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Opening extract from

The Battles of Ben Kingdom: The Feast of Ravens

Written by

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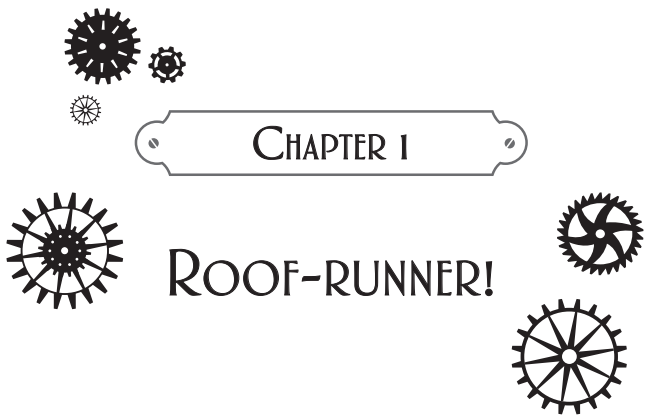
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Chapter 1

Roof-runner!

"*Benjamin Kingdom! Prepare to defend yourself!*"

Ben was trapped, and he knew it.

He quickly cast his eyes around, searching for the source of the voice. To his left he saw chimney pots rising up out of a sea of coal dust and ashes. To his right, more chimneys, more choking fumes. Overhead lay a filthy blanket of cloud, and below, three storeys down, lay the cobbled streets. It was a view of London that few were familiar with, but it was as normal as breathing to Ben.

At the very edge of his vision, Ben thought he caught a phantom of movement, a shape that appeared

momentarily from behind a ramshackle stack only to disappear again, leaving just a stirring in the smoke. Without any thought of the danger, Ben pelted along the ridge of a roof, his feet finding purchase at lightning speed, like a tightrope walker at the climax of his act. It was not the easiest escape path, even at the best of times, but for the last ten weeks of his young life, none of his options had been easy.

Too soon, however, Ben ran out of roof and his feet came stammering to a halt. A tile snapped beneath his weight and slid away into empty space, almost taking him with it. Ben felt the strong hands of gravity reaching for him, doing their best to steal his balance. Instinctively, he grabbed hold of a chimney pot to steady himself while he fought to regain his footing – and not for the first time he was grateful for his skyboots with their studded rubber soles, part of the Watcher uniform he wore.

When his feet were secure again, Ben paused on the edge of the drop, his heart a racing engine. He lifted his brass-rimmed goggles from his eyes and considered his options. Through the haze spewing from factory chimneys and ten thousand household hearths, Ben could make out the ghosts of church steeples and the great dome of St Paul's, rising up from the patchwork acres of rooftops. Beneath him were the streets of London, waiting to

welcome him with an embrace of broken bones. And behind him, somewhere, was his pursuer.

Ben hesitated, uncertain which way to turn. *Come on, Benny boy*, he urged himself. He had to move and move fast, he knew that much. His hunter was not far behind and past experience suggested that he shouldn't expect things to go easily. Adrenaline surged through his body, making Ben feel vibrant and alive. He was a Watcher, after all; part of a secret army, hiding and surviving on the rooftops of the city: he didn't scare easily.

Three months ago, Ben would have laughed at the idea that he had any sort of destiny beyond scratching out a meagre living as best he could. But then three months ago he had been totally ignorant of a lot of things. Such as the battle that had been raging for centuries, with the Watchers on one side and the Legion on the other. The Watchers in the high places and the Legion in their network of tunnels. The Above and the Under. Good and evil. Opposite, but not equal.

Ben knew about the war now. And his own part in it.

He faltered, uncertain which way to turn, and the words of his mentor, Mr. Moon, sprang to mind. *Stop larking about and focus!*

Jago Moon was a man with many hidden talents, steeped in the knowledge and law of the Watchers. He

was a master swordsman, which came as a surprise to people who assumed (as Moon intended them to) that he was a slightly insane bookseller. But that was only the beginning of Moon's gifts. The old man's hearing was so acute that he didn't even need to use his eyes when he was sword fighting. Of course, the old boy didn't have much choice on that score; he was blind as a bat and twice as scary.

