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THUNDER CITY

A MORTAL ENGINES NOVEL

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TAMZIN POOK

The sea was calm that evening, and the town of Margate lay at anchor just off the rugged western coast of the Great Hunting Ground, surrounded by a slowly spreading slick of sewage and chip wrappers.

What portion of the Hunting Ground that was, with its stern cliffs and stony beaches, Tamzin Pook was not sure. She caught only a glimpse of it as she went with the rest of the team and their guards along the walkway that led along the raft town's upper deck to the stage door of the Amusement Arcade. The walkway was mostly enclosed, but outside the stage door there was a section called "the paddock", walled with wire mesh, where keen fans and gamblers gathered to watch the players pass. The other players waved at the onlookers, or showed off their muscles, or blew kisses. They were all much more glamorous than Tamzin. Tamzin was a girl you wouldn't look at twice: short and wiry, her black hair cut short, her blunt, tan face set in a semi-permanent scowl. While the others went in for colourful costumes and flashy bits of armour, Tamzin always wore the same plain, close-fitting tunic and leggings in which she trained. But it was Tamzin

the fans were waiting for. As soon as they caught sight of her, the usual shouts began.

"Tamzin!"

"Over here!"

"Tamzin Pook!"

"Good luck, Tamzin!"

"Should have been you, Pook!"

"Vengeance for Eve Vespertine!"

Hooting like a lot of monkeys, Tamzin thought, ignoring them. *It ought to be them inside this cage, not us.* She looked out through the wire again towards that anonymous shore. Two small motorized towns had stopped on the tideline, and airships and passenger balloons filled the sky above them, drawn like moths to Margate and its infamous Amusements.

Then the stage door swung open, and Tamzin passed through it with her fellow fighters into the backstage area, where the stagehands were waiting to hand them their weapons.

There were four boys with her that night, and three other girls. All of them were bigger and stronger than Tamzin. Some showed their nervousness; others tried to hide it behind a show of bravado. They talked and laughed together, but not to Tamzin. They were still mistrustful after what had happened last season with Eve Vespertine, she thought. Their side-eye glances made her feel guilty. She wanted to tell them she had their backs and would keep them safe if she could, but she wasn't the sort of person who was good at saying things like that. If she tried, she would only end up mumbling and

stumbling and making everyone embarrassed and more nervy still.

The stagehands were handing out the gear: axes, chain-swords, serrated cleavers. From a gantry overhead, minders with guns kept watch in case any players got the bright idea of trying to fight their way to freedom rather than face another show.

A stagehand gave Tamzin her knife. Its smooth rubber handle was stained black with her sweat. An armoured cable trailed from it, plugged in to a battery pack that fitted on to her belt. She checked the battery herself, as she did always, making sure it had been fully charged. When she looked up, one of the new boys caught her eye and smiled.

"This waiting is the worst," he said. "Wonder what Mortmain's got lined up for us tonight?"

Tamzin didn't answer. She guessed he wanted to talk to calm his nerves. Maybe he thought if he got friendly with her she could save him from whatever was waiting for them. But the best thing he could do for all of them was let her concentrate. He was cute, that boy, and he had performed well in his first few shows, but she didn't even bother to learn her new teammates' names any more. It hurt less that way when a show went bad.

She turned away from him and stared at the door that led into the Arcade. It was a big door, squarish and twice as tall as Tamzin. Its timbers were bound and studded with iron.

"Two minutes, people!" shouted the stage manager.

One of the new girls was sobbing with fear. The others moved away from her, afraid she'd bring bad luck. From

beyond the door came the eager voices of the crowd, blurred into one huge, ominous wash of noise that sounded like a stormy sea. Tamzin did not hear it. She was concentrating on the iron-bound door. She had learned that if she concentrated hard enough even her thoughts fell quiet. Then there was only Tamzin, and the door, and the unknown thing that was waiting beyond the door to kill her.

