

# The Eye of Neptune

## Monster Odyssey

*Also by Jon Mayhew*

Mortlock  
The Demon Collector  
The Bonehill Curse

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JON MAYHEW



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*For* \*\*\*



‘Let me tell you . . . you won’t regret the time you spend aboard my vessel. You’re going to voyage through a land of wonders. Stunned amazement will probably be your habitual state of mind.’

Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*





## PROLOGUE

# LIVERPOOL, 1810

*I hate this place*, Prince Dakkar thought, pressing himself against a dirty, soot-stained brick wall. *It's cold and grey. The English are cold and grey!*

He shivered, watching people squeeze past each other, wrapped in great coats, their caps pulled down against the bitter wind that blew up the river. Tall masts rose above the heads of the crowd, and the noise of movement, ships loading and unloading, mingled with the screams of gulls. Somewhere in the distance, a church bell rang. It was another world compared to the markets of Bundelkhand.

Dakkar's colourful suit and turban drew many a curious glance. He felt his cheeks redden and, for the first time in his life, he stared down at his hopelessly thin slippers. They had been white once but travelling had greyed them and now brown water seeped through their soles, numbing his already frozen toes.

The people here dressed strangely, in knee breeches and socks and long jackets with ridiculously large cuffs.

A face suddenly appeared from the seething crowd. Stern brown eyes glowering above a scarf that smothered the mouth and chin.

‘Prince Dakkar, you must come with me immediately,’ the man said, towering above the boy. ‘Your life is in danger.’

‘My life?’ Dakkar stuttered. ‘Ow! You’re hurting my arm! Nobody touches the royal personage!’

The man softened his grip on Dakkar’s upper arm. ‘Forgive me, your highness,’ he said, glancing behind him. ‘But it is imperative that we get away from here – now!’

Dakkar followed his gaze. Two hawk-faced men with long drooping moustaches and cold eyes weaved in and out of the travellers towards them.

‘Those men mean you harm – they are enemies of your father,’ hissed the man, pulling at Dakkar. ‘You must come with me.’

‘This is outrageous,’ Dakkar spluttered. ‘Where are my servants? I don’t even know who you are!’

‘Your servants are dead, their throats cut by those ruffians,’ the man snarled through gritted teeth. He pulled the scarf down, revealing a square jaw and a broad nose. ‘I am Count Oginski, your new mentor. Now, are you ready to go or do you want to meet the two thugs over there?’

Oginski didn't wait for an answer but pulled Dakkar into the mass of people and hurried along the quay towards the streets of the city.

Dakkar's heart raced and his knees nearly buckled as he bumped into passing dock workers and ships' passengers. Oginski's grip held firm. Every now and then Dakkar peered back and saw a stern eye or a determined stride through the throng. Once he thought he glimpsed shining steel. A blade!

Oginski whisked him into a side alley, nearly dragging Dakkar off his feet.

'Blast! Wrong one,' Oginski said, skidding to a halt and slapping his palms against the brick wall that ended the alley. 'It's a dead end!'

Dakkar stumbled into Oginski, his breathing ragged, tears prickling the back of his eyes. He could smell sweat and the stink of the puddled alleyway. Muffled shouts and footsteps grew nearer and then the two men appeared at the mouth of the alley.

'The boy is ours, Oginski,' one of the men growled, pulling a long blade from his jacket pocket. 'Hand him over and we'll give you a quick death.'

'Come and get him then.' Oginski grinned, crouching and pushing Dakkar to the back of the alley.

The first man lunged but Oginski stepped back and grabbed his arm, twisting it upward with a sickening crack. The other assailant had closed in quickly and raised his own blade high.

Without thinking, Dakkar leapt forward and punched hard with both hands into the man's kidneys. He gave a hiss of pain and turned on Dakkar.

Snatching the dagger that fell from the first man's grip, Oginski swung round and buried it in the second attacker's neck. Something wet splattered Dakkar's cheek and jacket. The other opponent fell with a gargling oath and lay still, his blood reddening the pools of mud on the ground.

Dakkar stared at the twitching man and then at his blood-speckled hands. The other assailant lay slumped, groaning and nursing his mangled arm.

'Come quickly,' Oginski said, grabbing Dakkar again. 'There is no time – these men were only the first.'

