



THE CITY OF A HUNDRED ROWS VOL.1

CITY OF DREAMS & NIGHTMARE

IAN WHATES

*Born story-teller Ian Whates takes us on a gripping,
terrifying trip-of-a-lifetime.* – TANITH LEE



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Praise for
IAN WHATES

“Born story-teller Ian Whates takes us on a gripping, terrifying trip-of-a-lifetime, through the heights and depths of the exotically grim city of Thaiburley, in this excellent fantasy thriller.”

Tanith Lee

“Adventures in a nightmare citadel – a story that hits the ground running and doesn’t let up.”

Liz Williams

“Brilliantly inventive.”

SFX

“It is his characters who live through the story and make the reader need to know just how it’s all going to pan out, human characters who may seem familiar but then there’s that one thing, that shifted alteration that changes the world and changes the reader too.”

Michael Cobley

an excerpt from
CITY OF DREAMS & NIGHTMARE
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Ian Whates

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ONE

Only men of the right sort were eligible to join the Kite Guard. Only those with families of sufficient standing and the proper pedigree were even permitted to apply. Tylus qualified. Just.

From an early age his parents had groomed him for the part, sculpting his soul with philosophy, channelling his mind with geometry, anemonautics and alchemy, broadening his intellect with semantics and linguistics and honing his physique with fencing, swimming and pugilism. It seemed his whole life had been spent in preparation for the day he would apply to join the Kite Guard.

The day the Guard actually accepted him was the proudest of his parents' lives. At the lavish party to celebrate, his father, a functionary of minor significance within the mechanism of senior government, puffed and preened to such an extent that any there would have been forgiven for assuming that it was *he* who had achieved something commendable rather than his son. His mother became the focus of the local coffee circle for many months on the back of his success – no event was considered complete without her.

Yet in all the joy of that day and in all the years of toil and dedication that had led up to it, nobody ever stopped to ask Tylus whether this was what he wanted. Not even Tylus himself. Not until it was too late.

He wondered afterwards whether this played a part in the events of that night. Could it have been a simple, straightforward arrest had he been more diligent and more enthusiastic in his duties? Might all that was to follow have been avoided had he been the guard his parents always intended him to be?

These were questions that would haunt him often in the days that followed.

Tom was unnerved, far more so than he cared to admit. Not scared, no – he would never confess to that – just a little unsettled. No doubt this was due in part to being so close to his goal, a goal which, in his heart of hearts, he had never believed achievable. Yet as the Rows fell away one after another, and he climbed unseen into the city's highest reaches, where both custom and law forbade him to go, he began to hope and, eventually, to believe.

This was *Thaiburley*: the City of a Hundred Rows, known by many as the City of Dreams and by those who dwelt beneath it as the City of Nightmare.

Tom was born to the nightmare but now, for the first time in his young life, he had caught a glimpse of the dream.

Presently he was crouching in the shadows on yet another Row, willing himself invisible as he hid beneath a wrought iron staircase, his heart pounding and blood racing. He refused to dwell on where he was, on the impossibility of it all. If he did, he would likely lose his nerve altogether and bolt straight back down again.

His feet were sore from all the climbing, all the walking and occasionally running. It felt as if the sole of his left shoe was wearing through again, but there was nothing handy to patch it with and, besides, he had lived with worse things. At least it wasn't as cold up here as he had half-expected it might be.

The staircase that hid him rose from a broad, stone walkway, walled on one side with the familiar yellow-brown stone that predominated throughout the city. The wall's surface contained an apparently endless row of evenly spaced doors, all of them closed. He assumed that behind these doors were quarters or dwellings of some sort. The other side of the walkway stood open to the outside world, with just a calf-high sculpted guardrail separating passers-by from a headlong plunge into a veritable abyss.

