



ILLUSTRATED NOVEL

# **Big Trouble in Merrie Olde England**

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## CHAPTER I

### That's How it Always Begins

“Yeah, I’ve been to a lot of places in this great big world, and I’ve seen a lot of things,” Jack Burton drawled into the hand-held microphone, “but that don’t mean I’ve achieved total enlightenment, that state our Buddhist brethren describe as ‘Nirvana.’ If you really want to know everything—and by everything, I mean *everything*—then you gotta go beneath the surface. And I’m not talking about some ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ bullshit. To me, that’s a smack in the chops to literature’s greatest illustrators—Paget, Shepherd, Casagrande, Scharf, all those guys. When I say ‘beneath the surface,’ I’m not talking figuratively. Talking figuratively is for pussies and Democrats. I know what it means to go deep because you better believe I’ve done it. I’ve seen what lies beneath our fair streets, and it is not pretty. Okay, you never expected it to be pretty, I get that. But that’s because you’re picturing the rat-infested fecal matter that coats the walls of the nation’s sewer systems and a lot of aboveground Detroit. The last time I was in San Francisco’s Chinatown for any extended period, I slid down a fire fighter’s pole that took me way underneath the underneath you’re thinking of. I walked

through the Bog of the Dead Trees while the Black Blood of the Earth stained the soles of my boots, and if you're wondering what the Black Blood of the Earth is... well, you're not alone, cause I never actually found out what it was. Or what the Bog of the Dead Trees was, either. Probably should've been more inquisitive, I guess. Live and learn. But there was a lot going on at the time, including slavery, Chinese sorcery, a shitload of kung-fu and two smoking hot babes with green eyes."

Jack became aware that two people were frowning at him. So what if they were, he thought? They can narrate their own damn stories.

"Let me put this into some kind of context: a couple of thousand years ago, the first Chinese Emperor put the Curse of No-Flesh on a guy named David Lo Pan. And before you even say it, I know—David. That was his name, what are you gonna do? He didn't look much like a David in either of the bodies I saw him in. Sometimes, he was a feeble old guy in a wheelchair, other times he was some pasty-faced seven foot-tall wizard with creepy extra-long nails on each pinky. I was married to this one girl in Vegas who had the same thing. That should've been a red flag right there."

He paused in his recollections to take a bite out of his sandwich. Flavorless cheese and something called Marmite (although it might as well have been the Black Blood of the Earth) on flat, rubbery bread. Not good. Not good at all.

"So where was I?" he wondered aloud, as the dry chewed portions of what passed for food circulated around his mouth. He tried washing it down with a can of some soda going by the name of Tizer, but somehow that only made the sensation worse. "Yeah, he definitely wasn't a Dave. If you had to put a gun to my head—and a lot of people have, including two ex-wives (but not the one with the pinky thing)—I'd say he was a Basil. Don't look at me like that, Wang, I'm not good



with Chinese names. For those of you listening intently out there, and I know that's all of you, I just shared a moment with my pal Wang Chi. He was engaged to a green-eyed smokestack named Miao Yin—still is, for all I know. Whassat, Wang? Yeah, still is. Cute girl. Didn't say much. Actually, now I come to think of it, I don't think I ever heard her speak. Funny story, and don't stop me if you've heard this before, but a girl with green eyes turned out to be just what Lo Pan was after to break the curse. The bad news is, it also made him mortal and vulnerable to knives in the forehead. And while I'm the least culturally insensitive person you'll ever meet, I have to say that seems like a pretty lousy trade-off. Trust me, if you knew Lo Pan and all the weird supernatural shit he and his mob the Wing Kong were into, you wouldn't grieve for him. He was evil and greedy. When the time came, one green-eyed chick wasn't enough for him, he was gonna marry two at once. I don't think that's even legal in Utah, so it's definitely super off the books in San Francisco. So Dave Lo Pan was gonna have himself an ungodly double wedding, and to give you some idea of how tacky the whole thing was, he actually made his entrance riding down an escalator. I mean, come on. Can you even imagine something as piss-poor as riding an escalator on your way to a massively important function? That's how you know the guy was a world-class loser. The other bride was a lawyer, Gracie Law. And don't tell me about how unlikely it is that you'd get a lawyer named 'Law'. I've already been there. Although not really all the way there, just a clinch in the sewers and another in Antarctica..." Jack sensed a pair of green eyes boring into him, angrily. "Well, to make a long story short—"

"Too late," a female voice behind him observed, sarcastically.

"The wedding turned out to be a pretty bloody affair, after it got itself crashed by me, Wang, and a bunch of guys called the Chang Sing.