Again they ran, pushing people aside, ignoring the curses yelled after them as they sent folk stumbling into each other. Left and right, right and left, they clattered on through the smoky streets, until Dakkar became dizzy and gasped for breath.

Oginski stopped abruptly making Dakkar slip into the foul slime that coated the cobbled streets. Oginski gave a whistle and a horse-drawn carriage rumbled from a side street.

'Get in,' Oginski snapped, yanking the door open.

Dakkar clambered in and threw himself down on the wooden bench inside. His head spun and his heart hammered at his ribs. Oginski jumped straight in after him.

'We are safe,' he said, as the carriage began to rattle across the cobbled streets.

'Thank you,' Dakkar gasped, slumping in the seat.

For a second, the two of them sat panting for breath. Oginski handed Dakkar a handkerchief, pointing to his

face. Dakkar wiped and looked in horror at the red stains on the cloth.

'Not yours,' Oginski said, getting his breath back. He smiled and Dakkar grinned back in spite of his shock.

'Who were those men?' Dakkar said after a moment.

'Assassins,' Oginski said, staring through the curtains that covered the windows. They could be any number of people. 'British East India Company, Russians . . . Who else wants your father's kingdom?'

'Many, many people,' Dakkar said, nodding.

'But you are safe now,' Oginski said again, folding his arms. 'So, the great Rajah of Bundelkhand sends his eldest son to Count Oginski for an education. What was wrong with the schools of this land?'

'I don't like school,' Dakkar grumbled. 'I ran away.'

'To run away from your only refuge in a strange land is brave indeed,' Oginski mused, smiling at Dakkar approvingly. 'At the tender age of ten years old, too.'

'The scholars were idiots and the masters were buffoons!' Dakkar said, pouting his bottom lip. 'I learned nothing trapped in those stuffy classrooms all day!'

'And what about the previous school, my prince?' Oginski said, raising his eyebrows. 'And the one before that? You've run away from three schools in the last year!'

'No,' Dakkar protested. 'I was expelled from the last school. One of the masters tried to beat me.'

'And?' Oginski said, his smile frozen on his lips.

'I beat *him*,' Dakkar said, suppressing a grin. He leaned forward and reached for the curtains.

Oginski grabbed his shoulder, yanking him back.

'Please, my prince,' he said. 'I need to keep your whereabouts a total secret.'

'I was just going to look out,' Dakkar muttered.

'If you look out and a passing local sees you, with your dark features and jewelled turban, he'll mention it to his friends in the local public house. Soon it will be all over town,' Oginski said, staring into Dakkar's dark eyes. 'It will be only a matter of time before that knowledge falls into the wrong hands.'

Dakkar flung himself back in the seat and folded his arms. Soon the motion of the carriage and the exertion of the chase tipped him into a restless sleep.

Dakkar felt as though he were falling. As he fell through his dream, he heard his father's voice. Dakkar could see his sunken eyes, the long, grey beard barely concealing the pinched cheekbones.

'You are going to learn how to be a leader of men,' his father said. 'You will be taught by the best, by a nobleman who has known our hardships.'

'But he's only ten years old – he's still a child.' His mother's voice echoed across the miles. 'Give him a few years more. Let him enjoy his childhood.'

'He needs to learn how best he can serve his people,' his father spat, anger gleaming in his eyes, 'before he has no people left to serve . . .'

The earth began to shake and a searing pain split through Dakkar's skull. Gradually, he found himself

back on the bench in the carriage as it rattled and rolled him around. He felt a familiar tightness in his stomach and pressure in his throat. The sea voyage from India to England had not been kind to him and the memory of it was returning to him now. Oginski sat opposite, watching him.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, leaning forward.

Dakkar threw his head down and heaved a watery pool of vomit over Oginski’s boots. ‘I don’t always travel well,’ Dakkar gasped, choking back the acid burn in his throat.

‘I am sorry to hear that, my prince,’ Oginski said, grimacing at his feet and passing Dakkar a handkerchief. ‘You’ll get used to it. Your new home is close to the sea – we will spend many hours in its company.’

‘I hate the sea,’ Dakkar groaned, putting the handkerchief to his mouth. ‘And I hate learning.’

‘You say that now, your highness,’ Oginski said, smiling, ‘but you will see. My lessons are different.’

He rapped the ceiling with his knuckles and the carriage came to a halt.

‘There are fresh clothes in that trunk,’ he said, pointing to a large box on the seat beside him. ‘I shall step outside while you change.’