Having looked over that rail once, Tom had no intention of venturing anywhere near it again. This was the other reason he was so unnerved; he had again fallen victim to his insatiable curiosity and peered over the edge, even when a tiny voice at the back of his mind whispered that it would be a mistake to do so. Below him, the walls of the city had dropped away, dimly visible where torches and lanterns burned, before disappearing into the darkness completely. In their place there was nothing: a vast, gaping space. Raised in the crowded slums of the City Below, Tom had never seen so much emptiness. It horrified him but at the same time pulled at him. His head spun, he couldn't breathe and felt himself breaking out in a sweat. For a moment he had lost all sense of where he was, uncertain even of which direction was up or down.

This all occurred within a handful of seconds, though to Tom it seemed far longer before he was able to stagger back from the edge, wondering for a panicked heartbeat whether in doing so he was actually surrendering to the void, so uncertain was he of his own judgment. Then he felt the solid stone beneath his feet and perspective was restored, leaving him safe to scabble to the nearby stairway and to haul his trembling body beneath it. There he was determined to remain, until his legs felt more stable and his heart ceased pounding quite so quickly.

Never having experienced anything like this before, Tom had no name for the awful sensation, though anyone who actually lived at these levels would have nodded knowingly and informed him that he had just suffered an attack of 'vertigo', before slapping him on the back with a jovial smile and telling him not to worry, that it would soon pass. Lacking such sage advice, Tom could only wait and hope that it would.

He knew that when he did move, he was going to hug the wall as closely as possible; anything to avoid approaching that drop again. The wind up here was ill-tempered and unpredictable. It huffed and puffed with erratic bluster, and he was afraid that going too far away from the wall would leave him vulnerable to a particularly strong gust picking him up and tipping him over the balustrade.

Slowly his thoughts cleared and his breathing returned to normal. His legs still felt as if somebody had used the bones as moulds, pouring jelly into them before removing the bone and leaving just the jelly behind, but he knew that time was pressing. Night was not about to linger for his sake; it had a nasty habit of

turning into day when you least wanted it to, and he intended to be long gone before dawn arrived and Thaiburley started to stir. His legs would just have to cope.

The rest of the gang would be amazed when he returned and told them of his exploits, and none would dare call him a liar, not when Lyle was there to back him up. His status was assured. All of them would want to be seen with him, to associate with him, even Barton, who boasted so often and so loudly of his own exploits but who had never ventured beyond the Shopping Rows. Tom had left those behind long ago. Then there was Jezmina. How could she fail to be impressed when he returned a conquering hero from the furthest reaches of the City Above?

Of course, before he could do that, there was the small matter of completing this unlikely task, the task Lyle had set him, which he had accepted in a rush of blood, dazzled by the wide-eyed smile of a certain girl who'd been looking on. Yes, all he had to do was achieve the impossible and then retrace his steps – all of them, without being caught, through a city that would be stirring with the onset of morning.

That was all.

He was feeling progressively better and knew that it was time to move on, though he wished he'd kept a better check on the Rows. The truth was that Tom had no idea precisely how high he had come, how much further remained to go.

At first he'd kept count, reciting the lines of the levels-verse which every citizen, Below or Above, learnt almost as soon as they could speak, but there were so many of them; and so many other things to worry

about as well: not being seen, for example. Despite his determination not to, Tom had quickly lost count. He knew this must be somewhere close to the top, but had no idea how close.

The first lines of the nursery rhyme ran through his mind again.

*From the Streets Below to the Market Row,
From taverns and stalls to the Shopping Halls...*

The early stanzas were easy enough: they dealt with the known world, the Rows near to home, the ones that were permitted and accessible. But the higher he went, the more difficult it became to remember the right sequence as he ventured into areas of the city he had never imagined visiting in his wildest dreams.

From trinkets so cheap to exclusive boutique...

It was no good; he might as well face the fact. His memory of the verse faltered and everything became a muddle long before he reached this far in the rhyme's verbal record of Thaiburley's bewildering Rows.

His musings were interrupted as two figures emerged from one of the many doors along the walkway. Two men, chatting amiably. They wore the deep blue tunics of higher arkademics. Tom felt a surge of triumph and relief. Higher arkademics were to be found in the residences – he remembered that much – which meant there were only the Tiers of the Masters between him and his goal, the Upper Heights, the very crown of the city – the roof of the world.

