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Opening extract from

The Battles of Ben Kingdom: The Claws of Evil

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To Mum and Dad,
For always believing, always encouraging, always loving…
This book is for you.

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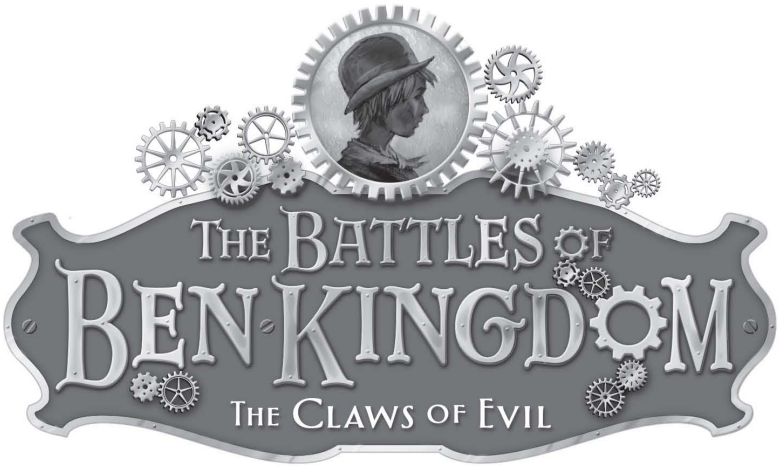
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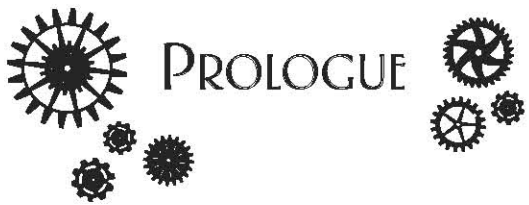
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ANDREW BEASLEY





Prologue

"London will soon be ours, ladies and gentlemen."

Mr. Sweet spoke and his audience listened. His voice was as deep and dark as tar, rising up from the barrel of his chest.

"We shall pluck out the beating heart of the British Empire and make it our plaything; a toy, to do with as we wish."

There were seven of them in all, including Mr. Sweet himself. They sat in a circle and talked treason, deciding how they might carve up the capital city between them. They called themselves the Council of Seven. A very modest title, Sweet thought, considering that the councils

before them had shaped the world to please their own ends.

"And what shall we do with it, when it is ours?" pondered a hugely obese man, his jowls wobbling with anticipation, a thin trail of drool escaping from the corner of his mouth. "Eat it all?"

"What a foolish waste," said a woman dressed entirely in black, only her pale chin and bloodless lips visible beneath the shadows of her raven-feather hood. "Far better to suck it dry."

"No," said a second man, with parchment-dry skin stretched taut across his narrow skull, his long limbs hanging loosely over the edges of his chair. "We should enslave it, make it work for us."

"Burn it," purred a seductive woman in green, her fat pink tongue reaching out to caress her teeth. "It would be such a pretty sight." She clapped her hands in girlish glee. "We've put cities to the flame before. I should so like to see it for myself."

Mr. Sweet permitted the others to have their say, but soon shut out their prattling and focused instead on his own dream of the future; a dream which didn't include his six fellow conspirators. His vision was of London, ruled by a Council of one. Nanny had always said that he wasn't good at sharing.

Mr. Sweet was from a good family, in other words a wealthy one, and he had land and houses and more money than he could ever spend. He had power too; he was a Member of Parliament and a cabinet minister. But as any man with power would tell you, once you got a taste for it, there was never enough to go round.

It was Sweet who had called this meeting, and Sweet who had chosen the location. An elegant and yet foreboding building in Bloomsbury, The Sinistra Club was he most exclusive in all London and its members the most eccentric. If a man had been barred from every other establishment for his outrageous behaviour, or ungentlemanly conduct, then he might still be able to hang his hat at the Sinistra, providing he had deep enough pockets.

The club had one other unique feature which made it such a convenient place for the Council of Seven to meet. When you were discussing the overthrow of the government and the Queen herself, a certain level of discretion was required – even the Seven themselves knew that to repeat what was said would mean pain. Lots of pain. Probably death. But at the Sinistra Club, the staff could all be relied upon to keep absolutely mum. Because every servingmaid, footman, waiter and bottle-washer had two qualities that Sweet found desirable in a servant: they were both illiterate and mute. They could not record

a single word that they overheard, and their tongues could not wag even if they wanted them to.

