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Opening extract from

The History Keepers 2: Circus Maximus

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1 The Queen of the Night

The night Jake Djones brought total disgrace upon himself and jeopardized the very survival of the History Keepers' Secret Service was so unnatu-rally, bitterly cold that the Baltic Sea almost froze over.

From the rocky, windswept shores of Denmark in the west to the frozen remoteness of Finland in the north, an endless expanse of ice – as thin as -gossamer and a ghostly silver in the moonlight – curved across the horizon. A continual dusting of soft snow seemed to silence this far corner of the Earth in an otherworldly hush.

A ship with blue sails broke through the veneer of ice even as it was forming, heading for the -twinkling lights of Stockholm – a fairytale -archipelago of bays, promontories and islets. The ship was called the *Tulip*, and at the creaking wheel stood a tall figure in a long fur coat. He reached out an elegant gloved hand and rang the bell. 'It's time, gentlemen,' he announced in a soft Charleston drawl.

Immediately two more silhouettes, both well wrapped up, came out of the snowy darkness and joined him at the helm, followed by a brightly coloured bird – a parrot – who nestled, shivering, on his master's shoulders. They gazed out eagerly through the snow as the ship sailed on towards the port. Their faces were slowly illuminated . . .

The figure in fur was strikingly handsome, a smile playing across his chiselled face. Next to him stood the owner of the parrot – a shorter boy with spectacles, his brows raised in a studious frown. The last person had olive skin, curly dark hair and big brown eyes that blinked with excitement. Three intrepid adolescents, young agents of the History Keepers' Secret Service: Nathan Wylder, Charlie Chieverley . . . and Jake Djones.

Charlie was the first to speak. 'Head for that -central island there,' he said, pointing towards a group of spires and towers. 'That's Stadsholmen, Stockholm's old town – the grand jewel of these islands, centre of the Swedish Empire. Though sadly, of course, we're not arriving in the city's heyday. In 1710 our old friend the plague came here, taking out nearly a third of the population.'

'Not arriving in its heyday?' drawled Nathan, pulling his coat tighter against the snow. 'That's putting it mildly. Sweden in the winter of 1782 has got to be the most inhospitable place in history.' He produced a tiny box from his pocket and applied lip salve. 'If my lips get any drier, they'll fall off.'

'Hell's bells, Nathan, *'92*!' Charlie exclaimed, closing his eyes and clenching his teeth in annoyance. 'We're in 17*92*. Honestly, I sometimes wonder how you made it this far.' Mr Drake – that was the name of his pet parrot – squawked in agreement, puffing up his feathers indignantly at the American.

'I'm pulling your leg.' Nathan smirked. 'Do you really think I'd be wearing this ankle-length sable coat in 17*82*? Not to mention these buckle-less riding boots – so austere they're practically Napoleonic.' He turned to Jake. 'The 1790s are all about dressing down.' Nathan loved clothes almost as much as he loved an adventure.

'Buckle-less riding boots, my aunt,' Charlie -muttered to himself. 'And don't even get me started on your sable coat. It's a work of barbaric savagery. Those poor animals had the right to a life as well, you know.'

As Jake listened to their banter, he felt a great swelling of pride at the thought that he belonged to the greatest and most mysterious organization of all time: the History Keepers' Secret Service.

Just a month had passed since his life had changed for ever. He had been kidnapped, taken to the London bureau and informed that his parents had been secretly working for the service

for decades – and indeed had gone missing in sixteenth-century Italy!

From then on it had been a nonstop roller-coaster ride. He had travelled through time, first to Point Zero – the History Keepers' headquarters on the Mont St Michel in Normandy, 1820 – and then to Venice in 1506, as part of the mission to find his mum and dad, and to stop the diabolical Prince Zeldt from destroying Europe with bubonic plague.

He had been reunited with his folks – but they had left behind Topaz, the mysterious and beautiful young agent to whom he had become devoted. Most extraordinary of all, he had discovered that his beloved brother Philip, who had apparently died in an accident abroad three years ago, had also been a History Keeper; there was a chance – a very slim chance – that he was actually alive somewhere in the past.

