

THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT

DREADNAUGHT

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Dreadnought

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The Economist Nov 16th 1870

The announcement last week by The Royal Society that the Greenland Expedition led by Professor Jorgensen, late of Stockholm University, had been lost with all hands has struck a grievous blow to the natural philosophy community within Britain and across Europe.

Few facts are obtainable at this time and distance, except to say that the expedition ship, the *Hesperus*, left Greenland three weeks prior to the announcement of its loss.

Information relayed by telegraph about a most important biological find in the Helheim Glacier raised hopes that an entirely new species would be added to the list of terrestrial specimens hitherto discovered.

The expedition seemed fraught from the beginning, when renowned naturalist painter Johan Von Brandt was confined even before the *Hesperus* embarked from Calcorn Harbour. His subsequent death cast an even darker pall across proceedings.

A memorial service is...

Three days ago

<static>drillship Cormora<static>immediate rescue requ<static>the eye<static> storm
approac<static>for the love of God<static>the eye<loss of transmission>

Recording posted on the internet by ham radio operator Sturm Olaffson, based in Norway.

*Yesterday**The Financial Times*

News that the drillship Cormorant has been lost in the Ninian Oil Fields sent another shudder through energy markets today. The loss of the ship in a field notorious for a series of rig disasters thirty years ago, has deepened gloom within the EU over the continued failure to secure reserves independent from the Russian energy giant Gazprom, or any of its myriad subsidiaries across central Asia. Vladimir Putin's latest offer, in his capacity as head of Gazprom, to reopen several new pipelines previously closed last winter during the price war that engulfed the Continent, has been angrily rejected by Brussels...

Three hours ago

'Greed, pure greed,' Decker yelled, his face white with fear and fury. 'Those men you sent into the refrigeration unit are dead. Have you nothing to say about that?'

Captain Harker ignored him, staring out the rain-streaked glass surrounding the bridge as the bow of his trawler plunged through another wave, water breaking across the deck in a foaming torrent before disappearing down the scuppers. The water had gone from a calm, glassy green an hour before to a clouded grey, the waves a heaving maelstrom running before a howling gale. Overhead, black clouds boiled furiously, rain sleeted down so hard it formed an almost impenetrable grey wall around them. Wind shrieked outside their little glass cocoon, a threnody rising and falling like the howl of a banshee.

'Have you nothing to say Harker? Nothing at all?' Harker finally turned his rough-hewn face towards Decker, who grimly clung to one of the chairs bolted to the floor. Groaning, the trawler plunged once more down the side of a surging wave.

'You'll shut your mouth, and do the job I pay you to do,' Harker growled, his beard bristling with fury.

Decker's face went white with fury.

'I didn't sign on to die, and neither did Ben, or Gordo or Benson, yet you still sent them down there. Three hours and where are they? You don't know what it is we've taken on board with Wells.' Taking a step towards Harker, Decker lost his footing and fell against a wall as the trawler rolled. Decker struggled to his feet with the assistance of Parsons, who had watched the encounter from the corner of the bridge. He looked up pleadingly at Harker.

'Captain, you must see that the weather has worsened. Turn us about and head for Calcorn.'

'Mutiny is it now?' Harker spat back. 'You're a coward, Parsons, just like Decker. A fool and a damned coward.' He turned his back, ignoring them both.

'Mutiny?' Decker's voice was tinged with astonishment as he unsteadily advanced towards Harker. 'You're the captain of a bloody fishing trawler, not the Bounty.' Stopping beside Harker, whose gaze was fixed on the raging storm, Decker leaned in.

'You should never have taken aboard that head case from the Cormorant,' he hissed, spittle flecking the Captain's beard. 'Nor that carcass he calls his 'prize'. Throw them both off the boat and head for safe harbour. Let me go see to those men before we all suffer from your arrogance.'

Harker slowly turned his shaggy head towards Decker. His eyes were red rimmed, the lack of sleep since the rescue telling.

'This season's catch has been next to useless, just like you. With Wells' prize, we'll have enough to keep us going for another five years.'

At that moment, the door leading onto the bridge blew open. A man staggered in, wind and rain following him. Decker felt the temperature drop as the intense cold swept in.

Parsons stumbled over to the door and heaved it closed. The storm's roaring abruptly stopped and the men looked warily at each other in the sudden silence.

Wells' eyes glittered strangely. From his left ear, across his cheekbone and along the jaw, a weeping burn mark glistened wetly. His face was bathed with sweat and he held a flare gun in one steady hand, the barrel speckled with rain.

'What's all this about, Wells?' Harker uneasily eyed the flare gun. 'We have a deal.'

Wells straightened with a jolt, his eyes focussing on Harker. Jaws cracking with effort, his mouth yawned open cavernously, the skin on the burn stretching, then splitting. Parsons winced at the blood running down Wells' face.

A series of alien clicking noises emerged from that bloody mouth, rising and falling in an eerie cadence that sounding shockingly intimate in the bridge's close confines. A shiver ran down Decker's spine, and he sensed that there was something far worse here than Wells' obvious madness. Wells levelled the flare gun at Harker.

'There can be no deals with filthy parasites such as you,' he said in an almost conversational tone. He stopped, and for a moment, his eyes lost their glitter and became clouded and confused. Then, something snapped within him and they regained their clarity.

'The men you sent,' he said, his voice tinged with triumph. 'They commune with the Weaver. Soon, every living creature on this planet will join in that blessed rapture. Then can begin the Long Night.'

Wells fired the gun, cutting short Harker's startled chuckle of disbelief. With a whoosh like a firework, the flare erupted in a cascade of white-hot sparks. Reeling back against the console, Harker clasped his hands to the flare, which jutted from between two

ribs. His cry of pain quickly dissolved into shrieks of agony when the magnesium charge ignited. The flesh on his hands boiled, the bones quickly reduced to charred sticks. Harker's lungs ignited and he had time to inhale once, before exhaling a torrent of sparks and burning flesh. His beard ignited and he slumped to the floor, shuddering. Then he lay still.

Retching noisily, Parsons staggered towards the hatch. The deck heaved then dropped when the trawler slid over another wave, sending Parsons crashing into a wall, his head making a terrible crunching sound. His body flopped bonelessly to the floor.

Decker warily circled Wells, looking for a way passed to the hatch. His mouth drawn back in a lipless smirk, Wells shook his head. Outside, the storm intensified, flashes of lighting illuminating the clouds like an x-ray.

'You may as well accept it,' Wells said conversationally.

'Nutters like you can piss right off,' Decker replied. 'I'm not done yet.' He swept up the crowbar he had brought with him from the engine room. Wells shook his head again.

'It can be quick,' Wells said, taking a step forward and nodding towards Parsons, whose head lay in a rapidly expanding pool of blood.

'Or not,' he looked meaningfully at Harker's smoking body.

'Is that the best you can offer?' Decker snarled. He leaped forward, swinging the bar at Wells' head. Not even attempting to dodge the blow, Wells allowed the bar to strike him in the temple. Decker jumped over the crumpled body, landing in front of the hatch. Throwing the bar aside, Decker wrenched the door open. He caught a glimpse of Wells stumbling to his feet, but ignored him and stepped out into the storm.

Freezing rain lashed him. Decker grabbed for the railing with both hands and gasped at the intense cold radiating up his arms. The trawler heaved over another monstrous wave and he felt the tendons in his shoulders cracking. With a terrible, wrenching effort, he kept his feet. The trawler slid down the other side of the wave, then righted itself. Perched precariously against the rail, with the wind tearing at his clothing, something odd drew Decker's eyes to the main deck.

He saw an orange light throbbing from beneath the hatch located over the central refrigeration unit. A wave of nausea surged through him. With each passing second, the urge to flee grew stronger. Stumbling along the walkway, Decker paused where it cut to the right. Buffeted by a new blast of rain, numb with cold, Decker had no time to react when a shadow fell across him. He howled in agony when a massive blow across his back slammed him against the rail. Then, he fell.

The world spun around Decker as his body flipped over the rail, describing a lazy arc through the air before landing in the churning waters below. The sea was frigid; a bone chilling cold that cramped his legs and arms. He surfaced, gasping, and was immediately swamped by a wave. Kicking frantically, he emerged once more, the effort exhausting him. Through water-smearing eyes, he saw Wells standing on the walkway, looking down at him. A strange hooting noise echoed across the sky, obliterating for a long moment the sound of the storm. Black tendrils, darker than the clouds, darker than the night, rose up behind Wells. There was then a roar like an approaching train and a massive wave swamped Decker, driving him down and down and down into the endless depths. Decker's last image was of the hull of the trawler receding as the darkness claimed him.

Up on the walkway, unaffected by the arctic conditions, Wells began to laugh. His head full of the darkness that swarmed between the stars, he returned to the bridge and closed the hatch behind him.

In the distance, lights winking faintly, Calcorn Harbour hove into view...

Now

Standing at the top of the main street, the stiffening breeze rippling his hair, Shelby looked with childish delight at the town laid out before him. He opened his arms up wide, the town encompassed within their margin. The harbour rested at the end of the main street, with the pier a black ribbon in the midst of the water's silvery shimmer. The cobbled street swooped down towards the water, buildings on either side jostling for space, shops nearer the water and cottages at the top. The town hall loomed next to him, exuding strength and purpose, bluestone blocks building up to a lowering clock tower that overlooked the town.

The shimmering water drew his gaze again and he happily started down the street, his eyes fixed ahead, arms swinging, step sure. People looked as he marched by, smiling indulgently at this affectation. He nodded to the Mr. Fletcher the butcher who waved at him from within the window, while Mrs Hetherington at the newsagents called out a hello to him. In a short time, he stood opposite the pier. Turning off the footpath, he walked down a narrow lane, tall hedgerows casting shadows that dimmed the late afternoon light to a murky coolness. In his hand, he held a scrap of paper, a shopping list that his distracted mind had completely forgotten.

Ducking through a gap in the hedge to his right, he scrambled down some broken rocks and strode out onto the soft sand, entranced by the water's rippling edge. Taking a deep breath of the sea air, Shelby clapped his hands with joy, watching as the clouds scudded before the stiffening breeze. Out in the harbour, waves were crashing and foaming in heedless fury. The distant doleful tolling of the harbour bell rang out over the crash of the surf. Seagulls fought the rising wind as it turned into squalling gusts, drenching the harbour in frigid spray.

Running at full pelt along the beach, arms held out wide like a bird, Shelby laughed. He danced away from the bubbling surf, a silver ribbon of foam stretching along the shore into the gathering gloom.

Off to his left, the beach curved away into a promontory, a blunt finger of land jabbing into the raging surf. Patches of scrubby grass marked its length, clinging grimly above a shore of tumbled rock, scoured smooth by the wind and sand. Dominating the tip of the promontory stood the stubby bulk of a lighthouse, silent and watchful over the harbour. Whitewashed walls swept up to a glass chambered lantern room, which glowed red in the fading sunlight. A tiny shed housing the generator clung like a barnacle to the base of the tower, the edges of the corrugated iron roof flapping in the wind.

Shelby gazed at the turbulent sky with joy written across his face. He loved this time of year, with its stark simplicity. He delighted in the constant roar of the surf, which left a pleasant ringing in his ears long after he left the beach. With their infinite patters and shades of grey, Shelby loved the way the clouds boiled and slid about the sky as they raced inland. The clean smell of the ocean and the tantalising taste of salt on his tongue made him grin even wider. He loved the murky light and he loved the possibility that the darkening sky would dissolve into a chaos of rain and thunder, drenching him to the skin and earning him a stern talking to by his smiling gran.

Stopping in his tracks, he uncurled his fist and looked at the damp, crumpled piece of paper clutched within. He was meant to be down at Mr. Graves the grocer getting eggs, bacon, and milk for tomorrow's breakfast. He felt a distant twinge of guilt and reluctantly started back for the gap in the hedge. At the foot of the broken rocks, he straightened suddenly, conscious of the familiar prickling down his back that always meant trouble.

The roaring of the wind and surf had picked up, waves crashing furiously along the shore. Boats moored along the pier bobbed like corks in a bath. Out past the lighthouse,

which blazed under the leaden sky, a vessel hove into view. Sparkles of white and orange flared along its structure. For a heart-stopping moment, it was caught side on to the rising waves, rolling ponderously under the onslaught. With a distant groan like a dying beast, it righted itself, slowly swinging to face the shore. It lunged over a wave then sped towards the pier, the strengthening wind at its stern.

Shelby looked at the ship with mounting fear, all thought of errands lost as it struggle to avoid running aground. He saw men hurry along the pier to a moored tugboat. Spray lashed him and with a start, he saw the roof fly off the shed housing the lighthouse generator. The distant glimmer from the lighthouse faltered, strengthened, then failed utterly. The struggling ship suddenly seemed more menacing in the encroaching darkness, and the prickling along his spine intensified.

With the dim light failing quickly, Shelby felt a sudden white-hot spike of pain sear through his mind. Crying out, he fell to his knees, hands clasping his head. Looking up with glistening eyes, he stared anxiously at the ship. He'd been upset before, when his grandfather hadn't woken one morning. But in all his sheltered life, he had never known fear like this. Now, gazing at the ship, Shelby finally understood what it was to be truly afraid. With the wind howling, the clouds running, and the heaving seas seeking to drag the trawler down, he fled the beach.

Up the lane he dashed, the two hedgerows blocking most of the faltering light. Only when he emerged onto the street near the pier did Shelby slow. Winded, he stopped beside the footpath. Several people eyed him oddly before hurrying off, disconcerted by the harried look in his eyes. His head still ached, and he rubbed his temples anxiously. The distant rumble of thunder rolled ominously towards him. The wind had picked up; leaves danced passed his quaking legs.

Turning his head, Shelby looked towards the pier. The bell on the pier tolled incessantly and the boats, riding at anchor, flew up and crashed down heavily. Beyond that, the entire sky, from horizon to horizon, was black with clouds. Distant flashes of light danced across white capped waves.

His head was suddenly ablaze with an overwhelming agony that drove Shelby to his knees. A cry escaped his clenched teeth and he staggered to his feet, grabbing a signpost for support. His hands shook and he had to blink furiously to bring his eyes back into focus. When they did, he could see the trawler had vanished, replaced by an inky black smudge that expanded rapidly, thrusting up and out towards the shore. He saw men on the pier pointing, then they turning and running as a black, ropy mass shot towards them. The darkness fell on them in a rush, and several men were smashed into the water, lost beneath the waves as the moored boats careened over them.

Around him, the few people still in the street started to back away and run. Shelby gripped the pole as the wind strengthened, battering shutters and lashing trees. The sun abruptly vanished and all was night. Heedless of the distant cries of terror around him, something broke in Shelby and he started running up the road, feet flying along the cobbles. He risked a quick glance behind him and saw the something darker than the night sweeping down towards him. In an instant, the darkness plunged everything into oblivion.

Silver sat cross-legged in the middle of her room, lights dimmed, the normally bright white walls reduced to shadowy darkness. Several candles sat in a circle around her, flames dancing to a light breeze that came from no discernible source. She gazed raptly at a small photo that sat in front of her. Two figures smiled out at her, and her heart ached. In front of the photo sat a small metal bowl, filled with gently steaming water. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the vapours. When she opened her eyes again, they were oddly

unfocussed and she began intoning the words she had underlined in a heavy, dark bound book that sat open to her right.

Nothing happened. This didn't overly surprise her; after all, the most surprising thing was that the book was even in the TARDIS library. Knowing the Doctor's over reliance on cold rationality and science, finding the book was a miracle in and of itself. Again, she said the words, voice husky with emotion. Nothing. The room drew closer, the walls pressing in. She said the words one final time, her voice insistent, demanding. Strands of hair clung to her sweat slicked face and the room grew oppressively hot. For the longest moment, she let her voice linger over the final syllables, a long, insistent, keening sound that echoed round the room. Then, imperceptibly, ripples formed on the surface of the water.

