



CATTLEFISH

"Dave Freer always delivers compelling, fast-moving, and addictive fantasy adventures."

& GARTH NIX &

Dave Freer

CUTTLEFISH

Dave Freer



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Summary: In an alternate 1976 dominated by coal power and the British Empire, Clara Calland and her mother, an important scientist, embark on a treacherous journey toward freedom in Westralia aboard a smugglers' submarine, the *Cuttlefish*, pursued by Menshevik spies and Imperial soldiers.

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*To my beloved Goddaughters, Emily and Teagan.
May your stars always burn bright and cast a wide and beautiful light.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is ever just poured out of an author. *Cuttlefish* is no different in that respect anyway. It owes its existence to my agent, Mike Kabongo, and to my editor, Lou Anders. Lou is the kind of editor most new authors dream they'll get when they venture into being published, and I'm glad it's happened to me at last.

The *Cuttlefish* is the submarine you get when a scientist spends too much time talking to an inventor about ways to do things in a coal-powered universe. I love talking to a guy who doesn't say "You can't do that," but helps me think of ways that allow me to do it plausibly. Thank you, Peter.

And always, this book would not be without Barbara.

CHAPTER 1

It was after midnight, and London's lights shimmered on the waters that had once been her street. Something dark moved down there, in the murky depths. Bubbles of smoke belched up in its wake. No one was likely to notice. The still, warm air already reeked of coal smoke, and the rotting ooze lying down on the drowned street that had once been Landsdown Way bubbled anyway.

The dark shadow crept onwards into Wandsworth Canal, and down into Nine Elms Waterway, and then slipped through the rotting concrete teeth into the deep channel.

Like the rest of the crew of the *Cuttlefish*, Tim Barnabas let out a sigh of relief. He knew all about the dangers of the Stockwell tube run—dead trees, fallen masonry, and, of course, the chance of detection in the relatively shallow waters of London's street-canal. Even though the submarines of the Underpeople did this run often, it was still the most risky part of their journey.

“Up snuiver, Seaman,” said Captain Malkis. “Let's breathe before we head down-channel.”

Tim worked the brass crank with a will, sending the breathing pipe to the surface of the Thames.

He swallowed hard to sort out the effect of the pressure change on his ears.

And then an explosion rocked the *Cuttlefish*. Rang the sub like a bell. Tim could hear nothing. But he saw Captain Malkis push the dive levers to full.

A blast of water sprayed out of the snuiver outlet, soaking them all, before the cutoff valve closed off. The *Cuttlefish* settled onto the bottom of the dredged channel. No one moved or spoke. Tim's ears still rang, but he could hear sounds again, and saw the captain signal to the Marconi man hunched protectively over the dials and valves of his wireless set. The Marconi operator nodded, wound his spooler, and sent an aerial wire up to the surface.

Tim watched the man's face in the dim glow of the battery lights. His expression grew increasingly bleak. He flicked the dial expertly to another frequency. Then the Marconi operator pulled the headphones off. “I got the Clapham Common sender first. Transmission cut out after an SOS. I picked up Parson's Green. They weren't even sending coded messages. Just reports that Stockwell's been blown, and Clapham had reported that they were under attack by men of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, before they went off air, Captain. And I picked up a signal on the Royal Navy calling the channel. The HMS *Mornington* and the HMS *Torquay* are ordered to start laying dropping mines in the Thames Channel from Blackfriars Point to Rotherhithe Bay. The captain of the *Mornington* was getting mighty shirty about the operation not running according to orders, and him still being below Plumstead Shoal and not on station.”

Captain Malkis's face showed no trace of expression. They all knew that the Inniskillens were Dutch Malcolm's special troops. As the chief of Imperial Intelligence, the duke had made them into a regiment to be feared. “Get the aerial and the snuiver down, crewmen.” He turned to the engine-room speaker tube. “Chief Engineer. I'll have all the power that you can give us. Mr. Mate.” He turned to the First Mate Werner. “You work out our time to the mouth of the Lea. We'll see how they like risking their ships in the Canningtown shallows.”

“Captain...should we not go back?” asked the first mate, his voice cracking, his heavy Dutch accent even thicker than usual.

“No, Mr. Mate,” said Malkis. “It's us...or rather our passenger, that they're after. It's just as well that we set our departure forward as soon as the Callands arrived.”

Tim cranked the snuiver in. He could feel the heavy, slow thump of the *Cuttlefish's* engines picking up speed. The breathing pipe clicked home. “Snuiver down, Captain,” he said, trying to keep his voice as controlled as the ship's master. It quavered slightly. But he didn't scream. He didn't say, “My man, I need to go back to the tunnels to see if she's all right,” although those were the words that wanted out, and his fear dried his mouth and made it hard to speak.

“Good lad, Barnabas,” said the captain, as if this was something that happened every day. “Go down to Chief Barstone in the engine room. He'll have work for an extra greaser if he's going to keep the engines running at this speed.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Tim did his best to salute without bumping any of the brass instruments that protruded into the small bridge space.

He turned to leave. “Barnabas.” The captain's voice halted him.

“Sir.” Tim halted.

“The Underpeople have more tunnels, and locks, and secret ways than the king's men know about, boy,” the captain said, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder gently but firmly. “It's our home, our territory; we know it. It's not the first time Duke Malcolm's had a go at us. And it won't be the last. Now get along with you.”

Tim swallowed. Nodded. He couldn't actually say anything, because his voice was too choked up. He turned away before the captain could see the tears starting, and hurried along the narrow gangway and then down the ladder to the lower deck. At the base of it he nearly ran smash into something that had no place on a submarine.

A girl. A girl in a flouncy dress with silly little puff sleeves. Honestly! Where did she think she was? On a pleasure barge cruising along Pall Mall Canal?

“Hi, hold on,” she said, grabbing his arm as he tried to squirm past. Her blue eyes were bright and wide with excitement, and one of her pale blonde plaits had come undone. She brushed the fine hair away from her eyes, “What's going on?” she asked, smiling at him.

“I'm busy,” he said gruffly, hoping that he'd wiped all trace of the tears away. “Got to get to the engine room.”

“Oh, it's so important that you are,” she said, teasingly. “Just tell me what the bang was?”

