroy's. "He's just a Third. A skivvy. He'll never get his Guild-mark. He'll just end up as a curator's assistant. Won't you, Natsworthy?" he asked, leering at Tom. "It's a pity your dad didn't leave you enough money for a *proper* apprenticeship. . ."

"That's none of your business!" shouted Tom angrily. His elation at the catch had evaporated and he was on edge again, wondering what punishments would be in store when Pomeroy found out that he had sneaked away. He was in no mood for Melliphant's taunts.

"Still, that's what comes of living in a slum on the lower tiers, I suppose," smirked Melliphant, turning back to Clytie Potts. "Natsworthy's mum and dad lived down on Four, see, and when the Big Tilt happened they both got squashed flat as a couple of raspberry pancakes: *splat*!"

Tom didn't mean to hit him; it just happened. Before

he knew what he was doing his hand had curled into a tight fist and he lashed out. "Ow!" wailed Melliphant, so startled that he fell over backwards. Someone cheered, and Clytie stifled a giggle. Tom just stood staring at his trembling fist and wondering how he had done it.

But Melliphant was much bigger and tougher than Tom, and he was already back on his feet. Clytie tried to restrain him, but some other Historians were cheering him on and a group of boys in the green tunics of Apprentice Navigators clustered close behind and chanted, "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Tom knew he stood no more chance against Melliphant than Salthook had stood against London. He took a step backwards, but the crowd was hemming him in. Then Melliphant's fist hit him on the side of the face and Melliphant's knee crashed up hard between his legs and he was bent double and stumbling away with his eyes full of tears. Something as big and softly yielding as a sofa stood in his way, and as he rammed his head against it, it said, "Ooof!"

He looked up into a round, red, bushy-eyebrowed face under an unconvincing wig; a face that grew even redder when it recognized him.

"Natsworthy!" boomed Chudleigh Pomeroy. "What in Quirke's name do you think you're playing at?"