Her eyes widening in amazement, Silver held her breath, anxious not to disturb the manifestation. The ripples grew in strength, lapping the edge of the bowl but never spilling over. A tiny maelstrom formed in the centre of the bowl. The room grew cool and the weight on her mind lessened. After a moment, the waters calmed. Captivated, Silver watched intently for any sign that might emerge.

Like the surface of a millpond, the waters lay still and reflective. Silver felt her pulse quicken when the surface darkened, enough so that she saw her eager face staring up at her. A tiny shiver went through the image, then red bled into it and Silver found herself drawn into a vision from hell.

Tiny, contorted creatures scattered like beetles across a blasted landscape not fit for life. Ravaged forests lay in vast windrows, the trees no more than broken kindling. Lifeless oceans the colour of rust heaved and tossed endlessly. The cities were empty husks, their lifeblood drained away. By the westering shore of a vast continent, a massive ziggurat caught her attention. A beam of light blazed from the tower standing at its summit towards an island in the centre of the harbour. Unable to break the hold this nightmare image had on her, Silver found her inner gaze unwillingly drawn to the island.

Her voice shrill and anguished, Silver screamed until her face purpled and her vision swam. A bizarre creature sat sprawled across the entire island, its monstrous bulk a vast, endlessly writhing pulpy mass. Silver watched in horror as the bulbous head turned towards her, and an eye opened and gazed upon her...

Silver's body convulsed and the vision dissolved when a flailing hand knocked the bowl aside. Water spilled across the floor as Silver scrambled back, one foot slipping in the water and sweeping the candles away, their flames dying with a hiss. The room was plunged into darkness; the only light a faint crimson stain hanging in the air. Silver scrambled for the light pad, knocking over furniture in her haste. She breathed in relief when light flooded the room, returning it to its former placid normalcy.

Sitting with her back against the door, Silver's shoulders slumped as she looked at the scattered mess on the floor. Sighing, she crawled over to the bowl and flipped it over, watching as it spun in increasingly wobbly circles.

'How like my life,' she murmured, watching the bowl track around the floor. She tucked the book under her bed, for further examination later. Stowing the candles in a drawer, she fetched a towel. She gave a little cry when she saw the photo lying on the edge of the water. Plucking it up, she carefully wiped off the water. Inspecting it carefully, Silver rubbed gently at the two smiling faces, then put it away, her heart full of regret.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, she tried to retrieve the memory of the vision, but found that it was like trying to grab at smoke. Shrugging the thought aside, she began mopping up the water.

At that moment, the TARDIS engines began to roar, and the floor tilted and turned. Scrabbling for the door, Silver half fell into the corridor, then staggered towards the console room...

* * * * *

The Doctor made one more connection with the soldering iron, then stepped back, pocketing his jeweller's glass. Admiring his handiwork, he flapped at a wisp of smoke with a spotted handkerchief.

'Excellent,' he murmured, inspecting the connection with a critical eye. Putting aside the solder to cool, he circled the console, running a systems check. Satisfied with the results, he allowed himself a thin smile of satisfaction. He tucked the cloth untidily into a pocket, then spun a dial with a flourish. A surging noise filled the room and the connection ruptured with a loud bang. The TARDIS pitched alarmingly, throwing the Doctor off balance. He regained his feet and grabbed at the console, knocking several switches. The TARDIS's erratic movement worsened and the Doctor desperately began operating controls, all the while the sound of the time engines groaning ringing in his ears.

The inner door flew open, and Silver staggered in, crashing against the console with a thud. Wincing, she grabbed a lever and hung on.

'Was it this time?' she cried. 'Asteroid storm? Gravity well?'

'I'm not sure. Something in the vortex perhaps...'

As quickly as it occurred, the shuddering died away. The engines quietened and the TARDIS settled back into its seamless journey.

Brushing her sweat tangled hair from her face, Silver glared at the Doctor, who blanched slightly at the look.

'Well. I'm waiting,' she said.

The Doctor scratched at an ear, his features shifting from caution, to disdain and back to caution. Finally, his shoulders slumped.

'I'm not entirely sure,' he admitted at last. 'I was just doing some routine maintenance -'

'Aah, routine maintenance. How many times have I said that all that tinkering will lead to trouble?'

'I was doing some routine maintenance,' the Doctor went on. His nostrils flared.

'Really Silver, I can't be responsible for everything that goes wrong in the vortex.'

'Oh no, Doctor, not everything,' Silver answered. 'Just most things, I would imagine.'

That brought the Doctor up short. He thought for a moment, then his face broke into a grin.

'A fair point indeed. Come over here and we'll have a look at what occurred.'

Silver pulled her hair into a ponytail and joined the Doctor on the other side of the console. Something caught his eye.

'What is that?' he asked, pointing at her t-shirt.

Silver glanced down and laughed.

'You did tell me to have a good time,' she said, looking at the spiked tongue splashed across the fabric.

'Fun? I said go and relax, soak up some of the atmosphere of the late 20th century, not add to their coffers by buying that.' He paused. 'You didn't go to one of the concerts, did you?'

‘Of course I did. Come on Doctor, it’s the Stones. Rock ‘n roll, man!’ She laughed at the look on his face.

‘Sold out commercial twaddle. I really should take you to the Altamont concert, Silver. Now *that* was rock and roll.’ Shaking his head at Silver’s broad grin, he turned back to the readout and typed in a command.

The image on the screen abruptly doubled back on itself, the graphic representation of the vortex becoming a shuddering series of images that broke and reformed in an infinite loop. At one point, the image broke up in a blaze of static, before resuming its normal course.

‘There,’ the Doctor said, tapping the screen with a finely manicured nail. His lips pursed as he toggled a switch. The image slowed, then sped forward again, slowing once more as the static reappeared.

‘A-ha,’ the Doctor said triumphantly.

‘What?’ Silver asked, bewildered by his reaction.

‘Hmmm,’ the Doctor said noncommittally. After a moment, he sighed. ‘I’m not sure. It could be any number of things.’ His fingers tapped nervously on the console.

‘Take a stab, Doctor,’ Silver said dryly, hands on hips.

‘This sort of investigation is a terribly tricky thing, Silver. Taking a stab, as you so indelicately put it, asks me to cast aside centuries of experience and observation all in the pursuit of the quick fix you humans are so very, very fond.’

Silver nodded to the screen, unmoved by the outburst. ‘And...?’

Screwing his face up, the Doctor tapped the screen. ‘This is only an imperfect representation of the colossal energies swirling about in the vortex. We’re a fragile island in a storm tossed maelstrom, Silver, a thin plasma shell the only thing preventing us from being a smear across the space/time con-’

‘Doctor!’

‘Hmm, yes, very well’. He chewed on his lip.

‘It could be anything, really. It could simply be a natural phenomenon. Possibly another upstart race experimenting with time travel? A psychic pulse, perhaps? For it to register the pulse would have been enormously powerful.’ Peering at the burst of static more closely, the Doctor’s voice trailed off. His frown deepened and he began typing furiously at the keyboard.

Silver tapped the Doctor on the shoulder.

‘Doctor?’ Ignoring her, his fingers sped up to a blur of movement. A string of symbols crossed the screen and the image broke apart. Silver thought about interrupting the Doctor again, but thought better of it and sat in a chair and waited for him to finish. Sometimes it was better that way, she thought to herself.

Eventually, the Doctor paused. He watched the readout, murmuring to himself as the results came through.

‘Yes,’ he said, quiet triumph in his voice. ‘Silver, I was absolutely right,’ he said, his face animated and flushed. ‘A massive psychic pulse actually breached the vortex. Almost unprecedented.’

‘I see,’ said Silver, in a tone lacking the Doctor’s enthusiasm.

‘That’s that then, yes. You’ve found the cause? Excellent. So, where to next then, huh? How about a visit to the moons of Mars? I’ve heard you say Phobos is spectacular this time of the year.’

‘Phobos?’ The Doctor shook his head, clearly exasperated. ‘Never mind that, this is a real puzzle, Silver. We should track down the source of the burst, if only for the sake of science.’

Silver laughed. ‘Science? Not your sense of adventure, then?’ The Doctor’s face looked pained, then crestfallen at being caught out.

‘I fear you know me too well,’ he said, his voice mournful, though Silver swore she saw a twinkle in his eyes.

Silver sighed, trying to look mournful as she shook her head. ‘You’ll be the death of me yet, Doctor. Oh, very well. Where’s the source of this psychic pulse, then?’

Beaming, the Doctor turned back to the monitor while Silver stood next to him, listening intently.

‘Well, the best estimate is Earth, late 20th century. Scotland, to be precise...’

The harbour was a mass of churning waves, the sound a distant counterpoint to the hissing of the wind along the dark, rain swept sand. In the sky, a flock of seagulls wheeled and dipped in an endless gyre over the centre of the harbour, their raucous cries tinged with almost human despair. Here and there, a bird would drop out of the sky, plummeting into the turbulent waters, its existence washed away in a heartbeat.

On the edge of the world, the ocean ran red as the sun touched the horizon. The wind grew chill and moaned restlessly over the beach.

There was a flicker of blue halfway down the beach, then the sound of the time engines grinding their way into reality. Fitfully emerging into existence, the TARDIS shuddered into solidity and the engines thundered to a stop. The echoes lingered for several seconds before the lonely sound of the waves returned.

A sparrow lighted in the roof, head bobbing in every direction. It froze when the door clicked, head hunching down into its body. Training a beady eye on the Doctor’s top hat, it watched him step out onto the sand. Silver followed, awkwardly shrugging on a fur lined coat.

The Doctor wandered towards the water, head bowed as he carefully searched the sand. Snatching up a shell with a cry of delight, the Doctor brushed the sand away and cast a critical eye over it. He showed it to Silver, who shrugged her shoulders and turned to look at the harbour. Calling out to the Doctor, she pointed towards the water.

The sparrow watched the Doctor’s head follow Silver’s outflung arm. It started at a sound and flung itself into the sky, swooping away as a shower of dirt and rocks cascaded onto the roof of the TARDIS. It flew directly over the heads of the Doctor and Silver, then, as if a hand had plucked it from the air, it soared directly upwards, until it was lost in the endless wheeling flock centred over the pier.

Absently pocketing the shell, the Doctor joined Silver by the water’s edge.

‘Oh my,’ he breathed, his forehead creasing.

A straight line of planking flanked by tall granite pylons every ten feet, the pier thrust deep into the harbour. Boats of every sort lined each side, some still at anchor, others on their sides or bobbing upside down. In places, the planking had broken, sharp ends thrusting dangerously into the air. Devoid of life, windswept and drenched by the roiling waves, it would have looked menacing enough even without the bizarre sight at the seaward end.

At the end of the pier, a deep-hulled ship rocked at anchor. Two cranes stood to the stern of the boat, tangled netting covering them like spider’s webs. A number of cables draped limply over the starboard side of the trawler. The hull seemed intact and waves washed around it in a foaming torrent of silver and grey. The running lights were out and it looked abandoned.

‘Are those cables?’ Silver swept her hair away from her eyes as the wind picked up with a moan.

‘Possibly,’ ventured the Doctor, his voice uncertain. ‘They do seem overly thick, though...’

At that moment, a thudding sound rose in the air and a vast shadow swooped over them. Craning their necks, Silver and the Doctor saw a large black shape in the air, twin blades blurring at high speed.

‘A military helicopter,’ yelled the Doctor over the scream of the engines. Gathered at an open doorway were several men looking out over the beach. Their helmets gleamed in the fading light. What happened next was stunning in its simplicity and brutality.

The birds circling the end of the pier began falling out of the sky, singly at first, then a rain of them tumbling silently into the water. The cables, which also covered the first twenty feet of the pier in a dense carpet, suddenly unfurled and flew into the air, aiming straight for the helicopter. Veering away, the pilot attempted to avoid the rapidly approaching forest of cables. For a moment, Silver thought the ponderous machine had escaped, then gasped when it was caught.

Wrapping around the stubby fuselage, the cables plucked the helicopter out of the air as a child would an apple from a tree. Engines roaring, the helicopter fought the irresistible pull. For a few seconds, it seemed about to break free, then, engines whining shrilly, with men spilling from the open cargo doors, the helicopter plunged into the water. It clipped the trawler and a blade went careening across the water, ripping into a cruiser before embedding itself in the boat berthed next to it. The water boiled as the chopper slipped beneath the surface. There was a spark, then a whoosh as the spilled fuel ignited. Gouts of black smoke billowed into the air as flames ate greedily at the pier.

Wreckage quickly bobbed to the surface, amid a seething, steaming cauldron awash with bodies. Silver stared, shocked by the sudden carnage. She felt a hand on her shoulder, insistently tugging.

‘Come on, Silver,’ the Doctor yelled, already passed her, his coat flying as he raced across the beach. Silver struggled to keep up, her trainers sinking into the soft sand. There was a final explosion and water geysured into the air. A piece of metal smashed into the beach not ten feet from her. She ran on.

They climbed a series of steps leading onto the pier. Racing towards the far end, Silver thought she saw several ropey looking cables sliding into the water, but ignored them when she saw a man struggling towards the pier. She and the Doctor arrived at the same time and lent over the edge to grab the man. Several metres away, a boat riding at anchor was fully ablaze, smoke billowing into the air. With the heat of the flames pressing closer, they both grabbed at the swimmer.

His weight nearly jerked her into the water. Grabbing Silver’s free arm, the Doctor took a handful of the man’s jacket and helped drag him onto the pier, where he lay gasping like a landed fish.

There was a sharp crack and the boat exploded, igniting fuel tanks blowing the stern away. They both ducked as flames tore into the air. Burning debris rained steadily around them. Ignoring it, Silver examined the man she had helped rescue. His face was white but his eyes were clear and lucid. His black hair was short cropped and his clothing seemed to be some sort of uniform. He struggled to his knees, before slumping against a pylon.

Out of the corner of her eye, Silver saw that the Doctor had vanished into the cloud of billowing smoke. Some distance from the pier, two figures bobbing in the water caught her attention. One appeared to be struggling to hold the other’s head above water. On impulse, Silver slipped off her shoes and jacket, and dove in.

The water was freezing and Silver nearly gasped in shock. Steeling herself, she looked around. The water was dark, but far from gloomy. The dark hull of the trawler

loomed to one side. She saw more equipment floating to the surface and horribly, the severed torso of a man descending to the bottom, blood trailing it like an unfurled banner.

Ahead, she could see the duo feebly struggling. One had an arm around the shoulders of the other, whose head seemed to be partly submerged. She could see that he had one arm around the shoulders of someone else.

Cutting smoothly through the water, Silver surfaced beside the pair. Shivering as the frigid wind tore into her, she received a blow from a flailing arm for her troubles. Wincing, she slipped an arm around the man. He looked at her, his eyes wild with cold or shock.

'Steady,' she said. The other man groaned and opened his eyes. A nasty purple bruise swelled across one temple.

The conscious man waved his arms about feebly. His teeth chattered badly. Silver grabbed his face and pulled him closer.

'Concentrate,' Silver yelled. The man shook and his eyes started to drift. Before Silver could say another word, his eyes jerked open and his mouth yawned in a silent scream. His body half rose out of the water, then was pulled roughly from side to side, like a bone being worried by a dog.

The man began to scream, a long, inhuman sound that wound higher and higher. His body slid across the surface, arms beating ineffectually at something wrapped around his waist. His torso abruptly caved in and he convulsed, water and blood spewing in a pink froth from his gaping mouth. Swiftly, his body slid beneath the waves.