“The Inniskillens blowing up my home,” he said fiercely as he pulled his arm free and blundered on, blinded by the tears again, down the passage.



Clara Calland stared after him. She nearly ran after him too, to ask him what he meant. But...horrible snotty London boy. He'd looked nice, with a bit of a grin on his brownish face, when she'd seen him earlier, bringing their two small valises to the cabin. And he'd helped to carry Mother's book trunk. When you considered the size of the cabin, maybe it was just as well they'd had to leave everything behind.

She considered going up the ladder to find someone else to ask. But...it sounded like trouble. More trouble. She'd been so relieved when they had finally got out of the smelly, wet tunnels under London and into this strange submarine. The whole idea just fascinated her. Of course, submarines were something she'd heard stories about, and hadn't ever expected to really experience. They were illegal, banned in all civilized countries. Yet...everyone knew they existed. One of the girls from school, one of the Cashel sisters, claimed that she'd once seen one in Tralee Bay. Which was possible...anything could happen down in Kerry. It was crock full of rebels, down there, like Cork used to be before most of the city got drowned. She swallowed. Daddy had once let slip that his trips away had taken him to Kerry. She'd said that she hoped he was safe from those rebel scum. He'd just tousled her hair and laughed. That was before the men from Scotland Yard had come and taken him to the New Ear

Barracks military prison, to be detained indefinitely at His Majesty's pleasure.

~~She stared blindly down the narrow little passage. She didn't want to be here. She wanted her old familiar life back again. Mother and Dad together again, home and school and...~~

That was where it broke down. Clara, who always tried to be honest with herself, had to admit that she did not want her school life back. Nor did she want to go back to the tall, cold house on Redmond Street that they'd been living in when her life had suddenly turned upside down.

So, instead, she went back through the narrow little steel door and climbed up onto her bunk in the broom-cupboard-sized cabin. On the bed below, her mother was asleep, the deep sleep of absolute exhaustion, and, Clara realised, of relief.

Clara lay down on the thin horse-hair mattress and thought back about just how they'd ended up here. Parts of it cut at her like a knife.

CHAPTER 2

On the day it had all started, Clara had not wanted to leave school. It was not that St. Margaret's School for the Children of Officers and Gentlemen in Fermoy, Cork, Ireland, was a place that she loved. She detested every inch of it, from the courtyard with its limp Union Jack, surrounded by three stories of clattering corridors and classrooms, to the coal cellar that Ellen—helped by the three terror—had pushed her into last week. Clara knew that she should keep quiet, keep her head down...but she wasn't good at that. And the girls on the top of the pile were bigger than her, better at sports, popular with boys and with the teachers...but stupid, too.

Well, the library—with its tall stacks of slightly musty leather-bound books—mostly fifty years old, and, often as not, from parts of the Empire that had vanished beneath the waves in the Big Melt—was the all right part of the school. It had books and protection, in the shape of a librarian on duty. Besides, going in there was something the popular girls wouldn't be caught dead doing. So Clara had been lurking in between the stacks. She'd been looking at a book on the Australian Colonies, complete with pictures of funny-looking black men with painted throwing sticks and very few clothes.

No decent Englishman would be seen like that! Not even at New Brighton! The other girls would at least pretend to be shocked. That, and the angry expression on the man's face, made Clara curious enough to start reading. She'd read all the fiction in the place years ago, and besides, it was about a place that was a long way away, a place where she was unlikely to meet other St. Margaret's girls and be jeered at or, worse, sniffed at and turned away from. Books like this were good for dreams. She'd like to go there...It would be far enough away from home so she would not have to explain to her mother that she had got a B for chemistry in the latest set of tests. It didn't matter that she'd got 98 for mathematics, no.

She looked at the leather cover: *Queensland, the Dominion of Australia. Its People and the Quaint Customs of the Native Inhabitants*. A place on the other side of the world...it would be far away from anyone who knew that her father was in prison. Clara wasn't sure if they regarded that as any better than her mother being divorced, but she knew that when you added the two together it made her life in Fermoy, and at St. Margaret's, barely worth living.

Then, to her utter horror, she'd heard her mother's voice. "Is my daughter Clara here?"
Did she *have* to come here?

"Yes, Dr. Calland." The librarian sniffed. "I believe Miss Calland is in the geography section." Disapproval was written clearly in the librarian's tone. Parents, even the daughters of an original founding lady-governor, were not welcome on the school grounds. They should hand over their children at the gate, and their money at the front office, and that was it. A divorced mother, wandering around unaccompanied, would be as welcome at St. Margaret's as leprosy.

What was her mother doing here? Clara wondered, caught between irritation and sudden fear. Something must be wrong. She should be at work, in her laboratory at Imperial Chemicals and Dyes.

Clara's mother was tall, elegant, and all the other things Clara had decided she wasn't ever going to grow up to be: womanly, and a research chemist. Her mother's hair was always so precisely pinned up, especially when she went out...but it definitely was not in perfect order right now. And she was very pale. The moment her mother stepped around the stack, Clara knew that something was very wrong.

The fact that she put her finger to her lips was also somewhat of a clue. "Ah, Clara," said her

mother, a little too loudly and cheerfully, quite unlike herself. "You must come with me right now. I have a motoring car waiting out front."

A car? Almost no one had one of those. The trams ran well and to time. Fuel for motoring cars was ruinously expensive too. Well, in the British Empire. It was said that in America even a lot of ordinary people owned cars. The idea of going in one was rather exciting. "Yes, Mother," she said, doing her best to sound like a good St. Margaret's girl. "I must just take out my library books and collect my satchel."

"You can do that tomorrow, Clara. I am going to Belfast now, and I need to make certain arrangements," her mother said, firmly, while shaking her head and beckoning, a pleading expression on her face.

Clara got the message. She still wasn't sure what it meant. But she was perfectly happy to leave her satchel, and the chemistry test inside it—which had to be signed by her mother—behind. The library books were a bit more of a wrench. She put the book back in its place on the shelf and took her mother's outstretched hand.

Really. Holding hands. As if she were a little girl or something. But the look on her mother's face made her take it. Mother's hand was cold and damp.

Dr. Calland smiled politely at the sour-faced librarian, and led her out. Down the corridor. And then...away from the front gate.

"It's the other way," said Clara.