Ben did his best to imitate Moon now, using all of his senses to prepare himself for fight or flight. *You never know when you might not have eyes to help you*, Moon had advised him. Moon was full of cheery thoughts like that.

Fighting against the hubbub of the city, Ben listened for sounds that he could use to pinpoint his position. He had always considered himself to be the king of the streets, but learning to navigate across the rooftops was almost like starting from scratch. He closed his eyes, shut out all the distractions and concentrated.

A scream: the angry friction of metal against metal. *Brakes*, Ben recognized immediately. *A hiss of steam. The constant rumble of iron wheels*. He breathed in and tasted the sharp tang of coal dust in the air. *So, I'm near a station. What else?*

Above the drone of other voices, Ben could make out the barking of costermongers trying to outdo each other as

they drummed up trade. He pieced the details together, picturing the map of London in his mind. *A railway station near a market? That would be Liverpool Street*, he realized with some satisfaction. *So that would mean I'm on…Lamb Street. Probably.*

He opened his eyes and looked around for some confirmation. As the sea of smoke shifted, he made out that Spitalfields Market *was* dead ahead. Ben sniffed the air, drawing in the organic rot of vegetables. *Nice*. The problem now was whether he could make the jump.

"Arm yourself, Ben Kingdom!" boomed his hunter. "Get ready to fight like a man of destiny."

Ben still couldn't pinpoint where the voice was coming from, but it was undoubtedly closer than before. One thing was for certain – he needed to get onto a flat roof if he was going to stand a chance in one-to-one combat. And by his calculations, the flat roof of the market was less than eight feet away. *Well, maybe nine or ten*, Ben admitted. *Certainly not more than twelve*.

The Watchers were faced with these challenges every day of the week and had devised numerous ingenious methods to help them bridge the gap between one building and another. Ladders, planks, zip wires and ropes were all stashed at strategic locations. Unfortunately for Ben, this particular junction wasn't one of them.

"I'm coming!" said the pursuer, from somewhere too close for comfort.

"I'm going," said Ben, and he took three careful steps backwards, enough to give him a short run-up. Pushing down with his legs and swinging powerfully upwards with his arms, Ben fixed his sight firmly on the opposite roof and launched himself into the air towards it. *No more than twelve feet*, he told himself as the air rushed around him. *I can do this!* And even as he thought it, Ben knew that he was dropping too fast. The arc of his leap had been too shallow. *Of course I could be wrong*, thought Ben, too late. *It might be more like fifteen feet, in which case I'm absolutely stuffed.*

Spitalfields *was* further away than he had anticipated and Ben's heart was in his mouth as his feet fell short and the wall loomed up in front of him. He threw up his arms as his body slammed painfully against the brickwork, punching all the air from his lungs. Scrabbling madly, his fingers managed to get a grip on the guttering. Then he hung there for a moment, as helpless as a rabbit in a butcher's shop window.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Ben heaved himself up, first getting one elbow up onto the roof, then the other, and finally his whole bruised body.

"Easy," he said, with a lopsided grin. "Jago Moon would be proud of me."

Then the quarterstaff struck him from behind, catching him in the crook of his knees and sweeping his legs out from underneath him. *Or maybe not*.

Ben's eyes blazed as he saw his assailant for the first time.

"You fancy playing rough, eh?" Ben taunted, but the words had barely passed his lips when a missile caught him low in the gut, leaving him gasping for breath. It was a crossbow bolt with a weighted head, fired at close range by his slender attacker, who was now backflipping away across the roof.