Stunned, Silver waited for him to resurface. Overhead, gulls were once again circling, their lonely cries unnerving. After a minute, Silver grabbed the semi-conscious man, then began to kick towards the pier. A terrible sense of vulnerability haunted her all the way.

Back at the pier, the smoke hung in a thick choking pall driven by the wind. Swimming between two boats that were blazing fiercely, Silver felt the heat wash over her like an open furnace. Reaching for a rope, she saw the face of the man she had pulled from the water holding his hand out to her. His eyes were sharp, and the chin and nose neatly chiselled. Water streamed down his face. Oblivious of the burning rigging raining down around them, he took a handful of the man's jacket and pulled him out of the water.

Gripping the rope, Silver pulled herself up onto the pier. A few feet away lay yet another man, dressed as the others were. He lay still. Silver was suddenly conscious that they were all horribly exposed out on the pier. Troubled, she helped him to drag the man onto the pier. He rolled to one side and spewed up a torrent of seawater. Groaning, he leaned against a pylon. Silver noticed that, like the man who had helped lift him out of the water, he was dressed in black. Both wore holstered pistols at their hips.

'Thanks,' was all she could muster through chattering teeth. The man nodded, once, coldly appraising her. 'I'm Colonel Striker,' he said, nodding once to her. His voice was broad and commanding and his bearing was upright and composed.

'The man you saved is Private Dunstan.' Just then, the Doctor appeared from out of the cloud of smoke with another man by his side. The two rushed towards them.

Giving Striker a cursory nod, the Doctor leaned towards Silver.

'This is Private Baxter,' he said, as if introducing a newcomer to a garden tea. Baxter nodded once, his ash streaked face haggard. Collecting himself, the Doctor pointed to the landward end of the pier.

'Come along then,' he said, raising his voice over the roar of the inferno. Overhead, storm clouds gathered, and the first drops of rain had begun to spit. 'We have to get off this pier before we become trapped.'

Needing no urging, Silver and Striker rose to their feet. ‘This is the Doctor, I’m Silver,’ she said to Striker, by way of introduction, as they helped Dunstan to his feet. Brushing off Baxter’s assistance, the Doctor hefted the unconscious man across his shoulders, seeming to carry the weight effortlessly.

Cinders drifted down and Silver struck at several that landed in her hair. The wind changed and smoke engulfed them. Silver succumbed to a coughing fit, a dry hacking that tore at her lungs. The wind turned once more, tearing the smoke cloud into tatters.

Staggering under the dead weight, Silver risked a glance behind. Several boats that had burned to the waterline were sinking beneath the waves. Others were still ablaze, the flames racing up masts and along ropes, whipped along by the wind. A pillar of black smoke spiralled into the air, drawn in some strange way towards the centre of the gyre of birds.

‘Doctor,’ Silver called, stopping as a cough hacked at her lungs. ‘Doctor, there was something in the water before, something...’ She struggled to find the words to describe the incident. He looked at her querulously.

‘There will be enough time for chit chat once we find some shelter for these men. That storm will hit us in a matter of minutes.’ He nodded at a bank of milling clouds racing towards them. Lightning forked into the ocean, blinding flashes that danced across the waves. The bass rumble of thunder quickly followed. Fat drops of rain began falling and the temperature plummeted. Silver could see her breath misting in the breeze. Then, like a bolt from a clear blue sky, she felt an overwhelming urge to turn her head towards the end of the pier.

The trawler was obscured by a shifting pillar of smoke and ash, lit from within by fat cinders spiralling lazily into the air. Driven by that unknown impulse, she stared and stared into the smoke, until she was rewarded when the unmistakable shape of a man appeared.

Yellow eyes stared at her hungrily as a lean, haggard face split into a monstrous grin. The body underneath the long oilskin twisted and rippled. Opening his mouth, a series of clicking noises emerged. Silver winced as they resonated in her head and she heard her name being called. The man nodded at her, then on one booted heel and vanished back into the smoke.

‘Silver!’ Striker yelled at her again. ‘What in God’s name are you staring at? We need to find shel...’ Striker’s voice faded abruptly and his gaze switched onto the shore.

A man had stumbled out of the water before dropping to his hands and knees. He slumped against a large battered locker. Striker abruptly let go of his half of the burden, leaving Silver to stagger under the weight. He had taken two steps when he stopped, eyes bulging.

A dozen tentacles erupted from the water. The mottled black flesh was flat and spatulate; lined on one side with large, round suckers. They undulated across the sand towards the man, who was oblivious to their presence. Striker managed to shout at a warning, but it was too late.

Wrapping around his legs, the tentacles savagely pulled him to the ground. Screaming, the clawed ineffectually at the soft, wet sand as he was dragged thrashing into the water. For a brief moment, they could see his despairing face above the waves, as his arms frantically beating the water. Then, he was gone. Left behind were the insistent patter of the rain and the distant cries of the gulls. There was a loud thumping against the underside of the pier.

‘We had best be away,’ the Doctor said, warily eyeing the planks he stood on. With a grimace, Striker composed himself. Turning, he took up his share of the burden once more.

Wordlessly, they all stumbled off the pier and onto the street corner opposite. They paused, unsure where to find shelter, when Silver spotted a small figure beckoning to them from a doorway half way up the street.

'Over there,' Silver cried, pointing to a small figure in a doorway some distance away. Behind them, another boat exploded, and the pounding along the underside of the pier rose up in a savage staccato beat. The others needed no further urging, hurrying up the footpath. A door stood open, and Silver could see the shape of a small boy watching them.

Once inside, Striker and Silver eased Dunstan against a shelf. Carefully lowering the man he carried to the floor, the Doctor rolled him onto his side. He then grabbed Baxter as he stumbled in, and directed him to keep an eye on the unconscious man.

'Smith,' Silver heard Baxter say. 'His name is Reggie Smith.' The Doctor nodded once, then moved to the doorway, chancing a glance outside. Silver joined him and they both peered through hailstorm towards the pier.

'What's going on?' Silver whispered urgently. The Doctor shook his head, holding a finger to his lips. Scowling, Silver winced when a sharp pain lanced through her head. Rubbing her temple, she noticed the boy standing beside her. He held something a scrap of paper in his hands. Reaching out to touch him, Silver saw him stop then look at her, a smile lighting his face.

Despite the circumstances, Silver returned the smile. He was about twelve, short and stocky, with straight, fair hair, and a round face. Intense blue eyes, almost black, were his most remarkable feature. He pointed his thumb at his chest and said, 'Shelby.'

'Hello, Shelby. My name is Silver.'

'That's pretty,' he said, pointing to the necklace she wore. The charms sparkled in the fading light, and she held them out for him to inspect. 'One for protection,' she said. 'The other is for luck and this one is for knowledge.' She watched as his forehead furrowed in concentration, mouthing the words as he touched each charm in turn. Abruptly, he let the necklace fall and returned to the piece of paper. Silver watched him methodically fold the paper. When he finished, he showed her an intricately folded creature sitting in the palm of one hand.

Reaching out, Silver plucked it from his hand. Holding it to the light, she could see an elongated head, with multiple arms curving out from the body. A tiny indentation in the head served as a strangely sinister eye. Silver shivered, then quickly handed it back. Shelby turned his attention back to his creation, his eyes rapt. A thought occurred to her.

'Where's your mom, Shelby?' she asked, gently.

He didn't answer, turning his attention to a nearby rack of comics.

'Gone,' he said. 'Been looking for gran.' His eyes suddenly filled with tears, and Silver impulsively grabbed him in a hug.

Baxter, who had been observing the exchange, limped over and knelt beside them.

'Hullo, lad,' he said, ruffling the boy's hair when Silver let go. 'I'm Eddie.' Baxter held out a hand and Shelby shook it, looking grave. After a moment, Shelby let go, returning to the comic's rack.

'There's something wrong with him, isn't there,' Silver whispered.

'Wrong isn't the right word,' Baxter said, not unkindly. 'I think he's autistic, but I can't be sure. He certainly has the same mannerisms as my niece, and she has it.' He sighed, turning to where the Doctor stood. He hadn't moved, his gaze fixed on the pier.

'Do you know what's going on, Doctor?' he asked, keeping his voice low.

Tapping his lips with an index finger, the Doctor turned his head slowly, unwilling to interrupt his vigil.

'You don't need me to tell you that something is very, very wrong. I'm still unsure as to what it is.' His eyes burned with interest. 'It is certainly a puzzle worthy of investigation.'

Striker turned his head sharply.

'A puzzle?' he said, not bothering to keep his voice down. He stood up. 'I've lost five good men and you're calling it a puzzle. What sort of man are you?'

'The sort who sifts the evidence for the facts and then makes his mind up,' the Doctor waspishly replied. He looked at Silver

'Tell me Silver, have you noticed a shadow across your mind?' Silver looked puzzled. The Doctor sighed. 'Have you had this oppressive feeling of being watched? Or a sharp pain in your head, perhaps?' Baxter looked up. 'I have,' he said, his voice low. 'Back on the pier.'

Silver nodded also. 'Yes, just after we entered the building. Is it important?'

'Everything is important, Silver. Universally so. The psychic attacks you both experienced are a commonplace across the galaxy. This remarkable boy, however, is almost unique. He's the only thing stopping us becoming enslaved for the rest of our lives.'

Shelby closed the comic and stared at the people looking at him in surprise.

'Really Doctor, this is just too much.' Striker looked furious. 'Either talk sense or do us a favour and shut up. I'm in no mood for foolishness when half my men are floating face down in the harbour.' In the ensuing frosty silence, Silver watched the Doctor. His face grew stern and the colour drained from it.

'Sense, Colonel Striker?' he said at last, his voice taking on a harder edge. He crooked a finger at him. 'Come here and I'll show you sense.'

The two men stared at each other for a long moment, and Silver held her breath, knowing instinctively that if they fell out, what lay ahead would be hard going. Rising to his full height, Striker was about to say something, but a warning shake of the head from Baxter made him pause. Relenting, he walked over to the Doctor.

'Well?' he asked.

Moving outside, the Doctor pointed up the street. His face was unreadable.

'There's no point hiding in there, Colonel' he said, his voice faintly mocking. 'I'm trying to show you some 'sense'.'

Striker stepped out onto the footpath, and Silver and Baxter followed.

Steady rain had replaced the hail. The clouds raced overhead, diminishing what little light was left with the sinking of the sun. It was bitterly cold, and the chips of ice scattered up and down the street gleamed wetly. Standing next to the Doctor, Silver gazed in awe at the far end of the pier.

'Bloody hell,' said Baxter, his eyes wide.

'Satisfied?' Colonel, asked the Doctor. Silver thought he sound exhausted.

Striker remained silent, his face impassive.

Wisps of smoke were all that remained of the fire that had engulfed the far end of the pier. Several boats had sunk, while others listed badly. So intense had been the blaze, one of the granite pylons had sheared away. Miraculously, most of the planking seemed to have survived intact. The trawler looked undamaged, though this wasn't what caught their attention.

Dozens of tentacles sprouted from the centre deck, crawling slowly over the trawler's superstructure like boneless fingers. One would occasionally splash into the harbour, sending up great gouts of water. Like those that had claimed the man on the beach, each tentacle was a mottled black. Some were thin, while others were several feet in diameter. Red suckers, pulsing wetly with a hidden, obscene life, dotted each tentacle. With the light

fading quickly, a rusted orange glow began to emerge from within the centre of the mass of tentacles. Then, whatever intelligence lay hidden within the hold cried out, an alien hooting noise that left all who heard it shuddering with disgust.

Striker's eyes narrowed. 'Do you think it's native to this part of the coast?' His voice was alive with curiosity. The Doctor looked at him with a measure of respect.

'I'm most impressed, Colonel. Most of the military men I've met would deny the existence of what they were looking at, then insist on launching a missile strike, thereby verifying what they were trying to deny.' The frostiness in his early words had vanished.

'Evidence, as you say, Doctor, needs sifting and weighing. I seen enough to concede you were right. What do you think it is?'

'Ordinarily, I'd say that what we are looking at is a squid. Larger than average, certainly. Under normal circumstances, one would consider it unusual, no more than that. But this particular specimen...'

His voice trailing off, the Doctor looked again at the pier.

'Does he often act like that?' Baxter whispered to Silver. She smiled.

'Always. Infuriating, isn't it?'

Baxter smiled in return. 'Very.'

The Doctor looked up sharply.

The Doctor looked up sharply. 'Who here knows their Tennyson?' Before anyone could answer, he went on.

*'Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee'*

There was silence after that, as they contemplated the pier. Finally, with a wave of his hand, the Doctor led them back into the shop.

Inside, the Doctor looked grim, but his eyes were alive with the challenge ahead. He turned to Silver.

'You asked me earlier if those things were cables.' Silver nodded, her eyes growing wide.

'We were obviously mistaken. This is something more than a denizen of the deepest ocean trench. The manner in which the temperature has fallen so precipitously makes it possible to argue that the creature is drawing energy from the very air. That still doesn't explain the massive growth, however.'

'Is that a clue to its identity, then?' she asked.

'Possibly. The growth rate is bizarre, as if there was another nearby source of energy feeding directly into it. I can't immediately discern what it could be, though. There are dozens of species across the galaxy that draw sustenance from energy surrounding them. We don't have time to winnow them. However, I have my suspicions...' Something occurred to the Doctor and he looked at Striker.

'Colonel, you haven't told me why you and your men were flying over the town.'

'We were part of the search party sent out to look for the Cormorant.'

'What happened to it?' Silver asked, eager for the distraction the conversation offered from the memory of the creature sprawled over the trawler.

'You two really are out of the loop, aren't you?' Shaking his head, Striker continued.

'Three days ago, a general distress message went out from the drillship Cormorant. It was investigating potential new deposits in the Ninian oil field. The message was

garbled, but enough came through so that a search began. Our base is about twenty miles inland, so we were roped into helping. We flew several missions, but nothing came of it until we received word that a fishing trawler – that one at the end of the pier, no less, had reported picking up a survivor. There were no other survivors reported, so we were packing up when something odd came through.'

His interest piqued, the Doctor leaned forward. 'Such as?'

'Two nights ago, reports began filtering in that all communications with Calcorn had been lost. Nothing was able to get through – landlines, mobiles, the internet. Nothing. Then the reports grew strange.'

'The darkness came,' Shelby said, his voice small and lost.

The others waited, but he refused to say more.

'Would you care to be more, Colonel? 'Strange' covers a multitude of sins.'

Striker looked exasperated. 'I don't really see that it matters. We need to leave. I have injured men and...'

'Everything matters, Colonel,' the Doctor said flatly.

'I saw it,' Dunstan called out from where he sat.

They all turned and looked at Dunstan. Some colour had returned to his face, but he looked drained

'It was me who found that milk deliveryman. Do you remember, Eddie?'

'Aye,' Baxter said, nodding.

'It was the day after the search had finished. Baxter and I came across a stalled van. Inside was a deliveryman. Jenkins, I think his name was. He was raving, the poor bloke. Claimed his dreams had come to life. Said he had been inside the town for over a week, but his logbook showed he had entered only that morning. The milk was still fresh, so we thought nothing of it and handed him over to the local authorities.'

'Interesting,' murmured the Doctor. 'Did anyone seek to find out what was going on inside the village?'

Striker rubbed at his face. 'This morning there were reports that several police who had entered the village hadn't come out. As a favour for the locals, we flew in for a look.' He nodded to the harbour. 'And that's how we ended up there.'

Silver looked thoughtful, then her face lit. 'Doctor, that turbulence that hit us in the TARDIS, do you think it is linked to all this?'