They were the ying to the Wing Kong's yang. Or the yang to their ying, I forget which one's supposed to be the good one. Oh, and Egg Shen, he was there, too. He's another ying-yang, a Chinese sorcerer, but a nice guy. And a tour bus driver, because being a sorcerer isn't enough to pay the bills in today's America. Anyhow, Lo Pan got himself dead, and the Wing Kong got itself exploded, no loss. And that was supposed to be the end of it."

Jack took one last chug of the Tizer, wishing it was a fifth of Bushmill or some kind of recognizable beverage brewed with identifiable ingredients.

"I saw ... a lot. A lot. Man-eating giant spiders, floating globes made out of eyeballs, these guys called the Three Storms: Thunder, Lightning and, uh, Pestilence, I think. I didn't have a lot of interaction with the last one. I thought I was an open-minded kind of a guy before the Chinatown thing—shit, I even had broccoli on a pizza once—but afterwards I realized I didn't know the world as well as I thought I did, and I knew a *lot*, including the pseudonym Rip Taylor uses when he writes letters to Penthouse Forum. He let it slip when we were arm-wrestling in the lunchroom of a Sears Outlet; it's a whole other story.

"But then the whole Russian thing started, and I found out that the truth went a lot deeper than the Black Blood of the Earth, which does not wash out of polyester, let me tell you. Wang and me were kidnapped by another branch of the Wing Kong and carted off to Russia because—Look, don't let it bother you, it was all pretty complicated, I think. Gracie was there, too. No, she didn't get kidnapped, like Wang and me—she was already in Russia, pretending to be a spy for this guy named ... I wanna say 'Svensson' ..."

"Swanson," Gracie corrected him, "Henry Swanson."

"I know I've seen that sonofabitch somewhere before, it's gonna

come to me any day now. So, yeah, Gracie was kind of a triple agent. *And* she's a lawyer. What can I tell you, it's the eighties—a woman can have it all these days. Look, don't interrupt me again, honey, I'm gonna lose my flow. Different parties wanted different things out of the situation, and everybody wanted the head of Ol' Jack Burton, and not just because of my trend-setting choices in hair couture. The Wing Kong were at the head of the pack, naturally, but they had competition, starting with the Russian government, which makes a lot of sense when you figure I'm pretty much the poster-boy for American patriotism and virility. There were a couple of weird characters called Valentina and Klokoe. I never really got the measure of 'em, but I came damn close with Valentina."

He took a few seconds out to shrug at Gracie, who was still glowering at him. "They'd both been thrown out of some land called Shambhala, which was supposed this Garden of Eden, smack in the middle of the planet. And also maybe in another dimension, the details are a little foggy, but Klokoe and Valentina had been King and Queen there, or something. I was never 100% sure they weren't brother and sister, and I'm pretty sure you can't be King and Queen if you're that closely related, that represents one of them, whaddya call it? Conflicts of incest? Anyway, they got one of the Three Storms, Lightning, on their team, or maybe running their team, who knows? That was a shocker, 'cause I was pretty sure he'd died back in Chinatown. But I definitely saw him die this time, I can confirm that his mortality is 100% uncoiled, buried under a glacier that sealed off the entrance of Shambhala. Which would've been a total win, if not for the fact that me, Wang and Gracie were left freezing off our extremities in the most remote place on the surface of the planet. And that's when you guys showed up."

He looked around the grey-metal control room of the Resolution-

class nuclear submarine HMS *Sue Lawley*. Those officers who were present, and not simply listening to Jack over the intercom, stood to attention. Gracie and Wang shifted uncomfortably, both feeling as though they might as well have been surrounded by those unspeaking guards outside Buckingham Palace. “Short of flagging down a passing whale, the three of us were pretty much screwed. We’re all Californians, even if Wang’s Californian by way of China. We’re like McNuggets, not at our best when we’re cold. So I’m grateful you passed by, even if you were having werewolf problems. After flying blue giants, killer Russian pixies and cockroaches that spit some kind of suspended animation-inducing sealant, an underwater lycanthrope almost seemed like a return to normality. Almost. And, yeah, it would’ve been nice if you guys had been heading to the States, that’s where my stuff is, all of it inside the Pork-Chop Express (that’s the name of my rig, but you already knew that). I get that you boys have a job of your own and a duty to your ... I wanna say ‘Queen’..?”

Wang nodded.

“We’re just grateful you were okay with the three of us hitching a ride, and letting us share your ...” He considered the crusts of the sandwich in his palm, and felt unable to bring himself to say the word ‘food’. “But we helped you out with the whole wolf man situation, I guess it was the least you could do. And I know Gracie enjoyed being surrounded by seamen.” He winked at her. She did not return the gesture. “Did you know the motto of Royal Naval Submarines is ‘We Come Unseen?’”