In every other respect, however, the Sinistra was the same as any of the basement clubs scattered across the city of London: oak-panelled, velvet lined, and reeking of money and cigars.

Sweet enjoyed the comfort of his chair and the elegance of his surroundings. The fire was burning brightly in the grate and keeping the bitter winter at bay; although these flames were obviously far too tame for the woman in green, he noted wryly.

She had been right: as the secret rulers of a society called the Legion, the Council of Seven had indeed turned cities to ash when it suited them. When the great city of Rome was consumed by fire in AD 64, it was the Legion, not Emperor Nero, who provided the spark. Mr. Sweet smiled, his teeth glistening in the gaslight. The footprints of the Legion stretched back for two thousand years if you knew where to look for them.

Blood was always a good clue.

Some members of the Legion had become quite famous in their own way, even if the army which they served remained a secret they took with them to their grave. Men whose names became a byword for brutality: Attila the Hun, who swept across Europe with unparalleled ferocity;

Vlad the Impaler; Ivan the Terrible; Maximilien Robespierre. The history books held them responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, but Mr. Sweet knew that it was the Legion, led by the Council of Seven, to whom the credit truly belonged.

When the other voices in the room grew too grating for him to bear any longer, Mr. Sweet cleared his throat and rose to his feet. He was dressed like a gentleman, but his clothes strained to contain the heavyset body that lay beneath.

Very slowly, Sweet allowed his eyes to move around the circle, probing for signs of weakness, for the points of vulnerability where he would one day strike. It pleased him to see the Council of Seven flinch as his gaze touched them. They were the wickedest men and women in the land, and they were all afraid of him. Before he spoke, he paused to stroke his luxurious moustache. The movement did nothing to conceal his smile.

"Yes," continued Sweet, "London is ripe for the taking. The greatest weapon of the Legion is almost complete. I have discovered today that the final missing component, the last of the Coins, has come to light at last." There was a collective gasp at this revelation. "It will be ours," Sweet continued, "and then the whole of London will know the power of the Seven."

"But what about the Watchers?" said the youngest of their group, a vain, pampered man, with long, feminine fingers and foppish blond hair.

Mr. Sweet swung around and fixed him with the full force of his stare. The man shrank back, almost as if the blow were physical.

"The Watchers are a spent force." Sweet spat their name. "The pathetic followers of a failed cause, waiting for a saviour who will never come."

Yet even as he said those words, Mr. Sweet felt the tiny crack in his own armour, a chink that slowly filled with fear. *There will be no last-minute rescue for the enemies of the Legion*, he reassured himself. The Watchers had been abandoned, the Hand of Heaven was not coming to save them, Mr. Sweet was convinced of it.

And yet he couldn't stop the thin trickle of dread that was worming its way towards his soul.



CHAPTER 1

THE WEEPING MAN

"Ben Kingdom!"

The policeman's voice boomed out and every head in Old Gravel Lane turned.

Constable Wilde sounded cross and Ben couldn't blame him. A mouthful of fresh horse manure was enough to do that to anyone.

"Stop right where you are, you 'orrible boy!" Wilde shouted again. Ben hesitated, but one look at the constable's bespattered and beetroot-red face was enough to convince him that stopping was the last thing he wanted to do. Instead he pulled his billycock hat down nice and tight, took to his heels, and ran.

London's docks were the busiest in the world and the streets that surrounded them were awash with humanity. Some might call the people that lived and worked there "the dregs", but Ben was not the judgemental sort, and anyway, he was one of them. As nimble and lean as a whippet, Ben ducked and weaved his way through the crowd. Dodging elbows, squeezing between bodies, even getting down on his knees and crawling through the forest of legs, Ben knew that Wilde wouldn't catch him this time.

Poor bloke, thought Ben with a grin as he remembered his missile catching the bobby full in the face. *He's gonna be picking that out of his moustache till Christmas.*

All day, grey snow had been tumbling down out of the sky like ash and Ben's feet skidded on the cobbles as he made good his escape. His trousers were soaked through too, and his hands were wet and raw, but he soon left poor old Constable Wilde far behind and so it was a small enough price to pay.