'Oh, very likely, Silver.' The Doctor pursed his lips. 'There was an element of temporal drift, so the timing of the turbulence we experienced would match with the trawler's arrival.' A thought struck him.

'You said there was a survivor on board. Did anyone make contact with him? Or her?'

'John Wells is his name. He was an engineer onboard the Cormorant. We had hoped that he would be able to shed some light on what was going on here, but he seems to have disappeared.'

'Or been gobbled up,' Baxter said bleakly.

'So what now, Doctor?' Silver asked. She had moved back to the doorway and was gazing at the trawler, entranced by the bizarre image it presented. Behind it, the swollen sun sank languorously into the sea. A curtain of darkness swept across the village.

'We need to find safer ground. Those tentacles already reach as far as the shore and we saw what they did to the helicopter. Higher ground would be best until we get a chance to better assess the situation.' They could hear a boat being smashed into kindling.

'You're a local boy, Baxter. Do you think you can lead us to a defensible position?' Striker looked at him expectantly.

Baxter thought for a moment. 'There's the town hall, at the top of the hill, sir. It's one of those Victorian piles; you know, designed to look like a fortress.'

'Capital,' said the Doctor. He motioned Striker aside while Dunstan and Baxter picked up the unconscious Riggs. Silver, who had begun shepherding Shelby out of the building, lingered a moment.

'Colonel, there's no easy way out of this village. If I'm right, the creature has set up some sort of containment field to give it enough time to fully regenerate. At the moment, the field works imperfectly, hence the milkman's escape, but as it gathers strength, so grows the field.'

Striker nodded. 'As you said earlier, Doctor, I have an open mind on these matters. You may dress like a fop, but you sound like you know what you're saying. You can rely on my men and I to see you this through.'

Looking pleased, the Doctor smiled, clapping Striker in the shoulder.

'Comrades at last, eh, Colonel?' he said, winking at Silver as they left the shop.

Outside, the temperature continued to fall. Drizzle sifted down, a silvery haze that reflected the little moonlight that was able to break through the cloud cover. Afraid the boy would wander off into the night if left unattended, Silver gripped Shelby's hand.

'Shelby, where's your gran. Do you know?' Shelby shook his head, then reached for his temple, rubbing at it.

'Up here,' he said simply, a sad look on his face.

'What do you mean?' she asked, puzzled. 'Do you mean you can remember her, is that it?' Shelby refused to answer and Silver let it drop.

They scurried up the footpath to the town hall, which proved to be the Victorian edifice that Baxter had suggested. The clock tower, barely discernible against the sky, loomed over them. The main doors were unlocked and they slipped through.

Inside, twin staircases on either side of the entrance swept up to a landing, which was lost in darkness. Black and white tiles marched into the interior of the hall.

'Baxter, I want you and Dunstan to break out the cold lights and check the landing and whatever lies beyond. The Doctor and I will recce the building's interior.'

Baxter nodded. He pulled two stubby cylinders from his equipment belt. Silver watched as he depressed one end. A cold blue light grew in intensity until he was bathed in it. Dunstan took his and did the same. They chose a staircase and silently ascended.

'That's pretty cool,' she said, pointing to the lights.

'Cylome sticks,' Striker replied. 'Despite the budget cuts, we still manage to get our hands on some interesting stuff.' He pulled two from his belt and handed one to Silver.

'Are you up to keeping an eye on the boy and Riggs?' He saw that Silver was about to protest, then shook his head.

'I'm sure the Doctor agrees when I say I need someone with a cool head down here looking after the two most vulnerable people in our group.'

'It is for the best, Silver,' the Doctor added. 'We'll only be down the hall a ways. I'm sure you know what to do if something untoward occurs.' Holding the light stick above his head, he surveyed the vaulted ceiling, whistling in appreciation.

Reluctantly, Silver nodded, watching the two men walk into the interior of the hall, surrounded by a corona of blue light that steadily diminished as they moved further into the building. When the light vanished, she turned to Riggs and made him as comfortable as she could, pausing to examine the bruise purpling his temple. He groaned once, before falling silent.

Sighing, Silver looked around the hall. The cyclome stick cast a small pool of light, making her feel she was adrift in a sea of night. Above, she heard Dunstan and Baxter

moved across the landing. A door creaked open and the sound of their booted feet faded. In the silence, the sense of isolation and vulnerability grew oppressive. She clung to the light stick, willing its illumination to spread further. Silver started when a distant clatter echoed down the hall towards her. Holding her breath, she strained to hear. The silence dragged on and gradually, she relaxed, certain that no one was approaching. Hoping to distract herself, she turned to speak to Shelby. With rising panic, she saw that he had vanished.

For a frantic moment, her imagination grew cluttered with thoughts of tentacles crawling up the street to pluck him from under her nose. The doors were ajar and she rushed to them. To her vast relief, Shelby was standing on the steps. He faced away from her, looking across the street. She could see the tips of the piece of origami held loosely in one hand

Standing by his side, she made sure nothing slithered up the street towards them. Shelby looked up at her, his eyes pools of darkness. She smiled down at him, but he continued to look blankly at her. His gaze unsettled her, so she looked away, rubbing her arms against the cold, noting with surprise that her clothes were drenched.

She started when she saw the figure of a man step out of the shadows on the other side of the street. He remained where he was and Silver took an involuntary step back.

Shelby chuckled, a deep, throaty noise that sent a shiver of fear down her back.

‘Did I startle you, Rachel?’ The voice rasped, heavy with menace. ‘Don’t worry. In time, we’ll all get to know each other much, much better.’

‘Shelby,’ she said. ‘What are you doing? Shelby?’

The boy’s head twisted and looked down at his body.

‘Aah, this poor scrap of a lad. A pity his mind is broken, otherwise he would be a formidable ally. No matter, no matter at all. In time, when the Long Night falls over this planet, we will all be one. So the Weaver has promised.’

Silver darted a hand at Shelby, closing it over his shoulder. She pulled it back with a gasp, stunned by the cold radiating from him.

His eyes blazing, Shelby turned and held out his hand. Sitting in the centre of his palm, the origami kraken shivered, its tentacles writhing minutely in the breeze.

‘Gaze upon the Weaver,’ he said, his voice eager. ‘The bringer of dreams, ruler of the night!’ Shelby suddenly lurched backwards, the hand holding the folded paper balling into a fist. From across the street, there was a painful cry, and the figure crumpled to the ground. Shelby fell into her arms, and when she looked up, the figure had vanished.

Carrying him back inside, Silver lay him next to Riggs. Shelby’s breathing was shallow, but his pulse was steady. Satisfied, she hurried back to the doors. Distantly, the sound of waves pounding the beach drifted towards her. Pushing the doors shut, Silver slid to the floor with her back against them. She felt her unease grow and she had to fight to stop it flowering into outright panic.

A few minutes later, she stood up, angry at her weakness. Dragging a table across the floor, she barricaded the entrance as best she could. After a moment of indecision, she decided there was little she could do for Shelby and Riggs. Silver went in search of the Doctor and Striker.

The light stick showed a little of her surroundings as she passed into the heart of the building. The entry hall gave way to a corridor that swept past several offices, before emerging into a larger room. An honour board dominated the wall above the partially open double doors at the far end. Portraits of severe looking men in robes and chains of office glared at her from both walls. With a thrill, she heard the Doctor’s voice on the other side of the doors and jogged towards them.

Stepping into the chamber, Silver came to an abrupt stop. Holding the light stick higher, she looked around in amazement.

The council chambers were impressively large. High ceilings vanished into the darkness. Banks of chairs on three sides hemmed in a long table sitting in the chamber's well. Silver could see Striker and the Doctor standing off to one side in a puddle of blue light. They were examining something lying at their feet.

Her first step echoed loudly around the room. The Doctor and Striker looked up sharply at her.

'Silver, didn't we tell you stay with the others,' the Doctor called, his voice irritated. Silver was shocked to hear him sound so unsettled. Looking around, she understood why.

The room was crammed with the bodies of hundreds of people, lying in haphazard piles on the floor, benches, tables and even the steps separating each bank of chairs. The room was hot and sticky, almost fetid with the ripe smell of hundreds of bodies packed together like sardines. Striker looked around in bewilderment, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

'They aren't dead, are they?' Silver felt a thrill of apprehension race through her. She touched her charms, mouthing the words of a warding she had recently found in a book.

'Oh, put those things away and don't be so silly,' the Doctor said, clearly agitated. His hands rubbed together, the rasping sound like a file on metal.

'No, they aren't dead. It's some sort of coma, by the looks of it.' Striker inspected a body, that of an elderly man. 'Their pulse rates are very, very slow, no more than two or three per minute. It's like a state of suspended animation.'

'But on a grand scale,' the Doctor said. His eyes alighted on one body.

'Both of you. Come and look at this. It is most singular.'

Striker and Silver gathered around a body lying on the floor. The Doctor pointed with a bony finger at a carapace that had formed over the top half of the motionless form, obscuring its features. Pulling a pencil from a pocket, the Doctor tapped the shell. A hollow noise rang out and the body shivered once, then lay still.

'There's another one over there.' Silver pointed to a body lying across a bench. 'And two more near the podium,' Striker said quietly.

'This is worse than I had suspected. Much worse. Our friend in the harbour has been busy. I fear the trap has been sprung.'

'The two are linked then, Doctor?' Striker looked around, shaking his head.

'It's hard to believe they aren't, Colonel. The psychic probing Shelby's barrier has protected us from is undoubtedly a manifestation of the creature. For those not protected...' The Doctor waved his hand at the chamber, that simple act more than words could convey.

'Why?' Striker asked, his voice anguished. 'What possible gain could come from this, this obscenity?'

Silent for a moment, the Doctor stared off into the distance.

'There are things that crawl blinking into the light and do their best to exist, to survive and thrive. They care not for the damage caused, the lives lost, the chaos they leave in their wake. Their continued existence is justification enough for all manner of terrible acts. We see the results around us. And it could spread further.' The Doctor's face was bleak.

'We've no means to check its growth. Safe within the containment field, it could reach full maturity without being challenged. Afterwards, what could possibly stop it?'

‘Speed then, Doctor, is of the essence. Come on.’ Striker turned and hurried up the centre aisle, chivvying Silver along. Casting one last look at the chamber, the Doctor followed them out.

When they returned to the entry hall, Dunstan and Baxter were waiting for them. Shelby stood between them, looking lost.

‘Thank God you’re all right,’ Baxter said. ‘Shelby was awake when we came back. What happened here?’

Feeling everyone’s eyes on her, Silver straightened, her face growing defiant.

‘There was someone outside, across the street. I’ve seen him before, hiding in the fire on the pier. He...he possessed Shelby. There’s no other word for it.’

I saw someone outside, and then Shelby started speaking with this strange voice.’

Silver felt the Doctor’s hand on her arm.

‘What did he say?’ he asked urgently.

‘He talked about the Long Night and how the Weaver would bring everyone together. You can’t know how spooky it all was.’ Shaking her head, she shrugged the Doctor’s hand away.

‘Does any of that strike a chord with you, Doctor?’ Striker asked.

Taking his hat off, the Doctor smoothed back his hair, then rattled his watch chain. All the while, his face was solemn, eyes intense.

‘As I said, there are a number of possibilities. All of them bad. We need to get to that containment field and examine it.’ He turned to Silver.

‘I know it sounds like I’m coddling you, Silver, but I need you to stay and look after Shelby and Riggs.’

For a moment, Silver looked like she was going to protest, then relented.

Silver nodded. ‘Anything to help, Doctor.’

‘I’ll stay,’ Baxter spoke up. He looked at Striker. ‘If that’s okay with you, sir?’

‘I had hoped you’d offer, Baxter because if you hadn’t I’d have ordered you to stay anyway. Dunstan and I will go with the Doctor. I’ll be relying on your judgement, your knowledge of the village if things turn bad. You are to remain here unless the situation deteriorates. If it does so, you know the lay of the land. Find a suitable retreat. How long before you think we will return, Doctor?’

‘It shouldn’t take more than two hours. Baxter, do you recall where you found the milkman’s van?’

‘Aye. Follow the high street up the hill, then on passed the train station. The road diverges further on, then you’ll go passed the Three Regents. Beyond that is where we found the van. Matt here should be able to find the exact spot, won’t you?’

Dunstan nodded.

‘The Three who?’ asked Silver, her curiosity piqued.

Baxter looked embarrassed. ‘Sorry, it’s the one and only tourist feature Calcorn has. It’s the name of three standing stones that overlook the village. Our own little Stonehenge. Druids and all that stuff. They sit on a barren patch of earth, you can’t miss them.’

‘Interesting. Most interesting.’ Consulting his watch, the Doctor snapped the lid shut. ‘Very well. Colonel, are we ready?’ Striker nodded and Dunstan joined them. As the two soldiers left, the Doctor turned to Silver.

‘Keep an eye on the boy, will you? His mind is powerful, but he’s exceptionally vulnerable. He has no barriers, no way of controlling his ability. He’s the keystone keeping us all alive.’

Silver nodded, then, to the Doctor’s great surprise, she reached up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

'You take care, okay?' Her voice was full of bravado, as much for him as herself. 'I'll see you soon.' The Doctor nodded once, then followed the others outside. Silver walked to the doors and watched the three men disappear into the night.

Turning back to Baxter, she looked at him and said. 'Right then. What do people do in this town for fun on a Friday night?'

* * * * *

The journey up to the standing stones was surprisingly quick. The night was quiet, just the faintest moan of the wind for company. The temperature had fallen and a silver carpet of frost had begun to creep across the land.

They hurried passed the station, which stood black and forbidding, an edifice of slate and granite darker than the surrounding night. On they went, parallel to the long silver double line of railroad track. After a few minutes, the road abruptly angled away, leaving the tracks and striking inland. Trudging up a gentle rise, they all saw a silver glimmering rise up.

'What in blazes is that?' Striker asked, pointing his light stick towards the glow.

'A possible answer,' the Doctor said, increasing his pace. 'Come along, I think I may've found one of the pieces to this puzzle.'

The road rounded a bend and they were suddenly on a broad, flat stretch of ground. Three dark shapes, outlined in frosty silver, loomed out of the darkness. The grass abruptly stopped, describing a bare, circular patch of earth around the stones. The Doctor stepped without hesitation onto the earth. Dunstan and Striker hesitated a moment, then quickly followed.

Holding his light stick high, the Doctor examined each stone in turn. Arranged into a triangle, their weathered bulk rose a dozen feet into the air. Frost had begun to creep along the pockmarked stone, lending a fey brilliance in the wan light. Dunstan and Striker stood looking on, their breath pluming frigidly in the air. The silvery wash of the waves below reached them distantly.

'Anything, Doctor?' Striker called after a few minutes of silence.

The Doctor waved a hand and shook his head. Stepping away from the stones, he looked around the clearing. His gaze was drawn to the harbour. From where he stood, he could see the main street, then the pier, all aligning with the henge.

'Interesting,' he murmured, looked down at his feet, then at the stones. Pulling his pocket watch out, he unbuttoned it from his vest. Standing so the nearest menhir blocked his view of the harbour, he held his watch by the chain. For a moment, the watch spun one way, then the other. Dunstan whistled in surprise when the chain gave a jerk, then slowly it and the watch angled towards the stone.

'As I suspected,' the Doctor said to himself, his words carrying across the clearing. He repeated the experiment with the other two, all with the same result.

'Doctor,' Striker called out, his voice a little unsteady. Ignoring him, the Doctor sank to his haunches, examining the base of the nearest menhir.

'Doctor.' This time Striker's voice was urgent. Annoyed at the interruption, the Doctor stood, a scowl on his face.

'What is it Col...oh, I see.'