Her mother shook her head. "I'll explain when I have a chance. Come with me, Clara. Just come along without arguing, just this once, please."

That had been enough to get Clara to follow her into the junior teachers' common room. It was empty right now. They were all away taking luncheon at the dining hall.

On the far side of the room was a little fire escape door next to the class racks. Clara's mother reached over the top of the cast iron fretwork on the edge of the rack of workbooks waiting to be marked. She felt about...and took down a key. She breathed a sigh of relief. "I was worried someone might have dusted and found it. Oh well. It's only been sixteen years."

She fitted the key into the lock of a door marked FIRE ESCAPE, DO NOT LOCK. Clara noticed that her mother's hands were trembling slightly. The little door creaked open. "They removed the key of the fire escape door because the headmistress found out that we'd been using it to sneak in when we were late for chapel and assembly," said her mother, with almost a hint of a smile. "I had had two spare keys cut, because I knew someone was bound to tumble to our using it. It'll serve them right if the place catches fire and they all roast."

Clara knew that her mother had taught here at St. Margaret's, back while she'd been a student. The idea of her being late for anything, or even doing something as...well, as underhand as that was quite strange, though. Parents didn't, did they? At least, not her mother. She was always so...proper.

They went through the doorway and out onto the landing, and her mother carefully locked the door behind them. That was more like her mother, than sneaking in late for assembly! The steep, rusty steel fire escape led down the outside of the old brick back wall facing the camogie fields, with the canon path beyond them.

"It's to be hoped that they keep watching the gate. I told them it could take a little time to get you out of there," said Clara's mother. "Here." She dug into her handbag and pulled out a pair of kerchiefs. Handed one to Clara. "Put one over your hair," she said hastily, shaking the other out. "We're too obvious with our blonde heads."

Clara was shocked. "We'll look like gypsies, Mother!" Being blonde in Ireland announced that you were possibly English or German. No one would hide that! Otherwise you might be thought to be merely Irish.

“Good. They're not looking for gypsies,” her mother answered, tying the kerchief in place. “I wish I'd thought of shawls.”

They made their way down the narrow stair and along the weedy edge of the third-team camogie field. There was a gap in the privet hedge at the far end of the field that girls who wanted to avoid camogie practice used to slip away through.

Clara knew it well.

It appeared that her mother must have known it too. It had proved to be quite a day for ruining the ideas she'd had about her parent.

They were squeezing through the gap when someone yelled behind them. It didn't sound like the King's English. “They're onto us,” said Mother, pushing her forward. Clara had been trying to avoid ripping her school skirt, up to that point. It was obvious that her mother, who normally would have had words with her about tears or stains, didn't care right now.

There was a coal barge heading away from the Blackwater toward Factory Town, with its smokestack dribbling dirty smoke from the cheap brown coal.

“Thank heavens,” said her mother. “Run Clara. Jump onto her. Tell Pdraig to hide you. I'll try and head them off. I'll find you later.”

“But—”

“Just go!” Clara saw, to her horror, that her mother, a lifelong pacifist, was taking a gun out of her purse.

Clara recognised it. It was her father's. She remembered the fight between her parents—because he'd dared to bring such a thing into the house—far too well to ever forget it. But surely he'd...he had it with him when he'd been arrested?

Mother's hands were shaking. “Go, Clara. Please!”

Biting her lip, Clara backed away. But she did not run. She wasn't sure why she didn't. Her mother had obviously gone mad, and was aiming the gun back through the scraggly privet. There was a banister. Her mother turned—even whiter in the face than before. “I thought I told you to run. Go. *Now!*”

“Come with me. Please. Please!”

Then there was the sound of several shots from back near the school, and a sudden crack of branches and a scattering of leaves.

And then a shrill whistle sounded, and someone shouted, “Stand! In the name of the King. Hold your fire!”

More shots were fired in answer to that, as her mother snatched her hand. “Hopefully they'll keep each other busy. Let's run. Next time please do what I tell you, Clara. This is not the time or place to argue.”

They ran. The unfamiliar barge was already picking up speed, running barely a yard off the canal margin. A black-faced bargee beckoned furiously, and they jumped aboard. “Get down among the coal, like. Be quick about it,” he said hastily. “Mad girl. Shooting! There be trouble about this.”

Following her mother's lead, Clara burrowed down into the small lumps of coal, trying to dig her way into it.

It was black, dirty coal, and then the bargee took a shovel and poured it over them. And then more. And more. He was not that gentle about it. “Black your face,” said the mother who normally told her to wash it.

The canal was a busy place, with barges pushing along both ways, as they slowly moved further from the school. “Squirm down as much as you can. And then keep still,” hissed her mother.

The thumping of the engine's pistons slowed. “Face down. Keep dead still,” said the bargee quietly.

Clara heard an angry English-accented voice, panting. “Why didn't you stop immediately?”

“Well, I'd like to have stopped immediately for you, sorr,” said the bargee, in a slow drawl, his

accent so thick as to make him hard to understand. “But t'irty-foive tons of coal keeps moving for while, like. So, it's sorry that I am. But a barge isn't like your motor-bicycle, Lieutenant. Can't start fast, can't stop fast. Can't do anything fast.”

“Pah. Mind your cheek, you Irish scum,” said the young officer, “or I'll have you locked up for disrespecting an officer. Now, I'm to search your vessel for a woman and a young girl.”

“Be my guest, sorr,” said the bargee. “No one in my cabin, as you can see, eh? T'eyre not here unless t'ey're lying on my coal. But look for yerself, sorr. Maybe t'ey're buried in it. Here's a shovel you'd like to dig t'rough it all.”

There was the meaty sound of a slap. “I warned you not to give me any more of your lip. I'll talk to you with me...”

“And what'll you do with t' barge, sorr? Nowt to tie her to here. She'll drift. Likely to block the canal. Colonel'll have t'at shiny pip off of your shoulder for t'at, I'm t'inking,” said the bargee, calmly.

There was a pause. An exasperated sigh. “Get on your way, then.”

“Why t'ank you, sorr,” said the bargee with mocking politeness. “I'll be doing t'at if you'd get off of my barge, like.”

A few moments later the big pistons began clanking again and the vessel shuddered and pushed on through the water.