He climbed out and Dakkar glimpsed a hedgerow and fields. He opened the trunk and found woollen, European clothes.

‘And why would I want to wear these ridiculous garments?’ Dakkar shouted out to Oginski.

‘They’re warmer and they don’t smell of vomit,’ Oginski replied. ‘Your highness.’

‘Barbarians,’ Dakkar muttered, pulling a face. He undressed and dragged them on. They felt strange and uncomfortable – the fabric scratched his skin and the thick material was stiff – but they were warm.

They travelled for days, sometimes in complete silence. At night, they stopped at small taverns or farmsteads, where Oginski paid handsomely for the innkeeper or farmer’s silence.

‘Speak to no one,’ Oginski said.

‘That’s easy enough,’ Dakkar snorted. ‘I have nothing to say to them!’

Dakkar slept well enough – the journey and the motion sickness exhausted him. Dakkar wondered if Oginski slept at all though – he seemed on constant alert, his eyes always roaming over their surroundings.

‘Where are we going?’ Dakkar asked.

‘To my castle,’ Oginski replied. ‘But it’s better if you don’t know exactly where that is.’

Finally, after days of bumping over potholed tracks, Oginski relaxed and pushed back the curtains. The clatter of the carriage made Dakkar wince but the welcome draught of cold air soothed his aching head somewhat. He stared out across an open moor that was devoid of any landmarks but one. In the distance, the moor ended in an abrupt cliff edge line. Evening was falling quickly and, silhouetted starkly against



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the dying sun, stood a tower, pointing skyward like a witch's finger.

'Welcome, Prince Dakkar of Bundelkhand,' Oginski said. 'Welcome to the Castle.'



Somewhere in  
Cornwall,  
1814



# CHAPTER ONE

## DROWNING

*I'll never make it, Dakkar thought. I am going to die.*

The freezing water pressed in on him, seeping into his nose and mouth as he kicked and flailed towards the pale light of the surface. Salt stung his eyes and the thundering of his heart merged with the roar of the tide. The mosaic pattern of the foam on the surface above him seemed so close yet too far to reach. More salt water forced itself into Dakkar's mouth as his lungs burned for oxygen. His limbs felt feeble as he tried to swim faster. The swirling sea darkened as his vision began to fail.

Then a calmness embraced him. He loved the sea. He loved sitting on the gravelly bed watching wrasse and gurnard weave among the kelp and luminous anemones. It wouldn't be so bad just to slip back down and rest there for ever. No more lessons, no more nagging from Oginski.

*But what about Mother and Father?* He hadn't seen them in four years – hadn't heard from them, even. Would they ever know he lay lifeless at the bottom of the sea?

The dark shape a hand plunged through the waves above, startling Dakkar into action again. Fingers tangled themselves in his thick, black hair and pulled. Fiery pain burned through his scalp but the sudden cold as he broke the surface forced him to gulp at the welcome air.

'You must control your breathing while you're at the bottom,' said Oginski, his saviour. 'You waste your breath, you die.'

'Thank you, Oginski,' Dakkar gasped, collapsing on to the rocks that Oginski squatted on. 'I'll remember that next time you try to drown me!'

Dakkar rolled over, still spluttering and coughing. His stomach twisted with pain as he retched up half the ocean. The bright sky dazzled him and the cold breeze prickled his skin. It was a few minutes before he could focus and see Oginski properly.

'How long?' Dakkar panted.

'Six minutes,' Oginski replied. 'But you could stay down for longer if you had faith in yourself.'

The big man stood up and loomed over Dakkar. He was a square block of a man, with greying curly hair, dark brooding eyes. To Dakkar he looked like he had been cut from the very cliffs behind him.

He extended a hand and, when Dakkar took it, nearly pulled him into the air. Dakkar stumbled to his feet and grabbed the thick woollen blanket that Oginski offered

him. He wrapped it around his shivering shoulders, reveling in the glow of warmth it provided.

‘You . . .’ Oginski began and then stared out to sea.

‘What is it?’ Dakkar followed his gaze and saw something break the surface.

A seal leapt high out of the water. A huge tentacle snaked up out of the sea, followed by another and another. Dakkar stood dumbstruck as the tentacles wrapped themselves around the seal. The seal gave a hoarse bark then vanished below the surface.