In the space between the standing stones a faint glimmering light appeared, steadily growing with each passing moment. At its centre, a pulsing yellow light appeared. Striker thought it looked uncomfortably like an eye, stripping him away layer by layer.

‘Fascinating.’ The Doctor’s voice was full of intense curiosity. With an effort, Striker tore his gaze from the light, and stretched an arm towards the Doctor.

‘Be careful,’ he called out, alarmed

Growing sharply in intensity, the light began to pulse, tendrils of energy snaking out towards the men. Before he could react, Striker felt himself engulfed in a freezing, burning light. In an instant, the light vanished, leaving the clearing devoid of life.

In the silence, the constant roar of the waves grew louder and the harbour bell rang out again and again.

* * * * *

The sudden tolling of the harbour bell jolted Silver out of her doze. She had the faint recollection that someone had been whispering to her, words she couldn’t quite understand.

Baxter stood over her, a look of alarm on his face. She blinked up at him and he visibly relaxed. Shaking his head, he went to the door and peered out. Rubbing at her face, Silver looked over and checked Riggs. His eyes were moving beneath their lids, and she heard him mutter. The words were indistinct, but suggestive. She settled back down next to Shelby.

His hands were moving again and she saw that he was unpicking the kraken. His small, chubby fingers moved deftly and soon, he held a crumpled piece of paper. He looked up at her and smiled. Then his mouth jerked open and words began to tumble out, low and hypnotic and shockingly intimate.

‘His mind is like a room with no doors. It will be a pleasure to squeeze the life out of him when he is finally broken.’ That voice, that horrible, rasping cruel voice was back. Silver scuttled away, her light stick skittering across the floor. In the half-light, Shelby’s face looked sinister. A great exhaustion swept over Silver and she barely suppressed a yawn.

‘You saw all those people in the chamber, didn’t you? A tasty morsel before the feast.’ The voice enveloped her like honey, soft and suffocating. ‘Those eyes of yours, those pretty little eyes, Rachel. So tired, so very, very tired.’

Her eyelids grew heavy. Silver struggled to focus on Baxter, who was moving about the room and oblivious to what was happening to her.

‘Doctor.’ Her voice was the barest murmur. Shelby began to chuckle, a monstrous sound she pressed in on her, forcing her down and down and down into the darkness.

I awake with a jerk. The carriage is quiet, just the clatter of the train over the tracks. Papa is asleep, his head to one side. I try to catch the remnants of my dream, but it scatters like confetti. Was it a nightmare? For some reason, the unsettling urge to scream is upon me. Sitting up straighter, I look out the window. The train slows as we approach the final corner above the town. Fog has swept in from the coast, and rain has begun to blanket the sparse countryside, streaking the window and blurring the world. The sun is descending, and a strange, red light lies across the world. I lean towards the distorted glass. What was I dreaming?

From where we rest, I can see the village of Calcorn, a sorry collection of buildings clustered fearfully against coast. At least it seems that way, perched up here like gods. The central spine of the main street runs straight as a razor through the town. It merges with a wide pier that runs some distance into the harbour. I settle back, gnawing at the remnants of my dream for meaning as if probing a sore tooth.

I reach over and pick up my book, discarded when I fell asleep. I glance through the glass door at a small copse of trees. They are barren of leaves. Perhaps they are dead. The

only life in them is the grey lichen crawling over every inch of bark. I shudder, fancying that the skeletal branches are clawing at the sky. The nightmare has unsettled me and I look away.

Resting my head against it, I watch through the window next to me with my eyes half closed. Papa's reflection in the window is a ghostly shadow. Everything about him is precise, from the part in his hair to the neatly trimmed moustache that he has only recently begun to grow, to the long, elegant fingers tipped with neatly manicured nails. For a moment, just a split second in time, the face of a watch flashes up onto his face, then vanishes. What is wrong with me?

Papa sighs, then his eyes open, blink once, then settle on me. He has always been able to do that, awaken fully rested and alert. A man of action with nobody to save. His sharp blue eyes glow and I smile back at him. He leans forward and stares at the village.

'Much as I remember it,' he says, his rich, full voice filling the compartment. 'Small, dull and rather unpleasant. Still, it is home to a number of good people. It's chief and only merit.' He looks at the book in my hands.

'Still reading that trash, Rachel?' His voice is cool but his eyes twinkle.

This is an old game between Papa and me. A man of learning, lover of science, he is dismayed that his daughter has fallen in with 'a superstitious lot given to prancing around tables while consulting with charlatans.'

I hold the book up, not afraid to stand by my beliefs.

'Mr. Burke is insistent on discussing spiritualism through the viewpoint of a scientist. He hypothesises, he tests, and then he goes over his findings. His work is of the highest order and Mrs. Matthews speaks...'

'Oh, Mrs. Matthews would speak highly of her cat if ectoplasm shot out of its mouth.'

'There are more things in heaven and earth, Papa, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

'Hamlet was mad, dear child, and a poor philosopher to boot.'

There is a little heat in Papa's voice. I notice that he stops, with some effort, from continuing. Smoothing his checked pants, he looks up again and smiles.

'Forgive me, the journey is wearing.'

'There is nothing to forgive, Papa.' My words are heartfelt. From what I know of my friends and their fathers, it is unusual that we have such a close, open relationship.

He smiles in thanks.

'Truth be told, I'm glad you came. Your mother needed the rest since her...' He stops, his brow furrowed.

'Your mother...' Again, he paused, his eyes blank.

A part of me, a strange, unfamiliar part that wasn't there when I fell asleep, screams to finish his sentence. What happened in my dream that would disturb me so? Mother is at rest, convalescing after a long illness. Better, that she should rest at home without disturbance.

'No matter.' He smiles pleasantly. 'We'll collect young Shelby tomorrow and be off on the morning train.' He points towards the village.

'Shadow haunted Calcorn,' he says, his voice foreboding. 'This was the centre of the one of the great witch trials of the 17th century. It is said that James I presided at the very first trial, near the Three Regents overlooking the town.'

Papa constantly amazes me with the local trivia he can seemingly pluck out of the recesses of his memory. A little teasing seems in order.

'Really, Papa, please try and enter the 19th century. Witches indeed! Next you'll be telling me there are bugaboos lurking in the harbour.'

Papa looks at me darkly. ‘When I was a locum here, Rachel, I spent a morning examining the site of the burnings. The locals are right. An earthen circle, bordered by the lushest grass in the north, lies there. Within that boundary, the earth is barren. Nothing will grow there, nothing at all.’ His voice is low and ominous, unsettling me.

The carriage jolts suddenly and we begin our descent. The faint shriek of metal on metal increases as the driver applies the break. Carriages clatter and bounce once more. For some reason, I am surprised that there is no movement in the corridor. Presumably, there aren’t many people riding with us.

Papa picks up his hat, plucking a barely discernible speck of dust from the brim. Another affectation, this top hat he cradles in his hands. He cherishes it, taking it with him wherever he goes. Another recent change about Papa. Such a changeable man!

‘What a pleasant sight,’ he says, gazing raptly at the harbour. ‘The sea always works a miracle on me.’

The fog has thinned a little. The sun, shining distantly like a burnished copper coin, touches the horizon and the sea flashes gold and red. Even as we watch, the colours deepen, until the sea runs red and the shadows press closer around us. A strange melancholy settles over me as the sound of grinding metal rises to a scream. We sweep round the bend and the edges of a station come into view. Without realising it, I have dug my nails into the book in my hands. For several seconds I stare in incomprehension at the tiny, half moon indentation scored into the leather, then hurriedly set the book aside. It doesn’t do well to dwell on certain things.

We gather our bags and wait in our compartment for the train to stop before we depart. Evidently, there are few others on the train for when we step onto the platform it is devoid of life. With our bags at our feet and the wind scattering leaves across the platform, we watch the train slide into the fog, heading for a hidden siding.

What little light there is begins to gutter into the horizon, the world suddenly as murky as looking through an unwashed window. I turn and see that a heavy curtain of rain has descended over the tracks approaching the station, dissolving the world beyond. The breeze carries a spray of water, the ice-cold pellets pricking my skin. I shiver. The sign hanging over our head, with peeling letters announcing ‘Calcorn’, swings slowly back and forth, rust chains squealing in the sullen quiet.

Papa raps on the ticket window with his cane, but there is no response. He mutters something under his breath, then returns.

‘Come along then,’ he says. ‘My factor in London assured me he had booked a hansom to take us into the village. We can bear to wait a little, yes?’

We walk through a litter-strewn corridor then emerge into the open. There is a lit gas lamp quietly hissing. The dull yellow light it casts barely illuminates the surroundings. A heavily rutted road, little more than an exaggerated track, meanders by. Beyond that, barely visible in the fading light and swirling fog, I can see several cottages. Lights glow through gaps in the shutters, orange and yellow and even a startling crimson in one. The cottages seem to lean together in the most alarming fashion. I imagine giving one a push, and watching as they topple like dominoes all the way down the slope and into the harbour. It is hardly a comforting thought.

Movement near the farthest cottage catches my attention. Outside the margins of the gloomy light, I see the faint outline of a figure standing alone. Some semblance of civility makes me raise my hand in greeting, but I stop, noting the slumped, narrow shoulders and the hunched posture. The lower classes do not frighten me, after all, they fill half of Papa’s appointment book each day. Still, I have the strongest impression whoever is staring at us has a malevolent gleam in their eyes and indeed, they flash yellowy at us in

the most peculiar way. Again, there is that urge to call out which rises within me, but I am learning to recognise its stealthy approach now, and force it down. Soon, the figure melts back into the fog and is lost from view.

I start when father touches my shoulder.

‘Do stop daydreaming, Rachel. Come along, the cab is here.’

We hear it before it appears out of the gloom, the steady clip clop of the horse and the jangle of metal bouncing down the rutted road. A single lantern swings over the head of the driver, his face passing garishly from darkness into light as the lantern spins.

The rain falls steadily now. The light from the gas lamp shines across the horse and I feel a surge of pity. Its head hangs low and I can see raw patches on its mouth where an ill-fitting bit has rubbed and rubbed. Cuts old and new line its shoulders. I note the whip lying across the driver’s nap.

The cab rolls to a halt, the driver jerking cruelly on the reins. Papa looks up at him coldly. Reaching up to pat the horse, I flinch when I see a cloudy eye rolling around in a grime-encrusted socket. The eye fixes on me and I sense that it is looking at me, looking *through* me. I look away hurriedly, my attention falling on the driver.

Pulled low over his face is a battered cloth cap. A grizzled face, lined and seamed like cracked leather, peers out from underneath the brim. A tangled fringe of sodden curls hangs like rat’s tails over his thin shoulders. I can feel his shadowed eyes lingering over me. His tongue rolls over cracked lips and I shudder.

‘Evening, sir. Miss.’ He touches his cap with a twisted finger. ‘Fine night for it’

He laughs, a wheezing, groaning sound that makes me shiver with dim recognition. His lips peel back in a grin, revealing a row of yellowed stumps protruding from swollen, almost black gums.

‘Come along, Rachel. Up you get.’ Papa hefts our overnight bag into the cab, then helps me up the steps and inside. He pauses on the steps.

‘The Admiral’s Inn, my good fellow.’ There is a grunt in return and the whip cracks. Papa has enough time to fall into his seat before the cab jerks into motion.

The confines of the cab smell like Papa’s dissecting room at college. The scent is so anomalous that it is at first hard to place it. The dull sense of unease that has been slowly rising in me all afternoon sharpens. Papa is staring out the window, his face unreadable.

‘Was it not possible to place Shelby on a train,’ I ask, failing to suppress the plaintive note in my voice.

Papa turns towards me. Irritation flickers across his sharp features, quickly suppressed. He smooths his pants.

‘You know as well as I that the poor lad is in no fit condition to travel alone. Soon enough you will find the world can be a dark and callous place, Rachel. True innocents like Shelby wouldn’t survive long alone in it. This is the best, and indeed, only way.’

He smiles, a brief, faltering effort that quickly fades.

‘Regardless, I’m sure you appreciate the chance to travel. After all, with your mother taken...’ His voice grinds to a halt. He tries again.

‘With your mother...’ Papa’s voice trails away and his eyes lose their usual intense focus.

The cab jerks round a corner, throwing us across the seats. Papa bangs on the ceiling.

‘Steady on,’ he shouts. ‘You’ll have us on our side.’

Any response is lost in the rising growl of the wind. The cab slows and we ride on in silence.

We round a bend and several dilapidated cottages come into view. They are arranged around a small courtyard. Several figures standing in the rain, faces upturned towards the night sky, catches my attention. The fog makes their bodies twisted, misshapen. Before they pass from sight, I see their strange, mask-like faces slowly follow the cab. I huddle into my seat as far from the window as possible.

The night is suddenly full of an almighty tearing noise, followed by a thunderous crash. The cab jerks to a halt and I hear shouted curses. Startled out of his doze, Papa opens the door and leaps to the ground. I slide across and look out, blinking as the rain drives into my face.

A huge oak tree lies across the road. Shattered branches like broken limbs litter the ground. Clods of dirt, thick and heavy lie in heaps around the exposed roots, which grope towards the sky. The driver scrambles onto the road and hobbles to the tree. I can see him shaking his head, a jittering movement that reminds me of an insect.

'This is far as I can take you,' he announce, scratching an ear. A shower of flakes rains down onto his shoulder. He shakes his head again. 'It's been raining all week,' he says, as if that is reason enough for the tree to have chosen this precise moment to fall.

'There's not another way into the village?' Papa calls out above the constant hiss of the rain. A row of trees shivers and tosses as a strong gust of wind passes over them.

'This is the only way,' the driver says, his voice taking on a harder edge. 'Best you get your bags and leg it to the Admiral.' He turns and points down the road, which now resembles a stream.

'Down there a ways then off to the right is the high street. You can't miss it.'

Papa stands there for a moment, looking silently at the driver. A galaxy of raindrops gleams on his top hat. He appears ready to say something, then turns. Returning to the cab, he grabs the larger bag, and helps me down. I step down, the smaller bag clutched in my cold fingers. Muttering angrily, Papa reaches into his pocket, fishing out a coin, which he tosses at the driver.

I draw my shawl tightly around my shoulders, grateful even for the meagre cover of my bonnet. Papa is already stalking down the road and I hurry after him. Passing the driver, I see him touch his cap. He manages to make even that simple gesture insolent.

'Watch the shadows, lassie,' he says, smirking. His breath is foul. 'The eye will be watching you, ain't any doubt about it.' He titters, a gross, ugly sound. Shuddering, I hurry away. I can feel his gaze biting into me.

Papa waits for me beneath the dubious shelter of an overhanging branch. We watch the driver clamber aboard the cab. He jerks the horse around and the cab vanishes into the fog.

'What did he say to you?' he asks.

'Nothing, Papa. Just gibberish about the shadows.'

He snorts, and then takes a grip on my free hand.

'Come along then, might as well make the best of it.'

Moving away from the shelter of the tree, the full force of the downpour strikes us. We bend into the wind and slog through ankle deep mud that sucks greedily at our feet. The shadows around us lie deep, thick and clotted like blood. The trees overhead toss fitfully as wind gusts through their braches. There is a faint glow from ahead, the unsteady light from a gas lamp that is like a promise of warmth and sanity in a world gone awry.

With a sense of having escaped the clutches of a faceless, malevolent force, we stumble into the glow of the lamp. I cling to the pole, marvelling at the light, which I had begun to believe was a mirage. We survey our haven and my heart sinks.