He rubbed his bruised stomach, grateful that the bolt that had hit him was made for stunning a foe, not killing them. His eyes locked on his attacker. Ben had fought with this opponent many times before, and there was something almost teasing about their manner which made Ben see red.

And then it came: the tinkling laugh.

"So it's like that, is it?" said Ben, reaching for his belt and unclipping a short brass tube. With a practised flick of the wrist it expanded into a quarterstaff of his own, which he spun from hand to hand; another of the skills that Jago Moon had taught him.

He knew that his assailant was not alone. When they came for him like this, they always hunted in pairs, and

the deep voice that had called out to him certainly did not belong to the slight, loose-limbed creature who remained teasingly out of reach. Ben braced himself and waited for the thud of feet on tiles that would announce their arrival.

Ben strained his ears. No sound came.

He looked around him, keeping light on his feet, waiting and alert. Then he heard it. It was a sound which still gave him goosebumps. The ugly clouds parted and swirled into eddies, stirred by the beating of enormous wings.

"Look no further," said the angel who landed in front of him. "And draw your sword."

"Here we go again," said Ben.

Even though this was by no means the first time that he had encountered an angel, Ben could not completely control the quiver of fear which suddenly grabbed him. There was something deeply unnerving about facing a being that was not of this world.

The angel in front of him was tall and powerful, with long dark hair hanging around a face which was simultaneously young and incredibly old. It was as if this man in the prime of his life had somehow witnessed everything that was terrible throughout history; all his scars were on the inside. He was wearing an open-necked, high-collared shirt, and a long, black, square-tailed coat,

which had been tailored for him personally to make allowance for the huge white wings which emerged from beneath it.

What always rattled Ben though, even more than the viciously sharp sword that the angel had drawn from its scabbard, were the angel's eyes. They didn't just see him, they saw *into* him. Everything that he was, everything that he had done, no secret was left undisturbed. It was a terrible thing, Ben thought, to be seen by an angel.

With a calmness born out of practice, Ben retracted his quarterstaff using the button on its hilt and clipped it back onto his belt. Then slowly, his gaze not flinching from the angel's weapon, Ben reached over his shoulder and drew his own sword from its sheath on his back. It was a light blade, slender and finely balanced. It was, as Jago Moon had been keen to instil, a weapon of defence and last resort. To take a life, even the life of an enemy, was not the Watcher way.

Ben flicked his wrist, making the tip of his sword carve invisible curls in the air.

The angel smiled approvingly and then unleashed his attack.

Ben didn't have time to think any more; all he could do was react.

The angel's sword slashed towards him in a furious

barrage of blows; right cheek; left flank; right flank; left cheek. Ben blocked every swipe but he felt himself being forced backwards across the roof, step by step. Desperately he made a counter-attack, diving forwards and then rolling back up to his feet behind the angel, with a spinning slash at his opponent's legs. However, a single beat of his wings lifted the angel above the arc of Ben's blade, and when he landed he attacked with renewed ferocity, sending Ben scurrying back on his hands and feet just to stay out of reach of the onslaught.

Ben tried to concentrate on what Jago Moon had taught him. *Focus. Breathe. Anticipate,* Moon would say. *Choices and consequences, Ben*. All good advice, he was sure, but pretty hard to manage when someone was trying to hack your head off.

Ben scrabbled back onto his feet just in time to parry an almighty downward blow which would have cleaved his head in two. His body still ached where he had slammed into the wall, and his arms were getting heavier, his muscles burning. Ben was losing and the angel knew it.

It was then that he backed into his other opponent, who had been waiting patiently on the rooftop. While he had been focusing on not getting his bonce chopped off, Ben had forgotten about the other attacker, the one with the crossbow and the playful laugh. Too late he felt

their arms around him and, caught off balance, he was flung to the floor. The small figure followed through with a sharp open-handed blow to his wrist, knocking Ben's sword from his hand, before pinning him securely to the ground.