Nine times out of ten, Ben was the very model of honesty. But during those rare lapses, it always seemed to be Constable Gabriel Wilde who arrived on the scene. It was Constable Wilde who had thrashed him after he broke the window of Langdale's tobacconists, and it was Wilde who caught him and thrashed him *again* after the

unfortunate incident involving the butcher's dog, the sausages and the club-footed grocer.

In Ben's defence, he hadn't actually meant to hit Constable Wilde in the face; he was trying to knock off his helmet. And when he first came up with the idea, it was only going to be a snowball that he threw…but then the carthorse had been good enough to lay a stinking, steaming road-apple right there on the ground in front of him, and one thing led to another. It was pretty much the story of his life.

Satisfied that Wilde had definitely called it quits, Ben paused to set his hat at the right angle. A billycock was like a bowler hat, only a touch more dandy, and in Ben's opinion it had to be set just so. Happy, Ben grinned at his reflection in a shop window, shoved his throbbing hands back into his pockets and set off back towards Old Gravel Lane and home.

Night was beginning to fall now and the darkness brought a wicked edge to the wind that cut through his coat to the marrow in his bones. As he trudged through the quiet backstreets, a church bell chimed.

It was then that Ben saw the man.

The Weeping Man.

At least that was what the street kids called him.

Ben stopped dead and watched the figure from a

distance, trying to make out if it really could be him. Ghoulish curiosity getting the better of him, he took a step nearer.

At first, no one had even noticed that children were disappearing. If there was one thing that the East End wasn't short of, it was unwanted children. Kids went missing all the time. But then came the sightings and the stories and the whispers, until the length of Old Gravel Lane was abuzz with the news. *Beware the Man. The Man in Black who stalked the streets. The Weeping Man who came to take you away in the night.*

The descriptions of the villain were always the same: tall, dark. Deadly.

That ain't the half of it, thought Ben.

The figure that Ben had his eyes on was dressed all in black, as befitting a monster. He wore a long square-tailed coat which reached almost to the ground, and the broad shoulders beneath it made it abundantly clear that no street kid would have the strength to get away once he took hold of them. On his head sat the sort of hat which Ben always associated with undertakers. It was not a comforting image.

The other thing that all the accounts agreed upon was the noise that he made. "Unearthly", said a frightened clergyman who had heard it on his return from evensong.

"Disturbing", said a mother of three, who had not let her children out of the house since. Unnatural. Bone-chilling. A death rattle.

There were plenty of rumours about what he did with the children he took. But all anyone knew for certain was that kids were disappearing and nothing nice was happening to them.

Just so long as I'm not next, Ben told himself and he edged himself backwards into the hollow of a doorway, trying to become one with the gloom. When the cold wood was pressed hard against his back, he stopped. Then he waited. Not breathing…not moving…while all around him the snow continued its slow and remorseless assault. It was the harshest winter that anyone could remember and so there were plenty of ways for a scruffy street urchin like him to meet his Maker. Given the choice though, Ben had no wish to end his days as the latest victim of the Man in Black.

Ben studied him from the shadows. He was morbidly fascinated, and a little terrified too; although he would never own up to that. Jack the Ripper still cast his long shadow across the East End and Ben had no illusions about there being a happy ending to the story of the Weeping Man. But here he was. And a glimmer of opportunity was beginning to present itself to Ben, like a

shiny sixpence begging for him to pick it up.

If, out of all of London, *he* was the one to identify the child snatcher, then he was bound to become famous. And *if* he was the one who could lead the bobbies to the beast's lair, then there surely had to be a reward in it for him. It was a brilliant plan, as far as he could see – the one tiny flaw being that it might cost him his own life trying. *Still, so far, so good, eh?*

Ben knew that he was being reckless. He knew that no one would come running if he screamed for help. *But in for a penny, in for a pound...*

Ben stuck his head out of the doorway for a better look. The Weeping Man was about twenty feet away now, taking a left into a dingy side street. Whatever he was doing, he obviously didn't want any witnesses.

What's your game? Ben wondered.

He picked up his feet and ran to the corner as silently as he could. He reached the entrance to the alley in time to see the Weeping Man stop dead in his tracks, sniffing the air. Ben froze too. He had allowed himself to be caught in the open, vulnerable and exposed. *If he turns around now...*

Inch by inch, Ben crept backwards, desperate for the protection that the wall could offer him. The snow crunching beneath his boots sounded as loud as cannon

fire in his ears, and he winced with every step. He made it back behind the corner, but not before a shudder took hold of him so vigorously that it threatened to loosen the teeth in his head. And he knew that his trembling had nothing to do with the cold.