“Stay down,” said the bargee quietly. So they did. The journey seemed endless.

“We're coming up to Mag's crib. Get yourselves off. And good luck,” said the bargee.

They scrambled up out of the coal and leapt out onto the muddy bank, which was here overhung by willow trees. There was a half-tumbled-down thatched cottage just beyond the trees, and her mother as coal-black now as the angry-looking man from Queensland in the book had been, led them through the tangle of mallows and bramble towards it.

Someone must have been watching, because the door opened before they got to it. “Get inside with you,” said the old woman in the doorway, hastily, peering around for any watchers. They scrambled in and she closed the door and bolted it behind them. There was not much light inside, with what little there was coming from a fire and two very small deep-inset windows, and it was hard to see much. But the poverty was obvious.

The old woman pointed at a wooden settle. “Sit you down. Padraig will be along soon.”

“Mother, what's going on?” Clara asked, as soon as they'd sat down.

Her mother was silent for a while, and Clara was about to ask again when she said, quietly, “I... made a mistake. I've got into a situation where they're going to kidnap me, or if they can't do that, kill me. And they want to take you to use as a lever on me, darling. They told me I should cooperate or you'd be hurt.”

“Who?” asked Clara.

“The Mensheviks. And now it seems as if the agents of Imperial Intelligence are after us too. The Russians brought me to the school to fetch you. But of course, the school porters won't allow me inside the gates of an all-girls school. I told the Russians you were doing some extra lessons, and they would take me a few minutes to get you out. They told me I'd have to hurry because Imperial Intelligence had just raided our house.”

“Oh.” Clara swallowed. She barely knew who the Mensheviks were, other than Russians. But she certainly knew who Imperial Intelligence were. They had arrested her father. “Who...who are these people? The bargee...this old woman? And what are we going to do?”

“Friends of your father's,” said mother, in that grim, defensive tone she always used when she mentioned him. “Friends of my mother's—your grandmother—too.”

“She was a fine lady,” said the old woman, nodding, smiling, showing missing teeth. “Had her head in the right place. And don't you worry, dearie. Padraig will sort it all out.”

Her mother said nothing. But Clara felt her mother's hand tense in hers.

~~The old lady went back to peering out of the small window. "If the polis come you'll be awa~~
through the back." She pointed to a small door. "There's a crawlway under the briars."

But all that came for them was the bargee, Padraig. He'd cleaned his hands and face, and changed his clothes. And by the way he spoke, he was no bargee after all. The thick Irish accent had all but vanished. He grinned at them. "You're a sight, the pair of you. Well, you'd better stay that way. I've organised transport to a safe house for you. But it's in a tink's cart, so you may as well look the part. Although you're even a bit dirty for it."

"And then, Padraig?" asked her mother. There was a real edge to her voice.

"We're arranging things. You've caused quite a stir, Dr. Calland. Fortunately, it seems that there are still people keen to give you shelter. And not just, like me, because of Jack."

Mother said nothing. But her hand tensed again.

Jack was Clara's father's name.



Lying on her narrow bunk in the submarine Clara could hear the boom of explosions echoing through the steel walls. She wished that she knew what they were and what was happening. But, as with much of this journey, she didn't. And she didn't know who to ask, since that boy had plainly not been going to talk to her. It was hard with no one her own age to ask, she thought, suddenly irritated all over again by how adults tended to fob you off, telling you that you were too young. Not too young for the problems and consequences of things, just too young to be told exactly what was going on. She'd badly wanted to know more about Padraig the not-really-a-bargee, and about her father. She'd wanted to know about why Padraig being mentioned had upset her mother so much. And she really wanted to know just what her mother had done to get all of them following her like a pack of blood-crazed foxhounds.

Clara looked around the little cabin with its dim battery-powered light in its simple Bakelite fitting and its plain riveted steel walls. It was very different from the elegant colonnaded mansion they'd been hidden in outside Fermoy. Very different from the way they'd got from Ireland to London to London. Not so very long ago she'd wondered what it must be like to travel underwater, or through the air, instead of clickety-clack by tram. On the whole, the air part had been scarier—because mother was so very afraid—but it was also a lot more exciting and comfortable.

The Most Noble Malcolm Woldemar Adolf Windsor-Schaumburg-Lippe, Duke of Leinster, Margrave of Waldeck, Earl of Northampton, and Baron of a dozen lesser estates, English, German, Canadian, African, and Australian, wore, as always, his full regimental dress. He had, after finishing his schooling at Harrow, gone to Sandhurst, and thence joined the Inniskillen Fusiliers. He'd moved on to the Imperial Hierarchy since then, but even as the chief of Imperial Intelligence he had not forgotten them. He'd shaped the Inniskillen Fusiliers from an ordinary regiment into the enforcement arm of the secret service he headed. He let the Inniskillens know that he was one of them, and they in turn were his. He was the Duke of Leinster, and they deluded themselves that he cared about them.

Duke Malcolm didn't care what uniform he wore. He had little interest in clothing. His half-brother Ernest made a spectacle of himself in tasselled boots and mulberry half-pantaloon. One could do that...if one were the king. Duke Malcolm's only personal affectation was his long ivory cigarette holder. He liked it, for reasons that were his to know, and for others to fail to guess at.

As usual, at this time of day, his staff were bringing him the morning summary of reports. "Your Grace," said Colonel Wexford, of the Irish Interest section, "we've picked up on the movement of several senior Menshevik agents entering our operations area. The Russians are up to something."

"I assume you're tailing them," said the duke, listening very carefully, to what was said, and to the tone of it. There was a wariness in Wexford's voice. If nothing was going wrong, the staff tended not to tell him about it afterwards. Something plainly wasn't going to plan.

The duke's guess was right. "Yes, of course, Your Grace," said the colonel, nervously. "But I have to admit that we've lost track of two of them. We assumed they were there to interact with one of the rebel groups. But there has been no chatter from our informers about it." He cleared his throat. He spoke to Major George, over at Russian Interests, and obtained some background on the men we've identified. One of them is...unusual. Count Alexander Pulshikoi is the science advisor to the Duma. Major George said he was once a very senior commander in their secret police. But what exactly he does now, and for quite what organ of state he works, we are less than sure. I can't see why he would be travelling to Cork. To Fermoy. There is nothing much there apart from a big dyeing works—Imperial Chemicals and Dyes."