For a second, Oginski stood silent, staring in apparent disbelief at what he had just seen. Then he turned on his heel.

‘Quickly,’ he snapped. ‘We must get back to the Castle.’

‘But shouldn’t we raise the alarm?’ Dakkar called, hurrying after his mentor. ‘Let the locals know there’s something out there?’

‘I’m not sure they’d believe us,’ Oginski muttered.

‘It looked like some kind of giant squid,’ Dakkar gasped.

‘That’s what it looked like,’ Oginski replied. ‘Whatever it was, it was something bad. Something very bad. Come on.’

Dakkar had been sheltered by the cliff face but now, as they reached the top, a raw wind cut into him despite the woollen blanket. He shivered and huddled into the warm fabric. Across the flat cliff top stood the Castle. It looked bleaker than ever to Dakkar.

‘I’m not sure what to do, Dakkar,’ Oginski said, with a shrug.

'We *must* warn the village,' Dakkar stammered through chattering teeth. 'Imagine if that had been a fisherman, not a seal!'

Oginski stopped and turned to look at Dakkar. A smile cracked the man's stony face as he laid a hand on Dakkar's shoulder.

'You're a good lad, Dakkar,' Oginski said. 'Your concern for others does you great credit.'

Dakkar felt some warmth despite the wind and the fact that he wore only a bathing suit. *To think I used to fear this man*, Dakkar thought, remembering his first night at the Castle. *But I was only ten years old*. It wasn't really a castle, more of a tower built on the cliff edge. Oginski had rebuilt it from ancient medieval ruins. The tower loomed above them, black and full of foreboding. It was round, stretching high above, with a conical roof of slate. A few cottages and outhouses huddled at its base. Thick glass and shutters protected the square windows that dotted the smooth stone face of the tower.

'More surprises!' Dakkar said as his gaze fell to the huge front door. Two horses stood outside, damp and dejected, in front of a black carriage. 'We have visitors!'

Oginski's face darkened. In the four years Dakkar had been at the Castle, he could count the number of visitors on one hand. They hurried past the carriage, where a surly driver in red military uniform was waiting. He stood to attention but Oginski merely gave a grunt and hurled himself at the oak front door. Dakkar hurried after.

In the wood-panelled hall, Mrs Evans, the housekeeper, bobbed and fussed, her black ringlets quivering



under her white mob cap. She reminded Dakkar of a plump blackbird.

‘Count Oginski,’ she said breathlessly. ‘Forgive me, sir, I know how particular you are about visitors but he insisted. I put him in your study.’ She handed Oginski the visitor’s card.

Oginski glanced at it, snorted and threw it to the floor. He turned and strode into the study, slamming the door behind him before Dakkar could see the man inside.

Dakkar grabbed the card. ‘Commander Blizzard,’ he read aloud. ‘His Majesty’s Navy.’

Dakkar dashed outside and crept close to the study window, peering in.

Oginski sat at his desk, his broad shoulders and thick arms making the furniture look like flimsy toys. His square face was stern. His deep brow cast shadows over his eyes as he sat opposite a young gentleman dressed in black – black jacket, black breeches and stockings. His hair shone golden at the top of this dark garb, giving him a pale and sickly appearance. A thin scar trickled down his left cheek from the corner of his eye to his chin, making one half of his face sad and mournful. *A naval man*, Dakkar thought. *That might explain the scar but he doesn’t look like any kind of sailor I know.*

Ignoring the cold, Dakkar pressed his ear to the thin glass and listened.

‘Let’s cut the pleasantries. When Commander Blizzard knocks at your door,’ Oginski said, his face suddenly flat and unsmiling, ‘he has either come to arrest you or to ask for a . . . favour. And as I’ve committed no crime . . .’

‘No?’ Blizzard smiled, raising his eyebrows.

‘No,’ Oginski growled back, holding Blizzard’s gaze.

Dakkar frowned. *Are they going to arrest him?*

‘There are rumours surrounding this castle, Count Oginski,’ Blizzard said, a chill smile set on his face. ‘Strange noises in the night. Lights visible from the sea. Unusual deliveries . . .’

‘Idle gossip,’ Oginski snorted, waving a dismissive hand. ‘The local fisherfolk are always looking for a tale to tell in the local tavern.’