Tendrils of mist have slunk up the road from the harbour, insinuating their way into the village. It is everywhere, a heavy, yellow presence that smells of the sea. With it has come a sense of unreality. Buildings swim in and out of sight and I feel a dizzying sense of dislocation from my surroundings. I grab at a wall, partly for support, partly to reassure myself that the world still exists. The rough texture of the brickwork brings me back to myself.

The cobbled stones of the main street look like half buried skulls, wet and gleaming in the rain. Weeds sprout in profusion and some cobbles are missing entirely, mud sweeping from the exposed earth in a sickly tide. Many of the buildings look half finished and some are on the verge of collapse. Exposed wood has warped and splintered under the onslaught of the elements. Shutters slam back and forth, the sound echoing down the lonely street. The door to the building across the road is missing, and litter chokes the entrance. The darkness within is impenetrable, and I hurriedly look away, not willing to imagine what might lurk beyond the threshold.

'How dispiriting,' Papa says, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. Under the unsteady light, his face looks troubled. Oddly, it gives me heart, for if Papa seems unsure of his surroundings, then my growing misgivings of this town must be real, not a concoction of my imagination. Yet, despite the urge building up in me to say something, anything, I am helpless, my lips unmoving. I feel like a prisoner, trapped in my own mind. In the distance, a bell tolls, a mournful noise that sounds like a warning.

Papa continues to wipe his face and I look disconsolately at the building we are standing in front. The upstairs windows are gone, and tattered curtains blow in and out, slapping against the brickwork. The front window is empty, the shelving filled with cobwebs and dust. How anybody could live in such a place is beyond my comprehension.

Daintily, Papa folds away his handkerchief. 'No matter,' he says, picking up our bag. 'We're here for a good purpose, so we'll make the best of it.'

The urge to ask him exactly why we are here to collect Shelby is so strong my chest aches. I remain silent. He puts on his top hat.

'From memory, our lodgings overlook the pier. Bracing sea air for the morning, I should imagine. Come along, before we catch our death.' His old spirit is back and he steps jauntily down the street.

I linger a moment, my attention snared by the empty window. Webs begin to stir lazily. Someone is watching me. A curtain twitches and I catch a glimpse of a rheumy yellow eye glaring at me. I bolt after Papa.

Nothing makes sense, I tell myself repeatedly. I cannot control my thoughts, which whirl around my head like leaves in a storm. I am drowning in a sea of half formed theories that terrify me. The sense of being trapped, of being watched and manipulated is overwhelming. Has the world around us dissolved? If so, where are we?

With a start, I find that I have stopped in the entrance of an alley. Papa has gone on without realising I have fallen behind. I am about to hurry after him when distant voices from within the alley catch my attention. Unwilling, but unable to stop, I turn my head to look.

Two figures, dressed in rags, are squabbling over the contents of a wooden crate, which rocks feverishly from side to side. They seem to be haggling over a price, their words rising and falling like the waves in the harbour. With a thrill of fear, they turn as one towards me. Abruptly, they depart, quickly swallowed by the fog. They leave the box behind. I feel a faint tremor rumble under my feet, the watch as the crate lifts and tumbles to one side, the ground beneath it bulging upwards from some internal pressure.

A sudden prickling sensation envelops me and my throat painfully tightens. My vision swims and the world tilts as I watch the crate wobble again. There is a sharp crack and a wooden slat breaks. A hand emerges from within, clutching desperately at the air. The vibrations grow stronger, then the ground erupts in a geyser of stones and mud.

Dozens of whipping tentacles thrust themselves into the air. I thrust my hand into my mouth to stop from screaming. The thick black coils, crawling with suckers that wetly pulse, gleam in the moonlight as they whip frenziedly around. Each loathsome tentacle is capped with a tiny claw that snaps greedily at the air. The tentacles boil over the crate and a muffled scream is quickly cut off as the box vanishes into the earth. All that remains is the swirling fog and the sound of my whimpering

‘Rachel?’ Further up the road, I can see Papa looking back at me. ‘What is it?’

Again, I am unable to speak. I hurry to Papa’s side. I attempt to explain, to weep and tear at my hair. Instead, I simply shake my head. Even if I was able to give voice to what I have witnessed, Papa would put it down to my obsession with spiritualisms and gently mock me with a lengthy speech on the virtues of science

‘Just...just two men squabbling in the alley,’ I finally stammer. ‘Their language was appalling,’ I lamely finish, ashamed at my weakness and fear.

‘Sailors no doubt,’ he sniffs. He pats me gently on the shoulder and I want to lash out at him, to scream at him to wake up and look around him.

‘It is not surprising that we would meet such people in Calcorn. Stay close by me and they shan’t bother you.’

Dispirited, I trudge along after Papa, my head down. I almost bump into him when we stop in front of a battered door. The smell of the harbour is stronger, a revolting mix of tar, rancid seawater and decaying fish. I look across the street and see the pier’s massive stone pylons marching into the fog. The sound of the bell is louder, accompanied by the slap of waves against the rocking hulls of dozens of boats berthed along the pier.

Looking up, I can see the shutters are closed, but light and noise leak out. A sign over the door creaks on rusty chains. I can just make out the faded painting of a man in nautical dress, a patch over one eye.

‘Not even a good likeness of Nelson,’ Papa says disapprovingly. ‘And he never wore a patch.’ He pushes open the door and a flood of light spills over us. Something about the sign makes me pause and examine it more closely.

The “admiral” glares down at me, and in light, I can see that the ‘patch’ is a deep gouge in the wood. The remaining eye glows with a garish yellow light that seems to follow me as I hurry inside.

For just a moment, a tiny fraction of time, it seems that the people scattered around the barroom are frozen in place. There is no sound, no movement, and no hint of life. Then, as we step into the room, this facsimile jerks into action like a puppet show. Faces peer from darkened corners and the man mopping the bar with a filthy rag stares morosely at us.

The room itself is long and narrow, the low ceiling making it seem smaller than it actually is. The furniture is plain, the tables stained and scarred. The sawdust-strewn floor is clotted in places with spilled drinks. Inexplicably, someone has let the fire die down, leaving the room damp and chilly.

Papa approaches the bar and doffs his hat at the barman, who looks at him blankly.

‘I’ve rooms booked for my daughter and myself. Who do I see about a key?’

An idiotic grin creeps across the barman’s face and I begin to hate him. His eyes are slits lost within piggish folds of grey flesh. His brow beetles and he continues mopping away at the bar.

The silence deepens and I feel the eyes of everyone in the room staring at us. Papa is showing a great deal of patience with this man, staring straight at him. A small victory! The bar man relents, looks over his shoulder and calls out in a thick unintelligible local accent that sounds like mud draining down a sink.

The conversation behind us has started up, as if the patrons have already grown bored of us.

A tiny, bent woman hobbles down a precipitate flight of stairs positioned behind the bar. She has a cloth tied over her hair and she peers at us through gummy eyes that blink constantly. I venture a smile, which she returns, revealing a gap-toothed maw, spittle hanging from what few teeth remain.

Papa nods his head.

‘I’m Doctor Silverstein, and this is my daughter, Rachel. My factor in London booked two for us. Did you receive his telegram?’

There is an air about the woman that I find disturbing and I look away, leaving Papa to get on with the ritual of signing in. Once more, I look around the room. Rough-hewn beams of timber serve as the floor, smoothed in places from years of foot traffic. The bar is the room’s centrepiece, long, dark, and polished with years of use. A desultory effort had been made to decorate the walls with nautical items, but the effect is lost in the general air of neglect.

A painting hanging next to a shuttered window catches my eye. I step closer and peer at it. In it, several black clad men stand together on the pier, forming a living wall seeking to keep some hidden oppressor at bay. Their stance and a glimpse of a half turned face look tantalisingly familiar. A comforting sense of protection settles over me. I look closer. The far end of the pier is lost in fog and shadow, but there is a hint of a brooding presence that deeply unsettles me.

‘Do stop gawping, Rachel,’ Papa gently admonishes. He holds a large metal key in one hand. I look up at him and smile with relief. I pick my bag up and follow.

At the first landing, we turn into a narrow corridor running the length of the floor. The ceiling is low and several paintings line the walls. One of the paintings catches my attention. Is something from the ether attempting to send me a message? Despite my apprehensions, I pause once more.

The painting depicts a view from the landward end of the pier. Wracked with clouds, the sky looms darkly over the running waves below. Cowering figures line the beach. The lighthouse is dark, a distant, forlorn object lost in the distance. All this is certainly disconcerting, a testament to the painter’s talent.

At the far end of the pier lies a strange looking steel-hulled ship, one side of the hull a gaping gash of torn metal. A sickly yellow light glows from within the breach, and cables, evidently designed to keep the boat from foundering, radiate from the ship along the pier. Despite the static nature of the painting, the cables seem to ripple and crawl. I hear a distant clanging of the bell, oddly attenuated, and an overwhelming belief that I am about to fall into the painting surges within me.

A distant murmuring from the other side of the wall springs up. Are there people in the room next to ours?

I turn to the landlady. ‘Excuse me, when was this painted?’ The sound behind the wall has grown to a clamour, a cacophony of panicked voices crying for help. There is a hideous scratching at the walls, followed by a series of thumps. Nausea sweeps over me. Why are Papa and this woman oblivious to the noise?

The woman remains still, her head twisted like a bird. She scowls at me.

‘Don’t rightly know miss.’ She sounds secretive, sly. For some reason, Papa remains silent, his back to me. Why has the colour leached out the corridor? I struggle to regain control of my thoughts and turn to the painting, hoping to focus on it and recover my senses. I try to make out the name etched in one corner. Around me, despite my best efforts to block it out, all the colours have leached away, like the bloom from dead flowers.

The words scratched into the paint swim into view. ‘Jacob von Brandt,’ I say, too loudly in the stuffy corridor.

‘Austrian. Dead, these past twenty years. Part of that expedition to Greenland, he was. They had to leave him behind as his dreams drove him mad.’ She cackles.

‘Threw himself from the top of the lighthouse. He claimed he had visions, the third eye and all that nonsense. They say that after the expedition left, he would sleep most nights in that circle on top of the hill. No wonder he went mad. No wonder he killed himself.’ Turning the key, she sniffs.

‘There you go sir,’ she said, her face suddenly cheery. ‘Do you want something to eat before you retire?’ Papa jerks into motion, like a clockwork soldier with a damaged mainspring.

‘Perhaps some bread and that cold beef I saw in the kitchen on the way up. Rachel?’

Distracted, I shake my head. The murmurings had died away and the corridor has returned to normal. But what is normal in this village, a part of me wails. Before we enter the room, I again look at the painting. It is nothing more than a dusty relic from the hand of a minor artist, long dead. Exhaustion surges through me and I want nothing more to do with the useless thing.

‘Nothing, Papa,’ I say, shoulders slumping. I stumble passed the old woman, who leers at me before fading into the shadows crawling up the corridor. Papa places his hat on a dresser, then rests the bag on the bed. The room is plain and dull, but Papa nods approvingly.

‘A trifle Spartan, certainly. But homely enough.’ While he lights the bedside lamp, a flashing light visible through the curtained windows attracts my attention.

The distant lighthouse proves to be the source of the incandescent blade sweeping the coast. Boats at anchor appear and disappear, the light revealing the dark hulks wallowing in the hissing surf. Nearby, the bell continues its mournful tolling. My interest rapidly wanes and I slump into a chair.

Papa glances at me. ‘You look exhausted. Perhaps you should retire.’ He points to a door. ‘Your room is just through there.’ There is a knock.

I inspect the room while Papa deals with the landlady. It is barely large enough to fit the bed, chair and table jammed within. The sickly looking wallpaper reminds me of a malaria patient Papa once treated. A small window positioned to the side of the bed overlooks the harbour.

Through the open door, I see Papa set down a tray of food on his bed.

‘It should do, Papa,’ I say, smiling wanly. ‘I think I’ll retire. Did you need anything?’

Papa chuckles. ‘No, my dear. Between reading the paper and finishing this bounteous repast, I want for nothing.’ His smile has all the charm of a two-penny melodrama. He comes over and kisses the top of my head. Murmuring goodnight, I hurry to my room.

I quickly dress for bed by the faint light of the moon, the wind moaning around the eaves of the building. Cold seeps through the walls and the room grows chilly. Standing there, listening to the wind, an uncomfortable feeling sweeps over me. I look around then move to the window.

Moving the curtain aside, the view is the same as in the next room. The soft hiss of waves crashing onto the beach is almost as sad as the tolling bell, but strangely comforting. Closing my eyes, I savour the distraction. But only for a moment. A distant whistling shatters my reverie.

A figure appears out of the darkness from the far end of the pier, the sweeping light lending his tall frame the jerky movements of a marionette. He seems to creep and stutter closer and I feel a tiny bud of dismay open within me. The fog parts before him, swirling away as if unable to bear his presence. When he steps off the pier and onto the land, the bell tolls.

Shadows obliterate his face, yet I know he is looking at me. When the light sweeps over him, he is grinning broadly. The next time, his grin has transformed into a snarl, his amber eyes flashing. Shrinking from the window, I let the curtain fall. I feel his eyes glaring at me through the wall.

He starts walking. I flinch with each crack of his heels, nearer and nearer until I begin to shiver. I am ready to run when he stops beneath my window. After an eternity, he moves off, whistling a jaunty tune. Hands trembling, I climb into bed and lie there, staring at the ceiling, praying for a way out of this place. Sleep is a long time coming.

When it does, I fall into a nightmare. There is a constant pounding at the door as light strobes across the room in silver flashes that dazzle my staring eyes. A child calls my name, his voice pleading for a response. The image of a man with a tiger's smile looms large and the echo of his booted feet torments me. Unable to move, terrified with the knowledge that something is crawling towards me along the pier, my dream-self lies there, screaming out for Papa, but the only words that emerge are Doctor, Doctor, Doctor...

Sitting up with a convulsive gasp, I claw at my throat. My face is slick with sweat and my eyes stare wildly into the dark for any hint of light. My heart beats like a trapped bird and I fight for calm. Half-falling out of bed I splash water from the basin onto my face. Hurriedly, I dress, then fling the door open.

The room lies empty. The tray of food sits undisturbed on the floor and the paper lies neatly folded. My bewilderment grows when I realise that the bed hasn't been used at all. Unsteady, I walk over to the door and look out into the corridor. It is empty.

The distant sound of music catches my attention. Moving across to the window, I see a crowd of people moving along the road and on the footpath. Children run between knots of adults who gawp at the many stalls that line the main street and the pier. Boats at anchor bob gently, many covered in gaily-coloured flags and bunting. Several garishly costumed figures move through the crowds, juggling coloured balls, to the enraptured delight of children who follow them. At the far end of a pier, a large ship lies at anchor. The figure fixed to the prow gleams in the morning light. Above the ship, a flock of seagulls circle endlessly, their cries a haunting echo across the harbour.

With a jolt, Papa's unmistakable top hat becomes visible amidst a churning mass of people. His back is towards me and he seems to be in animated discussion with someone, but it is definitely him. Leaving our bags, I race out of the room.

On the landing, I meet the landlady once more. On impulse, I reach towards her, fighting to hide the grimace when my fingers touch her hand. The skin feels like greasy parchment.

'Excuse me, could you tell me what is happening outside?'

She looks at me, her face haggard in the early morning light.

'Our annual fair, young miss.' Her eyes turn sly. 'You should go down, miss. They say Mr Wells' haunted ship is a truly memorable experience.' With that, she turns her back and stumps away down the corridor.

Slipping down the stairs and through the empty common room, I exit onto the street in a rush. The fog has lifted and the clean smell of sea air is striking after the mustiness of our rooms. The sunlight is bright, though clouds on the horizon promise rain. The number of people gathered in Calcorn is remarkable. The air is full of laughter and chatter. Gangs of shrieking children chase each other, swerving around and even through groups of adults who look on, smiling indulgently. The knot that has nestled in my stomach since I awoke loosens and my mood begins to lift.