“You’re a pig, Burton,” she informed him.

“No, that actually is our motto,” explained the grizzled Captain Gevaudan, who was standing to Jack’s right, listening intently to his guest’s memoirs.



“Oh, it is?” she asked, slightly flustered. “That’s ... extremely interesting.”

“Anyways,” Jack went on, “thanks for dropping us off in ...?”

“Portsmouth,” Gracie said, now sounding conspicuously less hostile.

“Yeah, that place. We’ll take it from here. From Gracie, Wang and me, thanks for everything. Jack Burton, signing off.”

To the cheers of crewmembers throughout the vessel, Jack handed the mic back to Gevaudan, who saluted the Americans with his other hand. Jack gave a casual salute of his own, turned on his heel and strode from the Control Room. Gracie and Wang smiled, before following Jack.

The Captain continued to salute for as long as it took for the American civilians to vanish from sight. He’d been hiding his discomfort from them, but the injury he’d sustained while they were restraining the vulpine Petty Officer Talbot was somehow still troubling him. The funny thing was, he wasn’t even sure how he’d cut himself. No point in worrying about it, he told himself.

The presence of Gracie Law, Wang Chi and Jack Burton in Portsmouth did not go unnoticed. For starters, an ITN camera crew were present to record their arrival, there being very few news stories concerning British nuclear submarines picking up hitch-hikers, and a big question mark surrounding the issue of what a small-time lawyer, a Chinatown restaurateur and a trucker might be doing in Antarctica.

The resultant report was seen by several interested parties, including a visiting American journalist, who just happened to switch on the television in the hotel room she was sharing with a gentleman friend. Recognizing her old friends, she reached instantly for the telephone,



little caring about the extortionate fees she was surely running up by doing so.

In the cramped offices of Lord Malcolm Morgause at the Houses of Parliament, home of British democracy, another telephone conversation was going on.

"I sincerely hope you didn't drag me out of the chamber for some piffling family matter, mother," the young peer spat into the receiver. "I was in the middle of a rousing speech about the Falklands."

"In point of fact, dear," his caller replied, "this may prove to be a rather significant development. Do you have access to a television set where you are?"

"Of course," Morgause replied, and instantly regretted walking into her trap. He knew what a low opinion she had of television, with the exception of the nature documentaries on BBC2. Oh, he was going to be on the receiving end of a good telling-off at some point in the near future.

"Well turn it on," she instructed him, "And we shall discuss this infraction another time. The commercial channel."

As instructed, he switched on the television, and examined his quiff in the reflection while switching to the ITN news on the third channel. God help us all if she ever discovers there are four channels now, he thought. What he saw seemed to be of far less importance than his mother had implied. Three people were being interviewed at Portsmouth Docks: a pretty, elfin-faced woman, a spiky-haired young Chinese man, and what seemed to Morgause to be the perfect example of a muscle-bound cretin.

"Second time on TV!" the tank top wearing, mullet-headed man exclaimed. American, as Morgause had suspected.

"His name is Jack Burton," his mother explained. Plainly, she was watching the same broadcast, but felt no need to justify her hypocrisy.

"He doesn't look like much," observed Morgause.

"I would be inclined to agree with you, poochie, were it not for the fact that he is mentioned in a document that has been drawn up for Kingfisher's attention."

"Mother, I have asked you not to go through my things—"

"It's a good thing I do, or you wouldn't have the faintest clue about how to become the ruler of the world. Honestly, Malcolm, what is the point of having a mole in the secret service if you're not prepared to pay attention to his leaks?"

Felix Kingfisher drummed his chubby fingers over Min Lo Chan's dossier, blandly entitled 'The San Francisco Chinatown Incident.' The information presented therein was scrappy at best, but suggestive. Highly suggestive. More interesting still were the photocopied statements made by local businessman Egg Shen to a lawyer named J. Hardin, during which the tour bus driver attempted without success to draw attention away from the efforts of one Jack Cornelius Burton, no fixed abode. What this Egg person *didn't* say about Burton, who was presently waving at Kingfisher via the ITN news, was most interesting. Clearly, this was a man to keep an eye on.

"Do you get reruns of *Kate Loves a Mystery* in this country?" Burton was asking no one in particular.

"Just to be clear," his female companion interrupted, "we were part of an animal rights group, protesting the hunting of the Antarctic Fox, when we became separated from our party. We'd like to express our gratitude to the Royal Naval Submarine Service for their assistance to three Americans in need. I think it's a perfect example of the Special