Where the Demons lived.

The arkademics strolled towards him: two tall, fit men, looking far healthier than any who were to be found in the City Below, even Lyle, who was one of the best-fed people Tom knew. He tried to hunker

down a little lower and thought invisible thoughts, willing them not to see him.

As they drew nearer, he became conscious of their words, and also of how loud his own breathing sounded. He did his best to take shallower, quieter breaths.

"I would never allow something like that, surely you must realise as much." The man currently talking was the older of the two and spoke earnestly, as if it were vitally important that his companion should believe him.

The other, who was nearest the edge and so furthest away from Tom, walked with his head bowed, as if his thoughts weighed heavily.

"Magnus, you know I want to believe you, but Syrena says that..."

The older man made a disdainful noise and stopped walking. "And you would truly take her side against me?"

The younger man also stopped and the two faced each other. They were now just a few paces away from Tom, who remained statue-still, hardly daring to breathe. In his mind he kept repeating his own private litany: *you can't see me, you can't see me, I'm invisible, there's nobody here, nobody here*, over and over, desperate to stay hidden.

The younger man's face was clearly illuminated by the lanterns lining the walls as he looked up. Strong, handsome features dominated by piercing eyes. It was the eyes that concerned Tom. If he were to glance beyond his friend's shoulder and slightly to the left, the man would be looking straight at Tom's hiding place. Fortunately, his eyes never wavered from the other man, the man he had addressed as Magnus.

“There’s no question of taking sides, but even you have to admit that her arguments *are* compelling. It’s because I respect you so much that I’ve agreed to this meeting at such a late hour, so that we can talk frankly, away from curious ears. I’m not accusing you, Magnus, I’m simply asking for an explanation. Don’t I deserve at least that much?”

The older man sighed dramatically, and rested a hand on the other’s shoulder. “Thomas, Thomas...”

The boy froze in his hiding place, thinking himself undone, believing that he had somehow been discovered by some arcane, sorcerous means, but the man continued talking and it was clear that the words were not directed at him but at the other, younger *arkademic*. The boy remembered to breathe and stared at the pair with renewed interest. Here was another Thomas. If they shared a name, what else might they have in common?

“Have things between us really come to this?” the older man continued.

“That rather depends on what you have to tell me.” There was steel in the young *arkademic*’s voice; a determination not to be fobbed off.

Without warning, everything changed. One second the two figures were involved in apparently relaxed conversation; the next, Magnus was anything but relaxed, moving so rapidly that at first Tom wasn’t sure of what he was seeing. He had to replay the sequence in his mind to be certain. Yes, there could be no doubt; the older man had drawn a knife from his belt and plunged it into his companion’s chest in one fluid, serpent-swift motion.

The other Thomas staggered backwards – three faltering steps that brought him closer to the edge,

almost against the balustrade. He stared down at the blade that still protruded from his torso, as if unable to comprehend what was happening. His hands clasped weakly and ineffectually at the knife's handle.

Then his gaze rose from the weapon to the face of its wielder. "Why, Magnus? Why?"

Magnus had followed his victim's stuttering retreat, stepping forward like some stalking predator as the other moved back. When he spoke, it was in the same measured tones he had used throughout, his voice betraying no hint of regret.

"Questions, Thomas. You always did have too many questions."

With that he lifted both his hands, again in a rapid, assured movement, and pushed the other firmly in the chest, sending Thomas staggering backwards, so that he teetered on the very edge. Just a low stone barrier stood between the wounded man and that long, fatal drop. For an instant he hung there and the watching boy hoped irrationally that he was not about to fall after all, but then the man's body seemed to sag, his legs buckled and he toppled over, vanishing into the night without another sound.