Duke Malcolm tapped the end of the slim ivory cigarette holder against his teeth. He looked out the window for a while, onto the soot-stained building reflected in the Pall Mall Canal, while the tension in the room grew. Then, without saying a word, he took up a pen, dipped it in the ink, and scrawled a note on his pad, ripped it off, and—after folding it neatly with slow precise folds—dropped it into the vacuum-canister, sealed it very deliberately, and put the canister into the tube with his mouth next to his desk. He pulled the brass lever activating the system.

The canister whooshed away and rattled off down and along the tubes to the records and archival section. Duke Malcolm looked at his officers, tense and watchful. Little things could frighten them, and he played on that. "I will review the dossiers," he said, coolly. "Is there anything else?"

Just the sight of that note being sent had been enough to start the colonel sweating, little rivulets pouring down his florid face. "No, Your Grace. The usual low level of unrest among the Catholics. But we're monitoring it."

"You'd better be." It probably wasn't important. But Duke Malcolm believed firmly in keeping his

officers just a little frightened. That meant sometimes taking a personal interest. They were afraid
tell him of their slips...like losing the Russians. But they were even more afraid not to.

CHAPTER 4

The engine room of the *Cuttlefish* was steamy, and the air was thick with coal smoke and the smell of hot oil. Oh, and the smell of sweat from the engineers and the navvies. The air was not pleasant to breathe down here. They were using compressed air to run on, because it was too risky to put even the engine-snuiver up, and the batteries were strictly for short runs, and operating on them was slower to recharge. So it was dim and smoky and busy.

Tim was grateful for both the busy and the dim part. He didn't want to think too much about Stockwell Tube Station, the explosions, and what might have happened to his home, but he couldn't really help doing that anyway. Not with the sound of the drop-mines that were exploding in the Thames Channel, echoing through the boat. Still, it was the silence between the explosions that was more worrying. The Royal Navy drop-miners would be listening with underwater microphones for the sound of the *Cuttlefish*'s engines, or—if those were silent—the sounds made by her crew. Tim kept a weather eye out for the “all quiet” light coming on. So far, so good.

They were running at a quarter speed at the moment, which meant the greasers had time to look at something other than the moving pistons. The slower speed meant that the *Cuttlefish* was backing edging her way about in the drowned streets of London. That was nearly as dangerous as the drop-mines were. The debris down in the streets, and especially the fallen wires, could trap the submarine or damage her hull. She'd have her catfish-feelers—long thin rods with touch-sensitive little plungers on them—out, and the captain and his bridge would be as nervous as tunnel rats now.

The thought of tunnel rats was enough to make him hungry. Above-people might regard them as vermin, but in the tunnels of drowned London, they were all the meat people could get, as often as not. One couldn't eat the fish out of the polluted water. In many stagnant areas the water was even more corrosive, eating flesh and decaying even iron, and there was nothing alive near it.

Thinking about it was enough to bring the memories flooding back. It was hard enough to leave home. Was his mam still all right? Did the little dank Victorian-era rotting red-brick tunnel he'd grown up in, hunted in, played in, lived in, still exist? Who were this woman and her daughter anyway? Why had Duke Malcolm's men chased them so hard?

They were not good questions, and they gnawed at him as viciously as his hunger. Answers, like food, were not something that he'd get for a long while.



Clara had always found that uncertainty was far worse than knowing the worst could ever be. They'd been hidden in the mansion in Deer Park for days. It'd been terrifying...and boring. Nothing much to read. Her mother not talking. So Clara made up stories in her head, and slept. It meant that she woke up at odd hours. Sometimes even in the middle of the night.

Clara hadn't even been sure what time of night it was in the mansion, when the quiet conversation from the next room had cut into her sleep. She lay dead still, listening, nervous. She heard a man's voice. “I'd like to wait longer, but...well, informers. We know we have a problem. That's how they caught Jack.”

Her mother's voice was odd. A little shrill. “And you. Except that Jack took the fall for you. Mac

you out to be an innocent bystander, Padraig. And you let him.”

“I’ve told you before. Jack’s told you too, as much as he can,” Padraig-the-not-really-a-bargainer replied, his voice very even. “It was a case of him or me. And he chose that it should be him, Mary.”

Her mother’s silence spoke louder than words.

The next afternoon they’d been smuggled onto the train to New Dublin. There had been guards and checkpoints at the station checking the passengers getting onto the train.

They inspected documents carefully—especially those of women and girls. They even took some of the young men aside into specially set-up cubicles, where they were obviously making sure that they really were young men. Clara watched through a crack in the guard’s van door. She and her mother had been smuggled into it while the guard’s van and carriages were still sitting in the shunting yards, and missed the search altogether. Still, it was a relief when the whistle sounded and the *Royal Irish Mail* began to slowly gather steam, hissing and shuddering her way along the rails, away from Fermoyle along the great Southern and Western Railway’s busiest track.

They’d got off the train at a small halt just before New Dublin itself. It was odd that the gleaming express train should even stop there. But it did, briefly, and the frightened little conductor shooed them off like hens.

They jumped down into the darkness, complete with their new valises and a little tin trunk. Somehow mysterious someone had been shopping for them. The clothes were expensive, fashionable, and not all what either of them would have chosen. But Mother had her own books in the tin trunk. Somehow they’d got those—but nothing for Clara to read. She’d had a go at *Chemical Principles* by Heydenbroek, but even peering out of the little window at the darkness had more to offer than that.

Her mother wasn’t talking, lost in a private world of her own sorrows and worries. Clara wished she’d at least say where they were going, or why. When you were just little, a baby or at junior school it was all very well being carried along by your parents’ lives, she thought. But surely she was old enough now to know, to do something? To make decisions?

“They’re supposed to meet us,” said Mother, looking around into the darkness, fearfully.

“The train was early,” said Clara. “I heard our little conductor man tell a passenger. Who was supposed to meet us?”

There was a pause. “I can’t tell you, love.” Her mother sounded...apologetic?