‘That may be but often rumours have a basis in truth. I’ll cut to the chase, sir,’ Blizzard said, breaking eye contact with Oginski. ‘The Americans have built a weapon. We want you to join us in a mission to destroy it.’

‘You refer, of course, to Fulton’s Floating Steam Battery,’ Oginski said, giving a fleeting smirk at the pale gentleman’s consternation. He rose from his seat and poured two glasses of port from a decanter on his desk.

‘How on earth do you know about that?’ Blizzard gasped, taking the glass in a limp hand.

‘Do you really think the construction of a steam-powered ship capable of carrying sixteen thirty-two-pound guns would escape my notice?’ Oginski sneered. ‘I am a man of science, Blizzard and an engineer.’

‘The best in the world, some say.’ Blizzard nodded. ‘Although you’ve never made such a ship for us.’

*A steam warship,* Dakkar thought, clenching his fists with excitement. *How I’d love to see that!*

‘Why are you so worried?’ Oginski continued, ignoring Blizzard’s comment. ‘The thing isn’t fit for the high seas. At best, it’s suitable for defending shipyards and bays. It’s not as if the Americans are going to sail up the Thames in it.’

‘Not yet,’ Blizzard muttered, and seemed to go a shade paler – if that were possible. ‘But once they perfect the hull, Britain’s mastery of the seas may be a thing of the past.’

Dakkar noticed Oginski grimace and incline his head. ‘Would that be a bad thing?’

‘Of course,’ Blizzard hissed. His blue eyes were icy. ‘It puzzles me, sir, that despite your immense talent and intellect, you’ve never invented any weapon that we could use in this great nation’s defence. If I doubted your loyalty to the government that shelters you . . .’

‘My loyalty is not in doubt, sir,’ Oginski said, shaking his head. ‘It’s just that I see no need for me to accompany you to America. Why can’t you destroy this vessel yourselves?’

‘We aren’t totally sure of its capabilities,’ Blizzard replied. ‘Your knowledge of engineering and design would prove invaluable.’

‘The answer is still no,’ Oginski said.

‘Is it your friendship with Robert Fulton, the designer of the ship, that stops you?’ the commander asked stiffly.

Now it was Oginski’s turn to look shocked. He recovered himself quickly. ‘Of course not!’ he said, giving a brittle laugh. ‘I haven’t seen Fulton for many years and

I'm even less likely to now that America and Britain are at war!

'Indeed, we *are* at war, sir,' Blizzard said. 'And if I thought you were in any way colluding with the Americans . . .'

'The very suggestion is insulting, sir,' Oginski said, his voice so low that Dakkar could barely hear it through the glass. 'I have nothing to hide.'

'Good,' Blizzard said placing the port glass on Oginski's desk. 'Then either you agree to help me or I'll search this tower from top to bottom and report anything suspicious.'

'You can do what you like,' Oginski spat.

'Yes,' Blizzard said, a grin twisting his pale face. 'I can.' He paused at the door. 'My ship is in Fullacombe Harbour if you change your mind'. Tomorrow evening we sail for America with or without you. A troop of my marines will visit you shortly before we leave. Be ready.'

Dakkar crouched down below the window and watched as Blizzard strode out of the house. The pale man paused before climbing into his carriage and looked at Dakkar straight, who was still wrapped in the blanket.

'Your highness,' Blizzard said, raising his hat and giving another grin.

The carriage clattered away from the house, leaving Dakkar staring after it.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE STRANGER IN THE TAVERN

Oginski charged across the Castle hall, papers clutched in his fist. He stopped and grabbed Dakkar by his lapels.

‘He called you “your highness?” ’ Oginski said, staring deep into Dakkar’s eyes. ‘You’re certain?’

‘Yes, Oginski,’ Dakkar replied. ‘Why are you so worried?’

‘I’ve told you before. Your father has many enemies,’ Oginski said, stuffing the papers into a leather bag. ‘He specifically requested that your location and identity be kept secret.’

‘So you say,’ Dakkar muttered.

Oginski stopped wrestling with the bag and looked at Dakkar. ‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’ he demanded.

‘If my father has so many enemies,’ Dakkar said, not meeting Oginski’s eye, ‘how will I fight them? I’m not learning the art of war here. Strategy, commanding troops – these are the things I need to learn. Yet you teach me how to swim, to build canals, to design machines.’