And now Jake was already on his second mission. Admittedly he had been selected more through luck than anything else (nearly everyone at Point Zero had come down with an appalling tummy bug after eating mussel soup, and agents were thin on the ground), and it was not a dangerous assignment – otherwise he would definitely not have been included, as he was still a novice. But nonetheless here he was, travelling to the Baltic in the 1790s to collect a consignment of atomium, the precious liquid that made travelling through history possible.

'So, tell me something about the person we're meeting,' he said, trying to hide the tremor in his voice.

'Caspar Isaksen the Third?' Charlie shrugged. 'Not personally acquainted, but he's our age, I believe. I cooked a pumpkin tagine for his father once. He said it would live with him for ever.' Charlie loved food with a passion and was an expert cook – although an experience in the kitchens of Imperial Paris had left him a staunch vegetarian.

'*I've* been personally acquainted with Caspar Isaksen the Third. Twice,' drawled Nathan with a roll of his eyes. 'You can't really miss him – he eats cakes like they're going out of fashion, and never stops sneezing.'

'So what is the Isaksens' connection with -atomium?' Jake persisted. He had learned all about this substance on his first voyage. To travel to a -particular point in the past, agents had to drink a dilution of it, mixed with exact precision. Gener-ally it worked only out at sea, in the magnetic -maelstrom of a *horizon point*; and then only on the few humans with *valour* – an innate ability to travel through the ages. The History Keepers needed this precious liquid in order to watch over history, protecting the past from dark forces that sought to destroy it and plunge the world into darkness.

'The Isaksens *are* atomium,' replied Charlie. 'The family have been in charge of its production for more than two hundred years. As you know, it's notoriously tricky to make. To produce an effective batch, its ingredients – which themselves are kept a secret from all but a handful of keepers – have to be refined over a period of years . . .'

'Decades, I'd say,' Nathan added.

'Quite,' Charlie continued, 'and it must be -created in freezing conditions. That's why Sejanus Poppoloe, the founder of the History Keepers, set up the -laboratory in northern Sweden. After he had done so, back in the 1790s, he handed duties over to Frederick Isaksen, the first of the line. To this very day, *all* atomium – as used by every bureau in the world – has been created in the Isaksens' -laboratory.'

'So, why are we meeting in Stockholm and not at the actual laboratory?' Jake asked.

'Dear me,' Charlie sighed, 'you *have* got a lot to learn. No one goes to the laboratory. *No one* has the slightest idea where it is, not even Commander Goethe.'

Jake stared back in surprise. Surely if anyone knew where the laboratory was based, it would be Galliana Goethe – the commander of the History Keepers for the past three years.

'Only the Isaksens keep the secret and pass it on,' Charlie continued. 'Can you imagine the disaster if its location got into the wrong hands? Catastrophe times infinity!'

‘There’s a myth,’ Nathan said, ‘that it’s set within a mountain, accessed through a secret limestone cave.’

‘In any case,’ Charlie concluded, ‘when the atomium is ready, a member of the family delivers it to a prearranged location. As Caspar Isaksen is a fan of the opera, like me, the opera house was the venue chosen on this occasion. And not a moment too soon,’ he added sombrely. ‘Atomium stocks at Point Zero are at an all-time low. This consignment is vital.’

‘So no slip-ups from the new boy,’ Nathan said mischievously, thumping Jake on the back.

Jake looked around at the port. There were ships everywhere, an intricate forest of masts and rigging. Along the shore, depots and warehouses teemed with activity as sailors and tradesmen, their breath visible in the freezing air, worked into the evening, loading and unloading their cargoes: iron, copper and tin; crates of wax, resin and amber; sacks of rye and wheat; consignments of animal furs; and endless boxes of shining fish. Mr Drake surveyed the bustle with a keen eye, always intrigued – and just a touch nervous – when arriving at a new destination.

The *Tulip* docked in a narrow berth next to a huge warship. Jake and Nathan gawped up at her great rounded hull punctuated by two cannon decks. High up on her starboard side a cluster of sailors, thick-necked and shaven-headed, stood talking in gruff voices.

Nathan caught their eye and lifted his fur hat in a flamboyant gesture. ‘Lovely evening for the opera, wouldn’t you say?’ The sailors ignored him -completely.

‘You be a good boy and stay here.’ Charlie stroked Mr Drake and gave him some peanuts. ‘We shan’t be long.’ The parrot watched the three young agents jump down onto the quay.