Clara twined her fingers in her mother’s. “Can’t or won’t, Mummy?” She never called her that. Mother was...babyish. Her mother was too serious, too thoughtful. And always “Mother.” Her father had been the jokester, always making both of them laugh. And he’d always been “Daddy.” Yet...under the jokes she’d always suspected that he was even more serious than her mother. It suddenly came to her that he must have been, and must have been hiding that side of himself from her. That hurt. And it worried her.

Her mother took a deep breath. “Won’t. You see, if they catch us, you won’t know. And people are risking their lives for us. The less you know, the safer they—and you—will be.”

Clara had to admit that she’d always been the one to exasperate teachers with her curiosity and her quick tongue. They wanted her to learn just exactly what was put in front of her, and not to explain why or how. It had always made her irritated in class, because understanding why made learning so much easier. And now she felt just the same. Only with added fear, and too many hidden nasty things out there. She shivered. They were still standing in the middle of the tracks, staring after the departing train. She pointed to the little iron roof of the halt. “Well...let’s go over there, and wait. And you can tell me what I can safely know, at least. Please.”

“Very well...but over there. In the bushes. I think I hear another train.” So they retreated with their valises and the trunk into what proved to be nettles, but the train was coming fast, so there was no time to move away from them.

It was only a green tank-engine spouting sparks from the stack, with its single headlight gleaming on the silver rails, racing towards them.

With a metallic screech, it came to halt, and four men leapt out of the cab. Their plumed shako proclaimed them to be Duke Malcolm's own troops. That was enough to frighten Clara and her mother farther back into the nettles. "Search the station. And be quick. They might have got down at Clancreath. That fool didn't know for sure," shouted the one who had remained in the cab with the driver.

Clara could see the gold of his epaulettes—a senior officer. Her mother pulled her down and they began crawling away from their belongings and deeper into the darkness as quietly as they could.

Along the road to their right a vehicle approached the station, coming fast, its powerful light cutting through the drifts of smoke and the night-mist. "They'll be caught," whispered Mother.

But it didn't happen quite that way. The big touring car roared up to the station, followed closely by another. And a third. The five soldiers plainly weren't expecting them...or expecting any real trouble. Their rifles weren't at the ready.

The same could not be said of the men who tumbled out of the cars, and their weapons did not look like ordinary rifles either. They outnumbered the soldiers three to one, anyway. "Put down your weapons, and raise your hands," said the tall man from the first car. He had a slight foreign accent. "Now."

The first three soldiers did what they were told. The officer, in the cab of the tank-engine, tried to draw his pistol. And one of the newcomers shot him.

It was not a loud, dramatic bang like it was in those American Biograph shows....It was just a stutter of noises no louder than a string of the smallest firecrackers on Guy Fawkes night. The weapon was plainly silenced in some way. But the officer fell out of the cab like a puppet whose strings had been cut. And there was blood. It was too horrific to be real. Clara knew she'd screamed. She couldn't help it.

The one soldier who hadn't surrendered threw his rifle at the nearest of the new arrivals and ran straight towards Clara and her mother. He fell over the tin trunk—which might have saved his life. The guns might be silenced but they ripped into the undergrowth. "Don't shoot. Dr. Calland is here," snapped the tall man. "Sergei, Ivan, Viktor. After him. He's unarmed now. Dr. Calland. You can come out. It is safe."

Some of the newly arrived men jumped down off the platform and walked into the nettles. Mother stayed dead still, and so did Clara. It didn't help. A beam of torchlight was fixed on them, and they had to get up.

"Count Alexander Pulshikoi," said her mother, to the tall man who had been giving orders, with a degree of coolness Clara had to admire. "What are you going to do with us?"

He clicked his heels and bowed. "Exactly what I said I would do, Doctor, before you were foolish enough to run away. You will be flown to Moscow. Our scientists are very keen to work with you. They are very excited about your work. It's a line that has not been pursued for some time."

"Flown? From here?" asked Mother.

He smiled. The smile was all teeth and no humour. "You will fly to London in a few hours' time on the regular shuttle-flight. There you can board a good Russian airship."

Her mother took a deep breath. "You'd better bring our bags and my trunk. I'll need that."

He nodded. "It will be done. I think we need to depart from here."

"What about those Inniskillens?" asked her mother. "They should not be hurt. Please."

He smiled his false smile again. "They will not be. Merely detained along with the train driver. We cannot afford to leave them here, that is all. And they would have killed you, you know."

Clara could feel her mother's hand squeeze hers. Her mother obviously didn't trust him either, but there was nothing they could really do.

They'd been whisked by car to the Dublin airship terminal, and from there—separately, to stop the doing anything rash in public, as Count Alexander had coolly explained—into a locked first-class cabin, part of a suite reserved for the Russian ambassador. The cabin had been about five times the size of the little cubby they would later share on the *Cuttlefish*. The other difference was that the door was open on the submarine. They could come and go as they pleased....

On the airship Clara had had to crawl out along the ventilation shaft to go anywhere.

CHAPTER 5

The Royal Navy commodore facing Duke Malcolm was doing his best to bluster and not to look very afraid.

Duke Malcolm felt the Royal Navy had...delusions. They liked to pretend they were the Senior Service. That the British Empire's existence and safety rested on the Royal Navy. But these days, with the Empire crumbling and unravelling on the edges, and buckling in the middle under the weight of its people and the disastrous effects of the sudden melt, it was Imperial Intelligence that held the Empire together. The Royal Navy was still the world's greatest maritime force, and her fleets could sail anywhere in the world they wished to, as they had for more than fifty years since the 1914–1915 War. Well, they could sail anywhere, if they could get the coal, as his half-brother was inclined to say. The Americans and Russians had enough coal to get them anywhere. They just didn't have the fleet, and they didn't have the munitions for a long war either. The methane burst that had accompanied the Meltdown had killed off half the sailors in the Russian Navy, a problem that Duke Malcolm wished the Americans had too. But neither rival had the food for their guns for a sea war, or any other way to fight against the British Empire.

If Duke Malcolm had his way, they never would. This bungler would learn the hard way, that the navy, too, took orders from Duke Malcolm. And the navy saw that they were carried out. "Your ship was not on station, Commodore. You had your orders."

"We were waiting on the tide, Your Grace," said the commodore, stiffly. "We'd been told that the attack was scheduled for one hundred hours...."