‘A great leader doesn’t just fight for his people – he cares for his people,’ Oginski sighed. ‘Do your people love your father or fear him? Do they have irrigation for their crops? Do they have steam engines to pump flood water out of their mines, to pull their loads?’

‘No, Oginski, but –’

‘I teach you the skills you need to build a modern, enlightened country,’ Oginski snapped, pulling his bag shut. ‘If you want to learn how to fight, then join the army. Afterwards if you don’t die in one of Europe’s insane wars, you’ll be able to go home and die fighting there.’

‘I only meant –’

‘I don’t have time for this argument, Dakkar,’ Oginski said, striding for the door. ‘I’m going to Fullacombe to hear what rumours are circulating. I’ll be back this evening. In the meantime, stay inside. Don’t swim and don’t talk to anyone except the staff.’

Before Dakkar could reply, Oginski banged the door shut behind him.

Dakkar scowled at the door, arms folded tight against his chest. Mrs Evans crept up to him and laid a hand on his arm.

‘Come on now, Dakkar, dear,’ she whispered. ‘Come and have a piece of cake and some tea. You’ll feel better then.’

Dakkar allowed himself to be led away to the kitchen, where Mrs Evans sat him down at the scrubbed table.

‘It’s not fair, Mrs Evans,’ Dakkar said, sniffing. ‘I’m a young man now and yet Oginski treats me like a child!’

‘The count has always been a secretive one,’ Mrs Evans said, cutting into the thick fruit cake. ‘He’s the same with everyone. Folk around here don’t have much time for him. He never gives a “good mornin’ ” or a smile to strangers. He’s been worse lately, spending even more time down in his cellar.’

Dakkar nodded. Oginski had been spending so long down there recently that Dakkar had wondered what he was up to. Usually Oginski shared his projects and presented them to Dakkar as learning opportunities – together they’d built a pump for the local mine and fixed the clock in the church tower.

‘He’s always so nervous and agitated,’ Dakkar mumbled through a mouthful of sweet crumbs. ‘Like when I first met him.’

‘You led him a merry dance then,’ Mrs Evans chuckled. ‘Pardon me for saying so, Dakkar, but you were a little monster then. You ran away five times, no less, clamberin’ out of windows, hiding in the coal shed . . .’

A grin spread across Dakkar’s face. ‘I wasn’t that bad, was I?’

‘We weren’t expectin’ you, see?’ Mrs Evans laughed. ‘When the count first brought you home, we thought he’d found a faery changeling on the road!’

‘But the way he changed this morning when he –’ Dakkar dropped his cake slice on to the table and jumped to his feet. ‘The squid, in the water. I forgot!’

‘What are you on about, lad?’ Mrs Evans said as Dakkar hurried out of the kitchen. ‘Here, come back! Where are

you going? Count Oginski said you weren't to leave the Castle!'

Dakkar rushed into the hall and through the front door. Out across the flat cliff path he ran, muttering and cursing as he did. The grey, rain-filled clouds hadn't broken but Dakkar could see the little village huddled around the river outlet where the cliffs sloped down to the sea. The stones crunched under his feet and the nettles that fringed the path whipped at his hands and legs, but he didn't slow.

*I've got to warn them about the thing in the sea, he thought. If someone died, I'd never forgive myself.*

Soon the low cottages came into view and Dakkar was in the heart of the village. He hurried to the tavern and crashed against the door, tumbling inside. The hard tiles stung his knees and the smell of beer and tobacco smoke tickled his nose. A fire crackled in the hearth and scrubbed wooden tables and chairs filled the small room. A couple of toothless old men with leather-brown skin and matted white beards sat in the corner by the fire.

The taverner's wife gave a squeal and slopped beer from the mugs she held.

'What on earth are you playin' at?' she screeched, slamming the drinks down on the table.

'I'm sorry,' Dakkar panted, scrambling to his feet. 'But I had to warn you.'

'Warn? What about?' one of the old men piped up in the corner.



'I saw something,' Dakkar gasped, slowly getting his breath back. 'It was in the sea this morning.'

'You're the boy from the Castle, ain't you?' The taverner's wife said, narrowing her eyes.

'Yes. My name is Dakker,' he said, rubbing his forehead. 'You must listen.'

A chair leg scraped along the tiled floor and Dakkar turned at the sound, peering into the shadows.