Standing on the steps, I again see Papa's hat. I step out onto the footpath in pursuit. Moving through the crowd, I detect a subtle shift in the mood. The sound of children laughing begins to sound eerily like the crying of the gulls circling the end of the pier. The groups of adults continue their animated discussions, but their eyes appear wide and their smiles fixed. Moving through them, I notice that their conversations fall silent and they turn to stare at me. As soon as I pass, I can see them jerk back to life, their movements stiff and their laughter distant and seemingly mocking me. Unease shoots through me once more and the urge to run grows.

Papa's hat once more comes into view. Without warning, the crowd closes in, jostling me aside and impeding my progress. They ignore my protestations and I suddenly find myself faced with being crushed against one of the great granite pylons. Striking out blindly, a gap opens up and I slip through and away.

I stumble to a halt a few feet away from the crowds. The laughter and noise of the children has abruptly faded away. I turn around and find that everyone is looking at me. They are poised like mannequins, stiff legged, their faces frozen mid-sentence. I am adrift in a no man's land between them and the ship riding at anchor behind me.

Shaking, I turn away. The clouds racing overhead are slate grey, the wind whipping up the water. The light has grown murky. Overhead, the seagulls continue their endless wheeling over the ship. Lightning crackles silently across the sky and several of the birds drop into the water.

Papa is visible on the ramp, his face turned away from me. He strides confidently to the top, pauses, tips his hat to someone in an alcove, then vanishes into the dark beyond the door.

'Papa,' I cry despairingly. Racing across the pier and up the ramp my headlong rush is brought to a halt when a man steps out of the alcove and blocks my path.

A chill shivers through me when I see him. He is the man from last night. His polished boots gleam wickedly in the fading light. A slicker covers his body, and a black, broad brimmed hat crowns his head. His mouth is twisted, one corner pulled up into a sneer. The unmistakable gleam of his teeth sends a thrill of recognition through me.

'Hello, missy,' he says. His voice rasps like a file on steel. His face settles into a smirk.

His broad, scarred hands flex and curl, flex and curl and his body is tense, ready to pounce. His body shudders as he stares at me, as if restraining a monstrous appetite. I am terrified, but I sense the answer to this nightmare lies beyond that door.

Gathering my courage, I take a step forward. 'Out of my way, please. I'm looking for my father.'

'Oh yes, your father,' the man says, not stepping aside. His smirk widens.

'The Doctor. So full of prattle, that one. Always talking, delaying the inevitable with a deluge of words. Tell me, Silver, why do you travel with him?'

A jolt passes through me and I reach blindly for the guide rope. Submerged images rise within my mind, incomprehensible memories that I feel I know, but cannot place. Strangely, they give me comfort.

I raise my chin defiantly. 'I don't know what you are talking about. A gentleman would let me by, but I can see you are no gentleman.'

I take another step. The man cocks his head, as if listening for something. The desolate cries of the seagulls drift down and I see another fall from the air, disappearing with barely a splash into the roaring surf.

His face falls. His hands continue curling into fists, but he moves reluctantly aside. I hastily step into the gap and passed him. Standing on the threshold, the open door stands open, a dark maw ready to swallow me.

Behind, I can hear movement. I turn and the man glares at me.

'Don't think I will forget any of this,' he hisses, thrusting a finger in my face. 'I am John Wells, and I will know your face when next we meet.' He steps back into the alcove and vanishes.

My eyes quickly adjust to the dim interior light. A door stands in front of me and a corridor runs off to the right. I try the door, but it bolted shut. Just then, I glimpse a retreating figure at the far end of the corridor, a rapidly moving blur in the gloom. It turns left and is gone.

'Papa!' I race after him, my footsteps echoing up and down the corridor. Around the corner, I confront a swinging door and the sound of someone descending.

Pushing the door open, I recoil from the raw stink that washes over me. The stench is of the sea, as if ten million years of muck have risen up and taken on a life of its own. Gagging, I back away, fighting down the overwhelming urge to vomit.

Furious at my weakness, I lean against the wall. Papa is somewhere down there, far from the clean air and the welcoming sky. Breathing through my mouth, I hazard the door once more.

The landing looks out over a vast, empty space. It is cast in great shadows, streaks of darkness that crawl down the hull and pool in the hidden depths. Ignoring my feverish imagination, I lean over the rail, hoping to catch a glimpse of Papa descending. I can just hear the clatter of his shoes, but they quickly fade away.

I call out to him. Like a pebble falling into a pond, my voice is swallowed up by the cavernous darkness. In response, something rustles below; a crawling sound that sends shivers up my spine. The stench grows stronger.

My feet are frozen. I cannot leave the landing. Fear grips me and I am ready to turn and run.

'Rise above your fears, dear girl,' a voice says, unbidden. It is so like her Papa's but confusingly different. There was a hint of someone else in the voice, a hint of steel and a tantalising essence I know I should recognise. The answer lies down in the darkness. Fortified, I hurry down the stairs.

I reach the bottom of the stairs in a rush, stumbling painfully to my knees. The hold is a vast, echoing chamber, full of strange noises. The frigid air reeks. Surrounded by the steel walls rising above me, I feel puny. A crippling sense of vertigo almost sweeps me away. Gritting my teeth, I stagger to my feet and call out.

'Where are you?' Again, there is that strange rustling noise, which sounds hollow and metallic and frighteningly close.

A spear of light spotlights a figure kneeling on the floor.

'No!' I start towards Papa, then draw back in dismay. His face is slack and his eyes vacant. That vital spark, that element that was his essence has fled, leaving behind a husk. A tear slides down my face. My hands begin to tremble as a sense of hopelessness engulfs me.

Someone chuckles to my right, a deep, loathsome rasp that cuts deeply. Wells steps into the light, his smile hungry. He places a hand to Papa's face, caressing it as he would a dog.

'What took you so long?' he mocks.

'Who are you?' My voice breaks on the rock of his arrogance and I fall silent.

'The future, my dear. I am the Herald of the Dreadnoughts, they who weave the shadows into dreams. The Long Night is almost begun.'

Something in the darkness moves. Then *seethes*. Suckered tentacles writhe towards me, slapping wetly against each other and the floor. A massive eye opens, revealing a yellow iris glittering with malign intelligence. Curling possessively around Wells, the tentacles run over his body in a continuous stream as his smile stretches wider and wider.

Under that pitiless gaze, I feel monstrously naked. It brutally picks through my mind, examining then disposing like confetti everything I have ever done or dreamed. The casualness of it, the obscene disinterest of the creature, fills me with a choking horror. Shouldn't I count for something a tiny voice in the depths of my mind protests? I have no answer for it, no brilliant comeback to give it succour. Cast down in the darkness, alone, the stunning realisation washes over me that all my dreams, my hopes, my desires, everything that makes me real and important, mean nothing to this creature. That is its true horror. I teeter on the edge of an abyss, ready to fall endlessly into the darkness.

Then, a ghostly hand, haloed by a silvery light, reaches out and grabs my own. Wells shouts, and the writhing within the darkness grows more frenzied as the creature reaches for me.

A face swims into view, that of a boy with an open, honest, unquestioning face. A smile lights his face and he says one word

'Silver.'

Wells' voice spirals away and the darkness melts as surging bands of coruscating light explode, obliterating the ship and everything within.

Gasping, Silver jerked up into a sitting position. She felt a hand within her own and looked at the boy next to her.

'Shelby,' she cried, tears running down her face. She grabbed him in a long hug, and he sat there, wrapped in her embrace, smiling and patting her awkwardly...

Sinking deep into their bones, a silent blaze of light burns coldly through them. There was a sensation of falling, followed by an agonising wrenching that saw them thrust into a burning crimson haze

'Bloody hell,' groaned Dunstan, holding his head in one hand while looking around in shock. His eyes looked wild, unable to comprehend what they were seeing.

'Pithy, but accurate,' the Doctor said. His face was flushed, but his eyes gleamed with keen interest as he took in their new surroundings.

They stood in a vast square bordered on each side by tall buildings made of a pale yellow stone. A constant rain of ash and cinders crackled down, accumulating in deep drifts across the plaza. A series of strange structures dotted the empty expanse, each a twisted knot of metal that may have been art or religious artefacts. At the centre of the square stood a small copse of dead trees, broken branches clutching at a crimson sky full of boiling clouds. The air was heavy and smelt of burning. Beyond the buildings, they could see vast columns of smoke ringing the city, ten thousand pyres that lit the clouds with a hellish glare.

All around them, strange slivers of light hung in the air, twisting slowly. Light spilled from them in all directions. Striker thought he saw something moving within the

margins of one, but when he looked again, all he could see was the oddly shining light. He started towards one, but the Doctor quickly restrained him.

‘If I were you, Colonel, I’d leave well enough alone. The psychic energy leaking from the creature on the ship has begun to eat at the fabric of reality. Each of these is linked to a different point in time and place – the chances of finding the one back to Earth are infinitesimal. Let’s have a look around and...’

A terrible trumpeting noise interrupted the Doctor, shaking the buildings and beating the men to the ground with its pulsing intensity. The noise echoed for several minutes leaving a horrible silence when it finally died away. Gradually, the wind returned, a hoarse whisper that moaned across the ash strewn square.

‘What in God’s name was that?’ Dunstan yelled above the ringing of his ears. His voice sounded close to breaking.

Ignoring him for a moment, the Doctor spun slowly about on his heel, noting carefully the buildings around them. Striker did the same, and pointed towards a vast structure that towered over them at the far end of the plaza.

Dominating that end of the square stood a massive, squat ziggurat. The stepped sides rose at steady intervals, until they reached a summit that was lost in a haze of ash. Only the flashing of a silver light at the top indicated the summit.

‘Don’t you think that is a most impressive sight, Colonel?’ the Doctor asked, walking towards it as if he was taking a stroll in the afternoon sun.

‘I wouldn’t stray Doctor,’ Striker warned, desperately struggling to maintain his composure in the face of the rapid turn of events. Pausing, the Doctor glanced over at him. After a moment, he nodded.

‘You’re perfectly correct.’ Still, he cast a lingering look at the ziggurat. He pointed to the summit.

‘Now that is interesting.’ The haze had thinned a little, revealing a slender tower topping the ziggurat. An intense silver light blazed from it, focussed on the opposite end of the plaza.

Following the beam’s path, Striker swore loudly, and Dunstan cringed, his face turning pale.

Rising like a black sun over the horizon of buildings opposite emerged a massive, humped shape. Black tentacles swarmed through the air, smashing buildings aside in torrents of brick and dust. A building slid to the ground with a shudder that left them reeling as the ground quaked in response.

The head, a vast spongy mass topped with a yellow-spiralled nodule the colour of polished bone, hove into view. Its black maw yawned opened, revealing a vast cavern-like mouth that dripped ichor. From it issued another explosion of sound that tore at their eardrums with a fearsome pressure. Hundreds of tentacles supported the body, spatulate lengths of writhing flesh that pounded the buildings with fury. The beam of light from the tower surrounded the creature like a corona, making it look like it was devouring the heart of a star.

‘Oh dear,’ the Doctor said, horror and fascination warring for control across his face.

‘Do you know what that thing is, Doctor?’ Sweat drenched Striker’s face and his eyes looked wild.

The Doctor swung around, his face intense.

‘We are in dreadful danger, Colonel. Not only here, but also those left behind in Calcorn. I’ve been such a fool. The signs were there, all the pieces to a puzzle I was too blind to see.’

His arm swept around, encompassing the hellish nightmare that surrounded them. ‘All this is the future your planet faces unless we can devise a way to return.’ Turning, the Doctor pointed to the creature, which loomed ever closer.

‘Across the galaxy they are known as the Dreadnoughts. Galactic parasites belched into space by their noxious, turbulent planet. The Galactic Biological Society on Telov V listed the species as being one of the seven deadliest sentient beings in existence. The Society refused to send more researchers to the Dreadnought home world after the destruction of the fifth survey ship. Bronze tablets, the sole remnants of the home world of one the most ancient galactic civilisations, record the first known contact with the Dreadnoughts. The Tuath were a stellar power, yet the Dreadnoughts brought their empire crashing down in months. They called them the Tov dal Enkala – ‘The Weaver of Nightmares.’

A sudden explosion in a nearby building caught their attention. Dark creatures, twisted and misshapen, erupted from it in a flood, like beetles escaping from beneath an upturned rock. There was a blinding flash, followed by a further explosion nearby. Chunks of rock sprayed through the air. More of the creatures escaped into the light, then scattering into the streets beyond. Out of one of the buildings several smaller figures appeared. One urgently beckoned to them and without a word, the trio sprinted towards them.

Several individuals huddled in the shadow of the ziggurat. They were tall, golden-skinned people, with deep black eyes and smooth, hairless heads. One was armed with a tubular device connected to a heavy looking backpack. He called out.

‘Quickly, in here.’ His voice was light, but carried easily. Signalling to the others in his group, he led them in a sprint towards a shadowed entrance several hundred feet away. Following them, the Doctor, and Striker raced into a darkened entrance and huddled away from the light. Dunstan lagged behind them, turning frequently to gaze at the vast creature that cast a red limned shadow over them. Finally, he stumbled into the entrance, the echoes of the creature’s cries ringing across the plaza.

The Doctor made to say something, but one of the group, a smaller female with an exhausted looking face, hushed him urgently. The taller man moved to the entrance, his weapon held at his hip, ready for use. A male companion stood beside him, his head ducking in and out, surveying the square.

‘Where are we?’ Striker hissed in the Doctor’s ear. ‘Who are these people?’ On the floor beside him, Dunstan crouched, his eyes wide, body shaking. A thin line of drool hung from one corner of his mouth.

‘Who are they? The few that remain, Colonel.’ Watching with keen interest, the Doctor appraised them in turn. Striker followed suit.

Other than the men in the doorway and the woman who had hushed them, there was one other, a wizened male sitting hunched over. He wore a dirty smock, and one of his arms was tucked within its folds. They all looked exhausted, deep lines etched into their faces. Striker felt a sense of palpable grief emanating from them all, barely repressed, but tangible, nonetheless. The woman slumped against the wall, her eyelids flickering, until the older man slapped her in the face. Her head jerked and she looked at the man, her features softening when he gave her a smile.

‘Steady on.’ Striker stepped forward, his fist clenched.

‘You misunderstand, stranger,’ she said with a tired smile. Still, she rubbed at where the blow had landed.

‘A necessary precaution in these fallen times,’ the taller man at the doorway called. He returned to his vigil.

‘How bad is it?’ the Doctor asked gently.

The woman on the floor began to laugh, the sound twisting into something approaching despair. The sound of it sent a ripple down Striker’s spine.

‘Things are beyond bad, my friend.’ She lifted herself to her feet. Reaching into a pocket, she pulled out a small black tube, with a thin needle at one end. Without preliminaries, she jabbed the needle into her thigh, depressing the stud at the other end. There was a gentle hiss, then she discarded the unit. Sighing she closed her eyes for a moment. When they opened again, her dark eyes sparkled with renewed life. Her face grew animated and the exhaustion lifted.

‘I’ve not slept in over three weeks. Without the adrenalin boosters, we would all be asleep, trapped within the hellish imagination of the Dreadnought.’ She nodded to the doorway. ‘Or worse.’

‘None of us have slept in weeks,’ said the hunched figure beside her. With difficulty, he lifted himself off the floor, waving away an offer of assistance from the woman.

‘We forget ourselves and our traditions of hospitality,’ the man muttered, straightening painfully before sketching a bow. The arm underneath the smock shifted and to Striker’s eye, looked oddly formed.