"Or on the receipt of our signal," interrupted Duke Malcolm. "Our informer let us know the submarine was due to depart earlier than scheduled. We needed you there and ready. Not three miles from where you were supposed to be."

The duke signed the order he had prepared. Folded it. Handed it to the naval officer. "Take that to Admiral Von Stael. You are dismissed."

The commodore opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, saluted, and left.

Duke Malcolm wondered how far down the hall he would get before looking at the order for his own court-martial.

He tapped the brass communicator button set into the leather of his desktop.

"Your Grace," his secretary's tinny voice issued from the instrument's speaker. "Shall I send in the man from the Royal Academy of Sciences?"

"Indeed, Miss Farthing," said the duke. "I am waiting for him." He put another of his long black Turkish cigarettes into the cigarette holder and lit it with his desk lighter, which was amusingly crafted like a cannon. He inhaled the aromatic smoke and waited.

Professor Browne was rather different from the naval officer. For a start he was clever enough to be afraid, and to show it. And secondly, he actually did not need to be. He was a moderately competent scientist, according to the dossier, and he played the game of politics very well. That was unusual in a scientist.

He was sweating copiously, and it was not a warm day. "Sit down, Professor," said the duke with far more affability than he'd shown the Royal Navy officer. "Now, tell me, what do you have for Imperial Security about this Calland woman? So far we've only been responding to the Russians trying

remove her. The affair involves, plainly, science. Presumably something she knows about, that cannot merely be duplicated from a formula. What is it, Professor? If we know the answer to that, perhaps we can step ahead."

The scientist rubbed his forehead with a large brightly coloured handkerchief. "It's difficult to guess just what she has discovered, Your Grace. It must, as you say, be something complex, that she has no grasp of, which makes it more difficult to guess, as her specialty was apparently synthetic dyes. But by researching the two Russian scientists she's been in correspondence with, we think it may possibly be an alternative to the Birkeland-Eyde process."

"Enlighten me, Professor Browne," said the duke, sitting back and drawing deeply on the ivory mouthpiece of his cigarette holder, preparing to try to understand whatever scientific jargon the fellow came up with. Both the Russians, and now the Underpeople, the water rats that lived beneath London, had gone to great lengths for this Dr. Calland. She must know something very valuable, for the risk and effort and resources given to transporting her. Not just a new shade of maroon for King Ernest's pantaloons.

It was easier to understand than he thought it was going to be.

"It is the process by which we make nitric acid," explained the professor. "It's the feedstock for synthetic fertilizers and some explosives. As an alternative to naturally occurring nitrates like Chilean saltpetre."

Now, a little too late, it all began to make sense, especially considering the slow bubbling war with Chile and Peru. No wonder the Russians wanted her! No wonder the Underpeople had helped her.

The British Empire controlled all the major natural sources of saltpetre. The source of nitrates that fed the army and navy's guns, as well as providing fertilizers...fighting a war without that, as the German Kaiser Wilhelm had found out, was a sure way to lose.

Duke Malcolm steepled his fingers and nodded. "Find out more about this woman, Professor, among your colleagues and her fellows. Try and find out more about the direction she's been working on too. Follow it up hard and fast. Expense is no object. In the meanwhile, if you'll excuse me, I need to authorize pursuit."

CHAPTER 6

First Mate Werner came down to the engine room as Tim's stomach was about to start digesting itself. "Mr. Engineer, we need some labour for the tick-tock," he said.

Tim found himself "volunteered." He didn't really mind, even if he was rather wary of the first mate. The mate was supposed to be a great submariner, but he had quite a temper, Tim had been told. Still, it would be a change from greasing fast-moving brass shafts, thinking about food, and feeling guilty because he could think about food, when he was feeling so miserable and worried about his mam and his home. But his mam had said he'd better join a sub crew because at least they could afford to feed him. And she was only half joking when she said it. Food was always short, and always expensive, in the tunnels.

They used strong cotton-tape slings to carry the heavy tick-tock up from the storage hold to the escape hatch. The heavy iron oval's inner works had to be wound up and set before being sealed, and put into the escape lock. Tim watched in fascination as the first mate did the preparation. There were cogwheels and springs and wires and a bullhorn and a modified Victrola. The precisely machined brass setscrews were positioned, and the three clockwork motors wound.

First Mate Werner stood up. "Seal it and put in the lock," he said, dusting off his hands.

Tim had been standing reading the dials and labels on the device as the mate worked. "Um. Isn't the arming switch supposed to be down, sir?" he asked.

The first mate gave him a poisonous look, but one of the engineers standing next to Tim packed up laughing. "He's right, Mr. Mate. You nearly forgot to arm the thing."

"So I did," said the mate, and he leaned down and flipped the switch. "Seal it and launch it, boys. Well spotted, lad."

They screwed the seal-plate shut, loaded the device, and flushed the tick-tock out of the escape hatch to swim away behind them. The tick-tock's little fins would carry it off, and soon it would start its work, while they crept on their way and lay silent, waiting.

The first mate tapped him on the shoulder as they turned to go back to the engine room. Tim thought he was in trouble, but all the mate said was, "Boy. You better go and tell the passengers that we're going to be on utter silence soon. We don't want them undoing the tick-tock's good work, eh?"

So Tim made his way up to the cabin. It went with being the youngest and smallest on the sub. You got to run all the errands. Even ones to girls with flouncy dresses and puff sleeves. He didn't know that much about girls of any sort, not that he didn't want to, and nothing at all about the frilly ones, except that he did not like that kind.

He knocked, quietly. She—the girl he'd met in the gangway earlier—opened the door without leaving her bunk. She held a finger to her lips and pointed to the sleeping woman with the pale, tired face below her. *Great!* thought Tim sourly. *I might as well have left them alone.*

She swung down from her bunk and came out of the cabin and into the walkway. "What is it?" she asked in a whisper.

Tim looked at the girl with her lace-trimmed dress. Felt awkward, as he usually did with girls. "Message from First Mate Werner. We've launched a tick-tock. You're to keep dead quiet," he whispered back.

"Oh. A what?" she asked, eyes bright with curiosity.

“It's a kind of decoy,” he explained quietly. “They're using underwater microphones to try to find us, see. So the tick-tock is a wind-up fake noisemaker. It's somewhere behind us. It's not going to hear if you make a racket.”