A squat, hunchbacked man, with small, glittering eyes stood leering at him. One hand rested on the table, supporting him as he leaned forward. Dakkar could see that his middle and index fingers were missing. His wide mouth split into a grin that was too full of brown tombstone teeth.

Dakkar gave a gasp, trying not to stare at the man's blistered, scarred skin and mutilated hands.

'Well, Dakkar, you ain't welcome here,' the taverner's wife said, wiping her hands on her apron and glancing at the man in the shadows. 'Go on, get back home!'

'But there's something out there in the sea!' Dakkar persisted. 'It could be dangerous.'

The squat man shuffled forward and gave a sniff and his grin widened.

'Lots of fish, I shouldn't doubt,' one of the old men cackled.

'Go on, shoo!' the taverner's wife snapped and she bundled Dakkar out through the door.

Dakkar didn't resist: – the strange man disturbed him. It wasn't so much his appearance as the look he had given

Dakkar. Full of menace. Glancing back, he saw the man peering at him through the tavern's small leaded window.

At least he'd named the villagers. He couldn't do any more. Dakkar ran back out of the village towards the Castle, the wind battering him. Dakkar couldn't help checking behind him. *Stupid! As if the man would follow me!* Still, all the way home, he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched.

At last he reached the Castle and slammed the heavy door behind him. Silence hung over the hallway as Dakkar scanned the oak panels, the suits of armour standing to attention, the stairs spiralling up to the next floor. He was just opening his mouth to shout for Mrs Evans when something caught his attention.

The cellar door was ajar. Located just under the staircase, it normally stood locked and flush to the varnished panels, almost invisible. Now Dakkar could see the edge of the door and the lock. Oginski must have left it open in his hurry.

Holding his breath, Dakkar tiptoed over to the door and peered down the short flight of steps. An oil lamp glowed dimly but there was no sound of movement. Slowly, he crept down, pressing himself against the wall.

The steps opened into a small room with a workbench, a number of cupboards and some tools scattered around the surfaces. A bookcase filled one wall. Dakkar sneaked up to the workbench and picked up one of the hammers that lay there. It felt heavy in his hand. He glanced up and what he saw made him gasp.

Pinned to the wall was a drawing of a boat. It was a strange boat, with a covered top and a wheel at the stern, rather like a paddle steamer. Written in neat copper-plate above it were the words *Oginski's Patent Undersea Submersible*.

*An underwater boat!* Dakkar thought, running his fingers over the lines on the plan.

He read the legend under the diagram: *Ballast tanks within hull for submerging . . .*

For some time, Dakkar stood, lost in the design of the craft. *So this is what Oginski has been so secretive about! But he couldn't have spent all this time just drawing up this plan – maybe he's actually making it! . . .*

Looking about, Dakkar could see a riveted metal door in the wall opposite. Dakkar pulled it open, wincing as it squealed on its hinges. This entrance opened on to a long flight of shallow steps. Through it Dakkar could smell the sea and hear the distant waves rolling against the cliffs. Pulling the door behind him, he took the first step and immediately slipped on the slimy green seaweed that coated everything. Dakkar's backside went numb as he bumped down every shallow step. He could feel the damp from the steps soaking through his trousers. Finally, he reached the last step and staggered to his feet, groaning and rubbing his aching bottom.

He gasped as he looked at the huge sea cavern he stood in. It towered above him, echoing with the roar of the tide. High above his head, daylight streamed through a hole punched in the ceiling. He stood on a platform of

rock that rose above a natural pool. Somewhere below, he supposed, the sea had bored its way in through a seam of softer rock, making a tunnel.

But what really caught Dakkar's attention was the strange craft that bobbed in the centre of the pool, tied in place by strong ropes. It reminded him of a cocoon. The deck flattened out and held what looked like a wheel from a watermill or a paddle from a miniature paddle steamer. Portholes lined the sides of the 'lid' and the hull of the boat.

'The submersible,' Dakkar whispered.

A plank bridged the gap from the rocky plateau to the craft. Dakkar tiptoed along it and, leaning forward, he pressed his palms on the polished wooden hull. As he did so, his knuckles grazed a brass lever. Without thinking, he pulled at it and scrambled back as the lid lifted with a hiss.

The submersible was open.

Two cushioned seats occupied the front of the craft. Dakkar could see the captain's seat, inviting him to climb in. *What harm would it do just to sit inside?* He stretched a leg over the side into the craft.