They pulled their coats tight and, stepping carefully across the icy cobbles, made their way through the bustle of people streaming along the dock. Jake glanced at the stalls selling cooked meats, salted fish and wooden cups of steaming cider. His attention was caught by a fortune-teller shrouded in a lace shawl, her wizened hand clutching tarot cards. She held them up to Jake, imploring him to listen to his destiny. He stopped briefly, his eye drawn by the card at the top of the pack: a smiling skeleton in front of a moonlit sea. The fortune-teller’s eyes opened ominously, swimming in cloudy grey.

‘Let’s not get involved,’ said Nathan, firmly taking Jake’s arm and guiding him on. ‘She probably works for the tourist office.’

The three of them skirted round the royal palace, then crossed a wide timber bridge into the formal square in front of the opera house – a graceful three-tiered building capped by a giant stone crown. A steady stream of carriages was arriving, from which the cream of Stockholm’s society – all wrapped in furs – disembarked and entered the building.

‘Opera?’ Nathan complained. ‘Is there anything more ridiculous? Overweight people warbling on about nothing! Couldn’t that rogue Isaksen have arranged a rendezvous somewhere more -appro-priate?’

‘How dare you, Nathan Wylder! How dare you!’ Charlie fumed. ‘This is a wonderful performance of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. It was written only a year ago. The ink is barely dry on the manuscript and the great man is already dead – God rest his soul. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.’

Nathan pulled a guilty face at Jake and the three of them forged on through the crowds to the entrance.

Meanwhile two figures on horseback emerged from the shadows on the other side of the square, their gaze fixed on the three agents. They dismounted, and the first, dressed in a high-collared coat, stepped into the half-light of a street lantern. He was tall, upright, and had straight shoulder-length fair hair. His accomplice wore a dark cloak and a distinctive wide-brimmed hat. The blond man whispered something in his companion’s ear, gave him charge of his horse, then hurried across the square in pursuit.

Jake's eyes lit up at the sight of the foyer. In contrast to the wintry gloom outside, it was an immense space of white marble and gilded mirrors, lit by -constellations of chandeliers. Its inhabitants were as magnificent as the surroundings: poised, elegant people, the polished black boots of the men and the long silk dresses of the ladies reflected in the gleaming floor. Many were arranged in chattering clusters; others were ascending a grand staircase, their eyes eagerly scanning the crowds for the latest source of scandal.

Nathan was in his element. 'I genuinely think this might be one of fashion's all-time greatest moments,' he announced, sweeping off his fur coat to reveal a splendid ultramarine jacket and breeches. 'Look at the silhouettes, look at the detailing, the sheer pizzazz. Their buttons alone could win prizes.'

An attendant wearing a coiffed wig, white gloves and an expression of loathing helped Jake and Charlie out of their coats. Jake's hand caught in his sleeve, and an undignified tussle was followed by the sound of ripping.

'Ooops.' He blushed and tried to stifle a giggle as he passed it to the man. The attendant merely sighed, collected all three overcoats and exchanged them for ivory counters with golden numbers before he withdrew.

'And be careful with my coat,' Nathan called after him. 'It was worn by the Duke of Marlborough at the Battle of Blenheim.' He then confided to Jake, 'Not really, but you can never be too careful with vintage fur.'

A bell sounded and the opera-goers started making their way into the auditorium.

'Well, we might as well get it over with,' Nathan sighed. 'The opera is not going to bore itself. Where are our seats?'

'Royal circle, box M,' Charlie replied curtly, indicating the next tier.

The three of them headed up the stairs, oblivious to the figure with long blond hair, who watched them keenly from behind a pillar.

Another white-gloved attendant led them along a candle-lit corridor and through a door into their private box. It was a small room lined in dark red, with four gilt chairs and a spectacular view of the auditorium. Jake felt another surge of excitement – it was like being inside a giant jewellery case. Five tiers rose up from the stalls in a sweeping oval shape, each containing a succession of private boxes with a batch of gossiping aristocrats. It was like some crazy human zoo – everyone was looking around and whispering slyly to their neighbours.

'Well, where *is* Caspar Isaksen?' asked Nathan with a wry look at the empty chair. 'He's late.' He picked up a pair of silver opera glasses laid out on a side table. 'I suppose, while I am here, I may as well study some Swedish architecture . . .' He started to scan the space with the binoculars – and then stopped. 'Intriguing . . .'