Tom could picture that fall all too easily: the long plummet past Row after Row, past terraces and balconies and stretches of featureless city wall – the city that he had spent the best part of the night climbing through – with the murdered man's body gaining speed the whole way, until eventually it struck ground. The Market Row, Thaiburley's ground floor, had long since spread beyond the walls and any faller from this height stood a good chance of killing someone or destroying a hut or other structure with the force of its

impact. Such things were not unknown. Sky-bounty the lower citizens called the fallen dead. Whatever remained of the body would be picked at and fought over, at first for whatever might be valuable – a shattered limb or surviving organ could raise a good price, as could the ring on a soon-severed finger, a finely wrought knife still in its scabbard, a piece of quality silk or linen clean enough to merit salvaging and reusing. Then, once the human scavengers had claimed their prizes, the dogs and rats, the heart beetles and the spill dragons would move in to feed on what remained; those scraps that had been overlooked or had simply not been worth carting off to the dog master or any of the other darker practitioners who paid well for fresh human meat.

All of this flashed through Tom's mind in an instant, while his eyes were fixed on the back of the murderer, Magnus. His hand unconsciously reached for the dagger concealed within his clothing. He clutched the hilt so tightly that it dug into his palm.

Bizarrely, what he had just witnessed chilled Tom to the core. Not because he was a stranger to either violence or death – he had seen plenty of both in his time – but because it was so unexpected here, in one of the highest Rows of the city. In the ghettos Below, fighting, intimidation and murder were a way of life, but things should be different here. People were supposed to aspire to greater things. To have witnessed such an act of ruthless treachery in such an elevated Row disturbed him more than anything he had ever encountered before.

Suddenly, the akademik's head came up and his back stiffened, as if disturbed by an unexpected sound, though Tom's ears reported nothing beyond the

gusting of the wind and he was certain that he hadn't moved or made a noise himself. Yet even as he watched, Magnus turned around and looked directly towards him. Dark, piercing eyes that stripped away any hope of anonymity.

How? Tom knew he'd remained silent. He started his litany again, furiously repeating the lines, but it was too late, Magnus was already striding towards him.

"Come out!" The words rang through the night in that same calm voice the man had used throughout.

Tom had heard about arkademics and the powers at their command. He very much doubted either his knife or the phial of treasured demon dust that Lyle had given him would be of much use now. The dust was the only other item he carried that could be considered a weapon, but the fine, glittering powder was intended for a very specific purpose and Tom had no idea what effect it was likely to have on a man, if any. So he resorted to the only other choice left open to him.

He ran.

But he was not quite quick enough.

The arkademic moved with deceptive speed and even as Tom bolted from his hiding place Magnus was there, lunging for him. Tom felt his arm gripped. He jerked it away, but the man hung on, grasping his shirt. Tom pulled and the arkademic clung. Something had to give. Fortunately, it was his shirt. The sleeve tore away and Tom was free. All thoughts of tiredness, of aching feet and jellied legs were forgotten, as he sprinted for all he was worth, racing for the stairs that had brought him to this Row.

The back of his neck tingled and shivers spread down his spine. He drove his legs harder, expecting with

every step to be struck down by a knife or something worse. If he could just make it to the stairs. Surely they weren't far.

"Stop!"

The single word rang through the air with the clarity of a bell. Spoken, not shouted, yet the force of it struck home like a dart. The voice was one that expected to be obeyed, that would not be denied.

Incredibly, Tom felt his legs faltering and he started to slow, to stutter towards a halt. Panic welled up inside him. He still wanted to run and was just as desperate to get away, but try as he might, his body refused to respond.

He knew that if he stopped, he would die. This realisation became the focus of his thoughts, the centre of his rebellion against the compulsion of that awful, irresistible voice.

Tom had to resist, somehow. He concentrated on his legs, demanding that they move faster, and they finally started to react, sluggishly at first, as if struggling to run through water, but he never quite came to a halt and after a few desperately difficult steps he was gaining a little speed and then a bit more, until suddenly he could move freely again, the voice's power evidently broken.