"OK, people!" chirped the stage manager. "Big smiles, everybody! Break a leg! You're going to knock 'em dead tonight!"

The bolts were drawn back. A burly stagehand grasped the lever that worked the door. Tamzin heard the voice of Doctor Mortmain, Margate's Master of Amusements, telling the crowd something that made them go quiet, then laugh, then cheer.

The door slid upwards on greasy chains. Tamzin's team ran past her, and she gripped her knife and followed them out into the arena.

The big space was in darkness, as it always was when a show began, the house lights dimmed, the small high windows shuttered to make the blackout complete. Then spotlights mounted in the high dome of the roof were turned on and began to sweep to and fro, following the players as they scattered and took up their fighting positions.

"Let there be light!" commanded Mortmain, from up in his private box, and the technicians switched on more lamps until the oval pit in which the players stood was bathed in it. The floor had been spread with fresh sawdust, pinkish in

places where the blood from the warm-up acts was soaking through. Around its the edge ran a high timber wall, marked with the scars and stains and scorch marks of previous shows. From the steeply raked seats above, five hundred eager faces stared down at Tamzin and her comrades.

The players were barely aware of the audience. Their eyes were on the far end of the arena, where more chains were rattling as another massive door heaved upwards. In the dark behind the door, a Revenant Engine raised its armoured head.

The spotlights swept away from the players to form a cone with the Revenant pinned at the point of it. As the reflections blazed from its armour, Tamzin saw that it was lizard-shaped. A high spine of metal plates; a long segmented tail with a bundle of ferocious spikes at the end. It looked as if Mortmain had dug up a dinosaur from some deep tar pit and armoured it in steel and chrome. But its small eyes glowed a ghostly green, as the eyes of Revenant Engines always did.

Inside the Revenant's armoured skull, a dead brain was nested, jolted back into a sort of life by weird old electrical machines left over from before the Sixty Minute War. The brain was not human, because strict laws forbade the building of Revenants with human brains or human bodies. Perhaps it was the brain of a crocodile in there, Tamzin thought, looking at the lizardy length of the new engine, its spines and sharpnesses. But the Revenant's bodies did not always reflect what sort of beast their brains had once belonged to – it might just as easily be the brain of a monkey, or a dog, or some wild creature Tamzin had

never heard of. All she knew for certain was this: it hated her. Hate was what drove the Revenant Engines. Maybe Mortmain trained them to hate, or maybe it was natural for dead things to hate living ones, but Tamzin had never met a Revenant yet that did not want to murder her.

There were gasps from the crowd, and a scream or two, as the latest Revenant stalked out into the arena. Those rubes from the towns parked on the coast had likely never seen a Revenant Engine before. Mixed with the gasps, Tamzin heard a few disappointed groans: those would be from serious gamblers who watched every show and had bet on the Revenant winning tonight. Mortmain had built dinos before, and Tamzin knew how to deal with them. She glanced left and right and saw something like relief on the faces of the others. The cute new boy – his name was Sergio; she couldn't help but hear his fans chanting it – glanced back at her and actually grinned.

But Tamzin knew overconfidence could be as dangerous as panic or despair or any of the other emotions that tugged at players in the Arcade. It couldn't be just another dino, she thought. She risked a glance at Mortmain, up in his private box. Mortmain, with his fussy lilac beard and gigantic silver lamé turban, and a faint smirk playing about his lips as he watched the fight developing below him. He had some surprise in store for them, Tamzin guessed, and she would have to work out what it was and warn the others before it was too late. She must not fail them as she had failed Eve Vespertine.

So think, Pook, think. What looks like a dinosaur but's even more dangerous?

“It’s a dragon!” she shouted.

The players reacted just in time. The Revenant Engine cranked its steel jaws open and a plume of oily orange fire poured out. The sawdust floor flashed briefly into flame: the dampened timber of the arena walls steamed. The crowd roared. The game had begun.