Charlie turned to see that the object of Nathan's attention was a box containing three young ladies, coyly blushing at him from behind their fans.

'Oh, please concentrate,' he sighed. 'This is work, remember.' He snatched the glasses and passed them to Jake. 'I'm sure *you'll* find something more interesting to look at.'

Jake examined the audience more closely. He half fancied inspecting Nathan's three beauties for himself, but felt it would be rude, so he started at the other end of the tier. He had never seen so much wealth, so many expensive clothes and glittering jewels. Suddenly his binoculars picked out a young girl in a white dress sitting on her own. There was something about her that reminded him of Topaz. He felt a pang as he remembered that dreadful night aboard the *Lindwurm* when she had disappeared, probably for ever, into the vortex of time. To take his mind off the memory, he swiftly continued along the row. Two boxes on, his gaze alighted upon a fair-haired man pointing a silver pistol directly towards him.

Jake gasped, dropped the binoculars, picked them up, looked through them again, shook his

head, turned them the right way round and quickly searched for the box once more.

It was empty. The man was nowhere to be seen.

‘What on earth is wrong with you?’ Nathan asked.

‘The box over there! There was a man pointing a gun.’

Nathan and Charlie examined the offending box. An elderly gentleman and his wife were now taking their seats.

‘He’s gone now, but I promise you I saw him.’

Nathan and Charlie gave each other a look.

‘You’re new to this’ – Nathan meant to be re-assur-ing, but of course it came out as condescending – ‘so you’re jumpy, that’s all. It’s the opera; everyone is spying on everyone else. That’s the name of the game.’

‘He wasn’t spying. He was pointing a gun, a silver gun,’ Jake insisted.

‘Silver?’ Nathan noted. ‘You’re quite sure they weren’t opera glasses?’

In truth, Jake wasn’t one hundred per cent -certain. The moment had been so fleeting.

‘Besides, not a soul knows we’re here. Only Commander Goethe has our exact time location, so let’s not panic.’ Nathan leaned over and whispered in Jake’s ear, ‘If I were you, I’d be more frightened of what’s about to happen out there.’ He pointed at the stage.

Jake nodded and tried to calm his thumping heart.

An excited hush descended around the theatre as the lights started to fade. A moment later, the orchestra suddenly struck up in a great fanfare of horns and bass drums. Jake once again scanned the tiers of people in search of the blond man, but there were just too many people. Everyone was leaning forward, eyeglasses poised. Another blast of trumpets, and then the violins began.

Jake felt a chill go down his spine as the curtains slowly rose, revealing a dark landscape. At first this was difficult to make out, but a series of lighting effects, each one drawing sighs of admiration from the crowd, gradually illuminated the stage: in the background, a huge moon hung above mountains and pyramids; in the foreground stood palm trees and giant flowers.

‘We’re in Egypt,’ Charlie whispered in awed tones, ‘in the realm of the Queen of the Night. In a moment Tamino is going to enter, pursued by a giant serpent.’

‘It’s a roller coaster,’ added Nathan, stifling a yawn.

There was a soft ripple of applause as the young hero materialized out of the desert mist, then fearful sighs as a giant snake curled down from above. At the sight of this, Jake froze. He knew the reptile was nothing but a piece of stage machinery – albeit a very convincing one – but memories quickly came flooding back. It was only a short time ago that he had been thrown into a hideous chamber of snakes and ladders. At the last minute he had been saved by two other History Keepers’ agents – his mum and dad, actually – but the incident had left a scar.

Gradually the stage filled with curious characters: three mysterious ladies in veils, a man dressed as a bird – ‘Mr Drake would have hooted with laughter,’ Charlie commented – then, heralded by ominous claps of thunder, a majestic, fantastical figure took shape out of the stars.

‘*That’s* the Queen of the Night,’ Charlie -murmured as she emerged high above the others. ‘She’s going to ask Tamino to save her daughter from the clutches of the evil sorcerer Sarastro. It seems like she’s this frightened mother,’ he carried on breathlessly, ‘but actually she’s the villain and wants to steal the sun and plunge the world into darkness.’

‘Don’t they all? Mothers-in-law?’ Nathan said with a mischievous smile.