The stairs were before him. He threw himself at them, leaping the first section in a single, flailing bound. This stairway was not made of iron like the one he had crouched beneath but of solid, unyielding stone, carved from the same stuff as the city itself. His momentum carried him recklessly forward. Legs pumping furiously to keep him upright, to prevent him from falling, he tore down the stairs. He almost

over-balanced again and again, but somehow managed to keep everything together until he reached the bottom. The steps passed in a blur and the next Row seemed to rush towards him. His feet met the level ground with jarring force. Three punishing strides later his legs finally buckled and he slammed painfully to the floor, barely raising his arms in time to protect his face. He skidded, rolled, grazing the skin from his knees and forearm, but still managed to scramble to his feet and run on, refusing to acknowledge the bumps, the bruises, the nagging ache in his left knee. He couldn't afford to feel them. Not until he was safe.

A gaping archway opened to his right and he considered diving through it, to lose himself within the inner city, but quickly rejected the idea. He was a long way from anywhere he knew and trying to hide nearby would probably be exactly what his pursuer wanted. The arkademic was bound to have some knowledge of the area, far more than Tom at any rate. To linger here would be stupid. Tom had made his ascent by clinging to the city's skin, by walking the terraces and corridors built in and around its outer walls and going up any available stairway that promised to take him to the next Row. Instinct told him to use the same approach now, that this would be the quickest way of escaping to the safety of his own levels – the familiar warrens of the City Below.

He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw no signs of anyone chasing him but refused to relax. This still felt like enemy territory and he had no idea what other powers the arkademic might possess, so he kept running for all he was worth.

Another flight of steps led to another Row. He ran through an enclosed corridor here, one built on the inside of the city walls rather than on its outer surface. This environment was a far more familiar one than the high terraces above. Narrow windows to his left looked out upon darkness. The noise of the wind had abruptly cut off as he entered the corridor and every pounding footfall sounded intrusively loud to his own ears as his feet slapped the stone floor in the enclosed tube of space. Surely anyone asleep behind the locked doors would be woken by such a cacophony and so mark his passing.

Instinctively he slowed a little, treading more lightly. He was breathing hard, the energy that fear had lent his body fast evaporating. The night's exertions were catching up with him and he began to feel his aching knee, the raw sting of his grazed forearm and the tiredness of protesting muscles.

Tom knew that he was far from safe, but the absence of any obvious pursuit robbed the threat of its immediacy. By the time he finished the descent to the next Row his lungs were fit to burst and all the aches and pains of his exertions and the earlier fall were catching up with him. He slowed to a brisk walk, needing to catch his breath. This Row boasted another terrace, which heralded the return of a wind that seemed to have gained in strength, buffeting him with renewed ferocity as he stepped out into the open once more.

The wall here was interrupted by a series of arched openings, each of which led through to a small chamber, with no other entrance or window. On the way up he had snatched a brief moment to explore one of them, discovering a featureless room, devoid of any

furniture or decoration. Now, on his return, on edge as he was, he found the darkened openings unsettling – a row of enormous mouths gaping wide as if to swallow him as he passed.

His breathing became less ragged as his body absorbed much-needed oxygen and he felt able to break into a jog again, anxious to be past these ominous archways. So intent was he on the openings that it took him a while to register the new arrival. In the distance there was a figure walking with measured steps but coming closer with each one. Instantly Tom feared the worst, suspecting this could only be the arkademic Magnus or one of his agents.

Then he spotted the stairwell to the next floor. It lay between him and the stranger. Tom broke into a sprint once more, desperate to make the stairs ahead of whoever the newcomer might be.

The figure quickened pace. Dark clothes, but that could mean anything.

“Hey, you, lad, stop where you are!”

The voice carried a familiar air of assumed authority but lacked the command that Magnus had possessed and Tom knew the tone well: a rizzer – one of the City Watch. Rizzer or Magnus, it was all the same to him; he had no wish to be caught by either. Head down, he ran for all he was worth. The rizzer started to run as well, but Tom made it to the stairs well ahead of him and charged down, laughing.

Rizzers he was used to. They lacked the dark, sinister menace of murderous arkademics. Running from them, outwitting them, was something he had been doing all his life. He reached the next Row with the other nowhere in sight.