“A clockwork mouse to distract the ship-cat.” She grinned, making her look both nicer and younger. “All right.” She paused. “Mother is asleep. And I'm starving. And bored. Bored stiff. Can I come with you? I won't make a sound, I promise.”

He shook his head and pointed back at her cabin. “No. You'd just be in the way,” he said. Honestly, she thought this was a jolly good party or something. It wasn't a game.



Clara climbed back up onto her bunk, feeling more than slightly irritated. He wasn't that old. She was nearly fifteen...well, more than halfway to fifteen. She was as capable of doing anything as he was. After all, she'd got them off the airship.



The Mensheviks had obviously thought that being several hundred feet above the ground and having a locked door was enough to keep their prisoners trapped. She and her mother were prisoners, there was no doubt about it, but they were being treated well—as if they were needed, but not to be trusted.

The cabin, with its wood-panelled walls, deep leather armchairs, hunting scene prints, a little viewing bay window with a velvet-cushioned seat, heavy maroon-and-gold damask curtains, and a small roll top writing desk, wasn't what Clara had always thought of as a cell.

It was one, though.

Except that there was a polished brass gridded vent above the bed. The grid was held in place with two large screws. It wasn't a very big vent, but the truth of it was that Clara wasn't very large herself yet. Everyone said she'd grow. She spotted the grid right away. And pointed because...she was rather suspicious that someone might be listening.

Her mother's eyes widened slightly. They had taken the pistol from her mother's handbag. She had seemed almost relieved to lose it. But they hadn't taken her nail file. The big brass screws turned easily. The square duct behind it wasn't very much bigger than the vent. Mother wasn't going to fiddle down it. It was even going to be tight for Clara. Mother took a page out of her diary. She wrote: “I need to know if they're listening. If they are, keep crawling, and stay hidden. When you get a chance get out and go to this address: 14 Brunel Close. Near the Strand. And ask to speak to your grandmother. By name.” She paused, and then wrote and underlined: “If they are not listening, come back!”

Then she hugged Clara, very quickly, as if she was afraid to hold on for too long, and then made a stirrup with her hands for her daughter to get up and squeeze through the hole.

The next opening on the ventilator channel was onto the main suite. And Clara could hear, and even see, quite clearly, what was happening. Unfortunately she could not understand it. They were talking something foreign. She'd learned some German, French, and Portuguese at school, naturally, but not whatever language this was, presumably Russian. But she could count the men sitting there—the five who had brought them aboard, and the man that Mother had called Count Alexander. The count was talking to one of them, as they sat and drank some kind of wine. At this time of morning! The other four were playing cards and smoking. It made her want to sneeze. People weren't supposed to smoke just anywhere on an airship! Even she knew that, and she'd never been on one. There was a special room for it, as far from the gasbag and as insulated as possible. Trying to control her nose Clara began to wriggle her way back along the channel. It was nearly as difficult as not sneezing. She eventually

could prevent the sneeze no more, and muffled the *hachoo* desperately into her arm. If they heard her they gave no sign of it. The men just went right on talking.

And then came the next problem. Getting out of the hole backward. She eventually found it easier to go back past, and then forward and out. "Well?" asked her mother, quietly.

"I think," said Clara, taking a tasselled cushion from the window seat, and pushing it into the ventilation hole. "If we do this we could have a party in here and they would never know."

Mother smiled for the first time, Clara thought, in days. "We'll let them have the party."

"They are. They're drinking and smoking in there. Smoking, Mother. On an airship!?"

Mother nodded. "The smell carries. I wouldn't be surprised if the purser comes along to ask them to douse the butts. It's not quite as dangerous as it seems, as we're below the hydrogen and that is in sealed cells. It would take a leak to mix oxygen with it, and ignition in the main envelope for it to catch fire. But it gives me an idea. Let's see. I know I've got some potassium chlorate in here, and the trick will be to mix some bromine and some acetophenone without us being affected."

"What?" asked Clara.

And now her mother's smile was more like that of a fox dreaming it had found a new way into a chicken farm. "The reason why they should not have picked on a chemist, and left her with a supply of chemicals. I'll give them an experience with lachrymals and a smoke candle that they won't forget in a hurry. And hopefully we'll be able to get off the airship in all the panic. We were heading for London anyway. But we were going via Mull-bridge and Glasgow. This is quicker and more comfortable."

It sounded...fun. Not like her mother at all. But a voice of caution sounded in Clara. Those were the killers out there. She'd seen them do it. "Um. I could just crawl along and get help."

"Unfortunately, help would just arrest us. And not arrest the Russian ambassador's military attaché," said her mother. "I suspect we are now wanted persons. And they enjoy diplomatic immunity. And I certainly don't want to be caught by the British any more than the Russians."

That was puzzling. Clara had always thought she was British. Even when Imperial security had arrested her father.

So her mother had set about mixing her potions. Very witchy business, thought Clara. Mother even looked like a witch when she was muttering formulas. A little later Clara had to squirm down the ventilator channel with the potions and their fuse and the little igniter.

Clara had to change her clothes, as the dress was a dusty wreck. Then they settled down in the bay window of the cabin to watch the coastline come closer, and then the countryside pass below. They could still see the drowned buildings, roofs and chimneys sticking up out of the water, or still visible through it.

And then, when London came in sight, with weak sunlight gleaming on the murky canals, the count's henchmen knocked on their door, with a steward accompanying him. "Take yer bags, ma'am," asked the disinterested steward, unaware of the gun at his back. "We'll be landing in ten minutes."

So the trunk and the valises were taken from them. And there they sat, a prim young lady and her mother dear, Clara thought, keeping as straight a face as if she was in Algebra and the teacher had just sat on an ink-bomb and was not aware of it. Mother had a thin thread of silk tied to her wrist...leading up into the ventilator.

Count Alexander came in as soon as the steward had gone. "I have spoken with our man on the ground by coded heliograph. They are searching Dublin and the roads for you, Dr. Calland. We're still ahead. Now, we'll be landing shortly. You and your daughter will remain here. Viktor and his brother will remain here as well. We will come and fetch you one at a time, once we're certain that it's all clear."

Mother nodded stiffly. She wasn't very good at hiding her feelings, but fortunately the count was very good at observing either.

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