Jake was so hypnotized by this figure, so lost in her spine-tingling voice, so focused on her evil eyes, that when a knock came at the door behind him, he jumped in shock.

He and his companions turned round.

Another knock came, but this time it was -followed by three sneezes and then a high voice: ‘It’s me, Caspar.’

All three of them gave sighs of relief. Nathan opened up and Caspar Isaksen squeezed himself into the box. Jake stared. Caspar was his age, but as wide as he was short, with ruddy cheeks, a runny nose and crazy fair hair going off in all directions. He had a worried smile and glistened with a layer of perspiration. He wore a bright turquoise jacket and breeches that were far too small for him, and Jake noticed that he had done up his buttons wrong.

'Sorry – so sorry I'm late,' Caspar puffed, madly wiping his nose and dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. 'Hello. Caspar Isaksen . . .' He shook Jake's hand, then Charlie's. 'Ah, Nathan! We've met, of course. As you can see, I didn't forget your advice – you said turquoise would do wonders for my figure. I *never* wear anything else,' he added with great pride, then turned to show off his outfit from all sides and caught sight of the stage for the first time. 'Good heavens! The Queen of the Night is already on! Has she sent Tamino on his mission? She's a sly one, isn't she?'

Nathan was already losing patience. 'Yes, yes – but business first. I take it the atomium's in there?' he asked with a nod towards the holdall in Caspar's hand.

'The atomium is—' Caspar froze mid-sentence, holding up his finger. Jake was just wondering what was going to happen next when suddenly the other boy sneezed. Then again; and a third time for luck.

'Sorry, sorry,' Caspar sighed, wiping his face with his damp handkerchief. 'You're quite right – -business first.' He knelt down, opened his case and started to remove the contents. Jake, Nathan and Charlie watched, bewildered, as he unloaded cake after cake after cake. 'I couldn't come to Stockholm without paying a visit to Sundbergs Konditori. Strawberry custard, cinnamon bun, Christmas knäck – yummy yummy,' he muttered as he laid them out one by one.

Finally, from the bottom of the bag, he retrieved a small veneered box. He wiped off a layer of icing sugar and a dollop of cream, and passed it to Nathan. A concentrated stillness descended on the agents. Jake could see that the top of the box was inscribed with an elaborate I – for Isaksen. Nathan opened it, and a golden light shimmered across their faces.

Inside, in a midnight-blue casing, lay two crystal vials, each full to the brim of the infinitely precious liquid.

'That's one consignment for Point Zero,' said Caspar in a more business-like tone, 'and one for the Chinese bureau.'

Nathan was just closing the case when Jake caught sight of a face in the crowd and his stomach churned. Down in the stalls, everyone was looking in the same direction, their faces bathed in light from the stage – except for one person: the blond man seated in the far corner, who was staring fixedly up at them.

'There!' Jake shouted out, pointing at him.

Nathan, Charlie and Caspar turned at once and saw the figure quickly rise from his seat, a silver pistol in his hand. Nathan snatched the opera glasses from Jake and used them to follow the man as he ran up the aisle and stormed through the double doors.

'We've been compromised!' he exclaimed. 'Back to the ship immediately!' He chucked the binoculars back at Jake and carefully took hold of the box of atomium. He adjusted something – Jake couldn't see what – inside, then flung open the door and looked both ways along the curving corridor: -nothing but flickering candelabra. 'Charlie, you go that way. Whoever gets to the *Tulip* first, prepare to set sail straight away.'

In a heartbeat, Charlie was racing along the -corridor and disappearing down the stairs at the end.

'Jake, Caspar, come with me!' Nathan barked. Caspar was hurriedly picking up his cakes and putting them back in his bag. 'Now!'

Nathan led the way, heading in the opposite direction to Charlie. Jake followed, with Caspar wheezing behind. Footsteps approached from the other end of the passage and a figure

appeared.

The three agents froze. Time seemed to stand still as Jake saw their adversary clearly for the first time. He was the same age as Nathan – sixteen or thereabouts – and in many ways a crueller, fair-haired version of him. He had striking features, a superior look in his eye and, judging by his tailored clothes, the same pride in his appearance. His hair, in -particular, was a work of art: long, blond and -perfectly straight.

Jake could see that Nathan had gone pale.

‘Who in God’s name is that—’ the American started to say as the man raised his pistol – and fired.