The floor of this terrace was inlaid with mosaic tiles, depicting a series of regally arranged profiles, predominantly those of men. Tom remembered them from the upward journey, when he had wondered precisely whose face he was in the process of walking over.

Some of the fear started to leave him. He was almost enjoying himself now, relieved to be dealing with the familiar. Until, that is, he caught movement in the corner of his eye – a large form swooping past the balcony to his left, beyond the city's walls. At first he thought it an enormous bird or, more terrifying, one of the fabled demons descending from the city's Upper Heights.

But then he saw that it was, in fact, a man.

The rizzer sailed towards the terrace, arms outstretched, cloak spread between his four limbs, catching the wind and gliding smoothly towards a landing ahead of Tom, blocking his way to the next set of stairs.

A kitecape; Tom stood and gawped, having heard of such a thing but never imagining he would ever actually see one.

For a precious second he could do little more than stare, seduced by the sheer majesty of this man so at home in the air. He came to his senses as the seriousness of the situation sank in. He looked around frantically, assessing his options: flee back the way he had come and hope he didn't run straight into Magnus, try to keep going towards the lower levels he knew – which meant somehow getting past the rizzer – or risk leaving the walls entirely to take his chances in the unknown jungle of the city's innards.

None of them sounded appealing, but he had to choose quickly and act decisively or all would be lost

and the razzar would have him. The razzar, clearly one of the famed Kite Guards, was almost at the balcony. He swooped in, tilting his body upward, closing his arms slightly and lifting his legs, causing himself to virtually stall in mid-air, preparatory to landing.

Tom knew that the decision could not wait, had already been delayed overlong, but he couldn't help himself – he had to watch. Suddenly the Kite Guard seemed far more of a threat than the razzars he was used to, too formidable to try and slip past. It was going to have to be the inner city.

Yet at the very instant he reached that unpalatable conclusion, the guard faltered and appeared to lose control. One second the dark form was moving with graceful precision, the next he was floundering. It was as if the capricious wind had chosen to desert him at the last moment, leaving his cloak suddenly limp and useless. The arms which seconds before had been outstretched, supporting him so majestically, now reached in desperation for the balustrade.

He almost made it too, but not quite. With a startled yelp, the razzar dropped from sight.

Hardly daring to believe his luck, Tom rushed to the edge to stare down, completely forgetting his earlier fear of the drop. He watched the unfortunate guard tumble away, staying until the figure was swallowed by the darkness. The sense of disorientation threatened to return once he stopped focusing on the falling man, so he moved away hastily but couldn't resist a grin of mingled relief and joy.

He trotted on towards the next flight of stairs, growing in confidence all the while. There was no one else in sight; still no sign of pursuit from Magnus and

nobody other than him to have witnessed the guard's fall. He wondered how long it would be before the man was missed and his smile broadened as he pictured the other razzers trying to work out what had happened to their colleague.

As Tom continued, he became increasingly aware of a sound; a bass thrumming that spoke of industry, a noise that seemed to surround him, reverberating, as if transmitted not only through the air but through the very stone of the city itself.

To his right, a gap opened in the solid expanse of wall. Not an archway such as had peppered the stonework in the floor above, but a dark, oblong, passageway. It reminded him of the alleys and runs that criss-crossed the City Below.

The sound grew ever louder, and a flickering glow of light fell wanly from the mouth of the passageway. He came to a halt, curious but wary, wanting to look into the opening but a little afraid to do so. Had it been this noisy on the way up? Had this light been so apparent? Surely not, or he would have remembered. He glanced quickly around, concerned that he might have somehow come a different way, but reassured himself that it would have been all but impossible to do so.

Finally he drew in a deep breath and peered around the corner. There was disappointingly little to see. The passageway took a left turn after a short distance and he found himself staring at a blank wall which pulsed with reflected shadow and light. It was a pulse that suggested the pumping of blood, like the steady beat of a gigantic heart. He realised for the first time that there was subtle variation to the sound as well, an almost

imperceptible rhythm that seemed in synch with the ebb and flow of light washing along the wall.