Ben lay on his back, struggling for breath, while his adversary sat astride his chest, knees on his shoulders, hands clamped firmly around his wrists. He looked for his sword. It was only a few feet away. It may as well have been miles.

He looked up into the face of his victor.

And, as always, she laughed.

"We must stop meeting like this," said Lucy Lambert, her cheeks flushed with effort.

"Very funny," said Ben, meaning to sound rather nonchalant about the whole thing but coming across as more petulant than he would have liked. "You can let me up now. I've had enough training for one day, don't you think?"

"Anything you say, oh mighty one," said Lucy, releasing him. She put out her hand and pulled Ben to his feet. He flashed her a quick grin but Lucy only held his gaze for a moment before turning away. She busied herself tidying her equipment and checking everything was in place on her belt.

She was a strong girl, in more ways than one, Ben knew. She was a Watcher to the core, standing there in the leather trench coat they all wore, her brass-rimmed goggles on the top of her head, like a crown in her long honey-coloured hair. Instinctively her hand went to her face as she felt his eyes on her, touching the long livid scar that split her right cheek in two and the eyepatch which hid the worst of her old wound.

"Be good," she said out of the side of her mouth. "Josiah is coming. None of your backchat."

The angel approached them, his footsteps measured. "Well," said Josiah, slipping his sword back into its sheath. "How do you think that went?"

"Sweet as a nut," said Ben.

"Apart from the fact that you would have been killed if I were Claw Carter or one of the Legion's Feathered Men," Josiah replied.

"All right," Ben snapped. "Keep your halo on."

Ben was tired, he was bleeding from grazes to his knees and elbows, and his head was spinning. Since he had joined the Watchers, most days had followed the same pattern. Endless training, constant lectures from Jago Moon and Mother Shepherd, the ageing leader of the Watchers. *Think like this. Act like that. Be prepared*. And yet, according to them, he still wasn't ready to go on anything

more challenging than a long-range scouting mission. All he ever got was *Not yet. Not today. When the time is right*. It was driving him mad with frustration.

The sense of elation that he had felt just moments earlier when he was jumping free, suddenly abandoned him, and the weight of his responsibility chained him to the spot. Ben felt Josiah looking at him, those ancient eyes stripping away all his outer layers of protection to bore into his soul.

The Watchers believed that Ben was the Hand of Heaven, the great leader promised by prophecy. It was a great destiny, but not one that Ben had asked for.

Deep down, Ben couldn't help but wonder if they had got it all wrong.

Did it seem likely that a street urchin from the East End, always in some sort of trouble, was really the one person who would end the war between the Watchers and the Legion? Ben was always up for a dare, but even he wouldn't have picked himself for this one. Mother Shepherd certainly had the wisdom, Jago Moon had the courage, and Lucy Lambert had just about all the qualities necessary, as far as he could see. But him? Ben Kingdom from Old Gravel Lane?

And what if he let them down? What then?

Ben rolled his shoulders and pinched at an imaginary

pain in his neck. *Head up, Benny boy*, he told himself. *Put on a brave face. Brass it out.*

Ben retrieved his own sword. He could see Josiah and Lucy waiting for him, before they all returned to camp. They looked at him with expressions full of expectation, but Ben was certain that his own doubts were written all over his face.

"I'll catch you up," said Ben, dropping down on one knee to fiddle with a shoelace that didn't need tying. "If Nathaniel is back yet," he called to Lucy, "give him a dead arm from me."

"I'll do better than that," laughed Lucy. "I'll tell him how his little brother was beaten by a girl…again!"

"Thanks for that," said Ben as he watched them leave.

That was another thing Ben found annoying. His big brother was allowed out on proper missions, and had even been in a few skirmishes, but Ben – the leader-in-waiting, so Mother Shepherd said – was never even allowed out of eyeshot.

"Give me strength," Ben whispered softly, his hand dipping into his pocket and touching an old silver Coin which lay there. "Or failing that, give me a bit of luck."