The Weeping Man stood motionless in the middle of the alley, unaware of Ben or unmoved by him. Ben studied him from his hiding place, transfixed; a rabbit stalking the fox.

Then, as suddenly as he had stopped, the Weeping Man lifted his head with a peculiar twitching jerk. It was an unnatural movement for a human, Ben thought; the angles were all wrong. He looked more like a dog cocking its neck and responding to a call which only he could hear; instructions from his master.

But whose voice was he listening to?

Ben went rigid and held his breath tightly in his chest, next to his hammering heart. Had he been heard? He grimaced as he imagined what was coming to him if the Weeping Man turned round.

Then the sound of the man's tears echoed down the alleyway and there was no doubt left in Ben's mind: he was in the presence of a killer.

He felt the sound as much as heard it; the physical manifestation of a soul in torment. The sobbing came from

somewhere very deep within the man, or so it seemed to Ben. Beginning with a low growl, it built with each shuddering gasp until it was finally released as a volcano of grief. Ben could almost feel the pressure mounting inside the Weeping Man until there was nowhere for it to go except to explode to the surface.

There was so much sadness in those sobs. Such pain. Such remorse.

But there was anger too, and that was what scared Ben the most.

The howling rage.

Get out of here, and get out now. That was what the sensible part of Ben's mind was telling him to do. And not for the first time, Ben wished that once in a while he would listen to the advice that it gave, instead of always following the other voice, the one that insisted on the exact opposite. *Don't be chicken-hearted,* it said. *Get a closer look. Looking never hurt anyone.*

Mind made up, Ben Kingdom inched forwards in the hope of getting a really good look-see.

Easy does it, Benny boy.

He had halved the distance between them when his foot caught against an empty bottle and sent it rattling across the cobbles.

It wasn't exciting any more.

It was dark. It was late.

And he was alone in a very bad place.

Fear filled Ben's throat as he realized what he had done. He glanced around at the tight corridor of the alleyway, filthy tenements on either side. In his curiosity, he had allowed himself to be led away down Skinners Lane. *Stupid, stupid, stupid,* he cursed himself. Everybody knew that you didn't go down Skinners Lane at night unless you had a death wish. *You really are on your own now, son.*

To Ben's horror, at that moment the Weeping Man cocked his head and very slowly turned around. He took a step in Ben's direction.

Then another.

Ben couldn't move now, even if he wanted to.

Twelve paces away.

Eleven.

Why can't I run? Ben screamed inside. *Why can't I just run?*

Ten paces.

Nine.

Then, as Ben watched, a heap of unwanted rags – bundled up, left to rot at the side of the street – began to stir with life. The Weeping Man kneeled over the tattered remnants, stretched out his hand and, from beneath the

surface, from under the filth and the grey stain of snow, another hand emerged, tiny and pale. Slowly, frail fingers reached out and clasped the Weeping Man's. An arm like a stick followed that hand, and then the form of a girl, fragile and lost.

It was Molly Marbank. Sweet little Molly Marbank, whose father worked with Ben's father at the docks. Or at least he had until he missed seeing the beam that was swinging towards him, sweeping Mr. Marbank's legs one way and his soul straight on to glory. After that Molly was orphaned and alone, and everyone assumed that she had gone to the workhouse.

Only Ben now knew that Molly was here, hand in hand with the Weeping Man.

The girl by his side, the Weeping Man rose to his feet and turned to leave.

And in that instant, Ben knew that he had been seen.

For the first time, Ben saw fully the face of death. The Weeping Man was much younger than he had expected: clean-shaven, square-jawed, with an almost aristocratic face, framed by tumbling dark hair. Ben saw soft cheeks, slick with tears. He saw a broad mouth, smiling. He saw a sword beneath the folds of the black coat, long and wickedly sharp. He saw eyes as deep and dark as wells. Ancient eyes, that had seen secret and terrible things.

And those eyes saw him.

The Weeping Man addressed him from the darkness. "I shall be coming for you, Benjamin Kingdom," he said.

And then, at last, Ben could run.