Tom knew he ought to ignore this, intriguing though it was, and continue on his way, but curiosity got the better of him and, without even consciously deciding to, he slipped into the passage. With every step the air grew warmer and the sound grew louder. He became convinced that he was moving towards some sort of harnessed fire. Mixed in with the deep rumble that had first caught his attention, another sound became apparent: a rattling sigh, as if some giant were restless in his sleep.

Having taken a sharp turn to the left, the passage then executed another dog-leg, this time to the right. Tom followed, to find himself standing at the edge of a vast room. Ahead of him, dominating the whole space, was a machine, an engine of incredible size and complexity. A mass of pipes and wires, cylinders and tubes erupted from its surface. Yet was it truly a machine? For the thing seemed almost alive. Between the myriad metallic paraphernalia membranes could be seen, flexible, near-translucent sheets which resembled living skin. The whole suggested to Tom the internal organ of some impossibly huge beast, encased in pistons and tubes.

The thing was in perpetual motion, rattling and humming, never still for a second, and then, with a repeat of the great sighing sound he had heard from the passageway, it contracted; a slow implosion that produced a blast of heat and light and sound as it shrank to a fraction of its former size. Almost immediately the contraption expanded again, the membranes that held it together glowing as if from some internal fire.

Tom could only stare at this latest wonder of the City Above, overawed both by the nature and the size of the apparition. He was standing in some sort of viewing gallery, with the mouth of the passage behind him. The machine, if such it truly was, rested on a floor that was perhaps two Rows beneath him, with the chamber extending a similar distance above. When fully contracted, the thing sank until its crown was a little lower than Tom's line of sight. As a result, he was able to glimpse the tangled mess of components that formed the apparition's top, only to see that mass rise upward and the sides roll towards him as the thing expanded once more. A single huge pipe of grey metal extended from the very centre of the engine, which is what he assumed he was watching, before disappearing into the ceiling above. He couldn't decide whether this pipe moved up and down as the thing expanded and contracted, or whether it remained fixed and the moving mass slid up and down the pipe.

Whatever the truth, something about what he was watching – this strange composite of machine and the organic – struck Tom as inherently wrong, almost obscene. He shivered, despite the heat.

The engine was so overwhelming, so impossible to ignore that at first Tom had eyes only for this remarkable object and was oblivious to all else. It took him a while to realise that the chamber housing the thing was not entirely deserted.

Looking up at him from the floor and to his left was the most bizarre creature Tom had ever seen. Naked to the waist, the figure was clearly humanoid and bulged with muscles, its skin glistening with perspiration. There were two things that made this figure so

remarkable. Although dwarfed by the mechanism he was evidently tending, the creature was obviously huge; Tom reckoned him to be at least twice the height of a full-grown man.

Then there was the creature's head: completely bald, with the face dominated by a single Cyclopean eye. The eye was opaque, a uniform milky white. The creature was evidently blind, yet its head had tilted upward and seemed to be staring directly at Tom.

Tom instinctively drew back and in doing so, remembered himself, remembered that he had just witnessed a murder and should be fleeing as swiftly as possible back to the streets he knew.

He had already dallied too long. Cursing his curiosity and hoping that the delay would not prove costly, he ran through the tunnel's twists and out into the open air once more. The comparative cold of the exposed night came as welcome relief after the claustrophobic heat of the engine chamber. He breathed deeply, glad to be away from the unfathomable machine and its unsettling attendant.

After a quick glance around to confirm that the terrace was still empty, he set off again. Yet he remained preoccupied, part of his mind lingering in that vast chamber with its bizarre occupants – the like of which he hoped never to see again.

Tom was distracted by his own thoughts and failed to notice the shadow that passed over him from behind. He was taken completely by surprise when something struck him in the centre of the back. It hit with enough force to wind him and he instantly lost his footing and went sprawling to the ground. A little dazed, he sat up; tasting blood, knowing that he must

have bitten his lip, and wincing at the sharp, burning pain between his shoulder blades. He looked around to see what had floored him.

The figure of a rizzer, the same rizzer, loomed large, puncheon in hand. That must have been what hit him – the puncheon. No wonder he had been bowled over. He glowered at the evil club, which looked so innocent now that it was safely retracted into its housing.

“What? How?” Tom began, staring at the guard whom he had seen tumbling towards what seemed inevitable death mere moments before.

“I’m a Kite Guard, kid,” the man said, almost growling the words. “You didn’t seriously think you were going to get rid of me that easily, did you?”

The guard reached down, grasped a handful of shirt and hauled Tom to his feet.

“Now, what’s a grubber like you doing up here in the Heights? No good, I’ll warrant.”

Tom almost blurted out that he was currently running for his life and that he had witnessed a murder only a short while ago but a lifetime of guarding his words stopped him. The chain of thought that came chasing after this instinctive reticence reaffirmed the decision. He suddenly saw the future had he spoken. His presence gave Magnus the perfect get-out. The man would be a fool not to pin the murder on Tom, who was in a place where no street-nick had a right to be and so obviously up to no good. It would be his word against that of a senior arkademic. Who was going to believe a lowly street-nick from the City Below in circumstances like that?

No one; that was who.

He had even run from a Kite Guard when challenged: proof positive of his guilt, if any more were needed.

The guard still held Tom by his shirt and he now lifted him off his feet, so that the two were staring eyeball to eyeball, with Tom's toes dangling just above the floor. The man's eyes simmered with rage and Tom wondered exactly who he was angry with – himself for losing control of his cape and falling so embarrassingly, or the lad who had caused him to fly in the first place.

“Well?”

The man did not really seem to expect a response and certainly didn't wait for one, setting Tom down and frog-marching him along the terrace, keeping a firm grip on his collar from behind.

Tom wasn't scared of the guard. The worst the guard could do was beat him and he had survived beatings from men a lot tougher than this. It was what would likely come after that concerned him. Once banged up he would be at the mercy of the system and those within it; senior arkademics, for example. Tom knew that if he wanted to survive beyond this night, escape was not simply an option, it was a necessity.

Despite his angry words the guard was surprisingly casual in the way he handled Tom, not even bothering to search him for weapons yet. None of the razzers Tom was used to would have made such a basic mistake when rousting a street-nick. The kids on this Row must all be soft, he concluded.

Tom knew that the guard's relaxed attitude offered him a chance, perhaps his only chance. As the man urged him forward, he let his feet drag and then pretended to stumble.

“Hey, watch it!” The razzer’s grip slipped a little but didn’t let go, his determination not to do so causing him to stumble into a hurried series of shortened, pigeon-like steps as he almost tripped over his charge.

Tom used this apparent mishap to mask the movement of a hand which darted into his clothing and emerged with the dagger. Quickly then, he twisted around, slashing with the blade. Slight resistance as it ripped through the guard’s cape and a deal more as it cut into the man’s arm.

With a yelp of mingled surprise and pain the razzer let go. Tom was free and instantly running. Yet he had barely begun to gather speed before he heard the familiar snick that warned of a puncheon being fired. His would-be captor had reacted far more quickly than expected.

Tom tried to dodge, veering to the left, but too late.

The missile slammed into him, instantly knocking him off balance. He was falling. Only then did he realise that his attempt to dodge had carried him nearer the edge and it was towards the edge that he now fell. He tried to stop, to twist, to hold himself, but momentum carried him on. His leg struck the balustrade and, before he could do anything, he was over.

“Help me!” he screamed into the wind as the city’s wall gathered pace and started to speed past. He clung on to the hope that the Kite Guard would react instantly and swoop to his rescue.

Then he remembered the knife in his hand as it slashed through the razzer’s cloak before biting into his arm, and it suddenly dawned on him that with his cape

torn the Kite Guard could no longer fly. Ice cold fear gripped his innards, as he realised that however hard he screamed, there was nobody left to save him.