With great solemnity, the Doctor returned the bow. Striker followed suit, his attention caught when he straightened on Dunstan, who remained huddled in the corner. Striker could see he was gnawing at a thumbnail, lost in his own thoughts.

‘As you can see,’ the Doctor said, ‘we are strangers here.’ He walked over to the doorway. ‘Though I fear we both have a common problem.’

The taller man beside him nodded.

‘Greeting to you all.’ He sketched a tired smile that seemed to linger too long on his haggard face.

‘We are all that remains of the peoples of this city,’ he said, his words harsh. ‘I am Lokdar, chief scientist of the Grand Council. This is my colleague, Talgrid.’ The shorter man nodded and then returned to the doorway. Lokdar pointed to the woman. ‘My sister’s name is Vanetta, and the elderling beside her is Sonfra.’

‘I am the Doctor, the man of upright bearing is Colonel Striker and our friend over there is Private Dunstan.’ Striker stuck his hand out towards Lokdar, who looked at it curiously, before taking it in his own. Striker noted the dry and ragged texture of the skin. He looked Lokdar in the eye, nodding his greeting.

‘You say you are all that is left. What of your armies, your navies? Surely, there has been some resistance to that creature out there.’

Sonfra snorted, a dry noise that turned into a hacking cough. He hunched over, groaning with pain while Vanetta eased him back down to the floor.

‘There was resistance,’ Lokdar said, absently fingering the controls on the weapon he held. They are all gone now, dust before a storm. We waited too long, allowed our curiosity to give it time to gain in power and influence. When finally we awakened to the danger, it was too late.’ He looked away.

Vanetta stood beside Lokdar and gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

‘Too late for recriminations, my brother,’ she said, her voice a soft whisper of loss.

‘And this was three weeks ago,’ insisted Striker, his voice tinged with disbelief. ‘Are you saying everyone on this world has died in the past three weeks?’

‘Died?’ Lokdar looked at him curiously. ‘Aah, you have only experienced the beginning of the infestation. No, they are not dead. They are sustained in an unnatural sleep by that...thing out there.’ His voice was bitter.

‘Tell us about it,’ the Doctor softly urged.

‘There is not much to tell.’ Lokdar settle against the wall, keeping a close eye on the portion of the plaza visible from the doorway. The crimson light crawled across his face and his eyes gleamed wetly.

‘The mountains to the north have always had a bad reputation. Crops habitually failed, buildings were constantly undermined, and people went missing. Eventually we learned to ignore it, shutting it from our minds like a guilty secret.’ He paused.

‘The fault lies with me, which is my burden to carry.’ His sister looked at him with worry, but he shook his head.

‘Tis the truth, Vanetta. If not for my greed for knowledge, that monstrosity would have remained buried.’

‘If not you, Lokdar, then someone else, surely’ He shook his head angrily.

‘You dug it up?’ Striker asked.

‘In a way. We are...were a people chronically short of energy. We had the knowledge, but not enough resources to make any of it a practical reality. My research indicated that beneath the mountains was an energy source of immense size, enough to fuel our civilisation for centuries to come.’

‘And instead you found that,’ remarked the Doctor, thrusting a finger through the door.

‘Yes, we found that.’ Straightening, Lokdar looked out the door.

‘At first, we rejoiced in the discovery of a new life form on the planet. It seemed to have laid there for thousands of years, deep in hibernation. We detected signs of sentience, then awakening life. At first, everything seemed normal. Then...’

‘Then people began falling asleep,’ finished Vanetta.

‘Is that it, they simply fell asleep?’ Striker looked puzzled.

‘Most have remained asleep, though some...some have awoken.’ His gaze fell on the old man, who looked away, rubbing at his hidden arm.

The Doctor looked thoughtful for a moment, wrestling with an idea. His face suddenly cleared and his eyes widened with an insight.

‘My word, so that’s how it works.’

‘This one is sharp,’ Vanetta said to her brother. His smile was brief.

‘Little good talk does us now. We have a plan; all we are doing is delaying its implementation.’

‘What are they talking about, Doctor?’ Striker asked. ‘What’s the link between an entire population falling asleep and that creature?’

‘Please do keep up,’ the Doctor admonished, gently. He ignored the angry look on Striker’s face and went on.

‘To sustain itself, a Dreadnought leeches its sustenance from its surrounding environment. In space, a local star, while on a planet...’ He looked pointedly at the group they had come across. ‘A by-product of this is the effect on living things. Psychic energy is generated which keeps the population passive. A few awake, changed in strange ways, like that person you saw in the council chamber. Given enough time, he would be transformed into something alien to Earth. In effect, the Dreadnought is a type of vampire. A psychic vampire, if you will.’

‘You say some people awaken. What happens when they do?’

‘This.’ The old man moved forward, his face alive with a bright, bitter smile. ‘Some of us were snatched away from the long, never ending night. But not without consequences.’ He pulled his arm from beneath the smock. Striker stared, then turned away, sickened. Even the Doctor’s evident fascination was tinged with revulsion.

Sonfra looked away as the others gazed upon his twisted and misshapen arm. The flesh was massively engorged, and the skin had burst in a long, ghastly rent that ran from shoulder to a barely discernible elbow. The exposed flesh was black and pulpy, fat veins tangled in a mass of ropy muscle. Dunstan suddenly lurched to his feet, wild eyes locked on the arm.

‘No, no, no,’ he cried, shaking his head from side to side. Before anyone could stop him, Dunstan lurched into a staggering run. He burst through the doorway and ran out into the light.

Striker moved to go after him, but Lokdar’s assistant grabbed him by the arm. Striker struggled, but eventually gave up when he saw the sorrow in Talgrid’s eyes.

‘He’s gone,’ Talgrid said, gently.

Dunstan’s running feet echoed back to them. A scuttling noise rose up, a dry, rasping sound that echoed horribly in the quiet. From the right side of the doorway, a swarm of black forms boiled into view. They saw Dunstan swerve away, but he lost his footing in a floe of dust. He was scrambling to his feet when the swarm fell upon him, carrying him away from the angle of the doorway and out of sight. His cry of shock turned into an animal screaming, which quickly wound down like a dying clock. All that was left was a dry scrambling noise, and the meaty sound of a body being torn apart.

The group stood in silence, looking at Striker. He struggled against them once more, then gave up, his shoulders slumping.

‘A by-product of the Dreadnought’s influence, Doctor,’ Lokdar said. ‘I sometimes think it deliberately awakens them after the transformation is complete. To hunt and disport for its alien pleasure.’

Rubbing his chin, the Doctor shook his head. His face was pale and sweat glistened on his forehead.

‘Now, while they are busy, would be a good time to leave,’ Vanetta said. She ignored the ghastly look on Striker’s face.

Lokdar stood up, hefting the weapon. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘while they are busy with their...While they are busy,’ he finished. ‘Come, we must reach the entrance to the ziggurat.’

As they assembled in the doorway, Lokdar at the front, the Doctor tapped him on the shoulder.

‘What is in the ziggurat that is so important?’

Lokdar looked stonily down at him. He hefted his weapon and depressed a switch. A harsh whine filled the air and he smiled with grim satisfaction.

‘We are the last of our people, inhabitants of a dead world. Honour demands that we ensure that this is the only world the Dreadnought lays waste. The tower atop the ziggurat is a solar collector, my finest achievement. And the key to the destruction of the Dreadnought. Disable the dampeners and within minutes a new sun will blossom in the sky, consuming the Dreadnought and everything under its sway.’

‘Is there no other way?’ The Doctor’s voice was soft, knowing the answer already.

Vanetta shook her head. ‘All our choices have narrowed down to this one, terrible burden. If we fail, we betray all those lost to the Dreadnought.’

‘Will you come with us Doctor? Perhaps there is a way for you and your friend to return to your own world and defeat the menace you face?’

‘We have no choice, do we? The dimensional rifts that are appearing could lead anywhere. With some power from the accumulator diverted, I could jerry rig a way for both of us to return.’ He turned to Striker. ‘What do you think, Colonel? This is as much your

choice as mine. Risk entering a myriad of rifts that could lead anywhere, or take a chance with these brave people?’

‘There’s no choice, is there Doctor.? Needs must and all that. It would be an honour to go with them and help as best I can.’

Lokdar nodded approval. ‘Are we ready then? Follow us into the entrance beneath the ziggurat. If we become separated, take the central shaft to the tower control room. Yes? Good’

The Doctor and Striker watched as their new companions gathered in the doorway. From the folds of her smock, Vanetta drew out a long barrelled pistol, which hummed with power. She briefly squeezed her brother’s arm, then the group trotted out into the light.

The Doctor handed Striker a spotted handkerchief. Startled, he nodded his thanks, tying it at the back of his neck and ensuring it covered his nose and face. The Doctor did the same with a second coloured piece of cloth. Once that was settled, Striker drew his pistol from its holster. The weight of it gave him an odd sense of reassurance.

‘Come along then, Doctor. And stay near. If what you say is true, you’re my ticket back home.’

Out in the open, the rain of ash and cinders had increased, a glowing fog lit from within. The air throbbed with noise, a great bass rumbling that came from far off. They stumbled through the knee-deep drifts after Lokdar, coughing and spluttering underneath their ineffective masks, constantly brushing the cinders that caught in the folds of their clothes.

Eyes streaming, Striker saw the lead group duck into a building. A harsh whine rose up, accompanied by a purplish light spilling from the doorway. Grabbing the Doctor, he pulled him in that direction. Taking the cinder strewn steps two at a time, Striker spotted some of the twisted creatures massing several hundred metres away.

‘Trouble’s coming, Doctor,’ he yelled, over the sound of the rumbling. He pointed towards the creatures milling in the distance. The sudden flash of crimson light overhead made them duck. Several more bursts of light appeared across the plaza.

‘What’s going on?’ He had to shout in the Doctor’s ear, such was the level of noise.

‘The Dreadnought’s psychic signature is breaking down the boundaries between dimensions. Very soon this entire world will be surrounded by dimensional rifts.’ He looked up at Striker. ‘When that happens, expect an armada of Dreadnoughts to appear. We must reach that tower!’

Scrambling through the doorway, they bolted down the corridor, emerging into a narrow chamber. Several empty slots lined the wall in front of them. They saw Lokdar shepherd his group into one, then he slapped a control on the wall and stepped in. Silently, the group began to ascend.

‘Wait,’ yelled Striker, racing after them. He skidded to a halt on the edge of the slot, grabbing onto the wall for support. He leaned over, and saw a drop that vanished into the dark. Looking up, he saw the group floating upwards, Vanetta beckoning to them frantically.

Standing by his side, the Doctor followed Striker gaze. ‘Clever,’ he said. ‘They appear to have harnessed the magnetic field of this planet and bent it to their own uses. I wonder... No matter, that’s for later.’ Without hesitation, he stepped out into the empty air and with a twitch of his shoulders, turned around. Floating there, he beckoned to Striker.

‘Come along Colonel. Unless you want to wait for our friends.’

Strange chittering noises echoed down the corridor. Twisted shadows emerged into the room, followed by scrabbling sounds. Taking a deep breath, Striker stepped over the

edge and found himself floating next to the Doctor. Leaning over, the Doctor touched a control. He noticed Striker's wan face.

'My advice would not be to look down,' he said, smiling as they began ascending. Just then, several creatures spilled over the edge and hovered in place. Confused, their limbs flailed and their jaws opened and closed with terrible clacking sounds.

'They won't take long to work out what to do. Fortunately, they can't make their ascent quicker than ours, so we should have plenty of time once we get to the top.' More creatures spilled into the gap, until it was packed with their bodies. The sound they made echoed up and down the shaft and Striker winced. He pulled his pistol from its holster and aimed it down the shaft, sighting along the barrel.

Striker was surprised to feel that Doctor's hand biting into his shoulder. He turned his head and looked at him. He was stunned to see the Doctor's face was white with anger, his lips working soundlessly.

'Put that thing away,' he hissed at last, his voice strained.

'What about Dunstan? One of my men... Those things...' His hand wavering, Striker abruptly holstered the pistol.

'Vengeance is a weapon that always returns to haunt those who use it,' the Doctor said, his voice quieter. 'This planet is set to die within the hour – let the poor things enjoy what little time they have left.'

'Enjoy? You have a twisted notion of what constitutes life, Doctor. Those things could hardly be said to be enjoying anything, other than the thrill of the hunt.'

'My view is more cosmic, Colonel.' The Doctor sighed as they slowed in front of a doorway. 'But perhaps the view from the top has made me too distant from the realities of the universe around me.' He stepped forward and waited for Striker to join him. Below, the cacophony continued. The creatures were distant, ant like things that swarmed over one another in an attempt to reach the prey they sensed far above them.

'No matter. Let's see what Lokdar and his friends are about.'

They emerged into a large, four sided room. The walls were made of a thick, clear material that allowed views of the entire city. Striker moved to a window while the Doctor crossed to the centre of the room, which was dominated by a pillar made of similarly clear material. Worked into the pillar was a wire lattice, along which pulsed energy currents. A semi circular console bent around one side of the pillar, and Lokdar and his group stood behind it, watching anxiously as Lokdar manipulated the controls.

Skirting the corner of the console, the Doctor joined Lokdar. The taller man glanced at him, but continued his work. Watching, the Doctor saw the readouts begin to spike and a steady hum began to sound, rising steadily in intensity.

'Lokdar, I need to transfer a portion of the power you are generating into a localised point in this room.' The Doctor raised his voice over the sound of the energy build-up. Lokdar paused, then flicked a switch. The hum increased again, and the energy coursing through the pillar grew. A golden glow began to radiate from it.

'All I need is some cabling and several lengths of metal.' Lokdar looked at his assistant.

'Talgrid, take the Doctor to the stores room and help him find what he needs. Be quick – the time approaches.'

Gesturing to him to follow, Talgrid led the way down a short corridor. Palming open a door, Talgrid ushered the Doctor into a long room filled with shelving.

His eyes widening in delight, the Doctor quickly picked his way through the shelves. His hands danced over units and cables, connectors and tool in a seemingly random search

for materiel. Finally, his arms full of cabling and metal rods, he hurried out of the room, with Talgrid at his heels.

In the room, the hum had become a steady roar. The glow from the pillar was almost blinding and the temperature had risen steadily. Lokdar and his people sat in a small circle, and Talgrid joined them. Striker thought they were changing, but he couldn't make out the words over the din of the energy build-up.

Immediately setting to work, the Doctor donned gloves and a pair of silvered goggles. Gingerly, he inserted a connector into a slot at the base of the pillar, the Doctor skipped away when it began to sizzle. Watching carefully for any further reaction, the Doctor returned with one end of cabling, which he quickly attached to the connector. Leaving his vantage point, Striker joined the Doctor.

'What are you doing?' Striker had to yell above the roar.

'The walls through the dimensions have been thinned on this world, thanks to the Dreadnought. Sufficient energy focussed on one area should be enough to generate our own rift.'

'But you said it was impossible to predict where a rift would lead.' The Doctor paused, and Striker could tell from his face that he was thinking furiously. After a few seconds, the Doctor stood up, a hesitant smile on his face.

'I'm afraid you will have to provide the critical element for our return, Colonel.' The Doctor quickly assembled a frame, roughly the same dimensions as a doorway. Puzzled, Striker helped him lift it. He kept it up while the Doctor connected several braces to the base, enabling it to stand of its own accord.

By now, the building had begun to shake, and the roar had developed a keen edged whine that set Striker's teeth on edge. Glancing over to the window, he saw a vast shadow fall across it and watched in dismay as a nearby building suddenly exploded in a boiling cloud of dust and rock.

'Doctor, we'd better hurry,' he urged.

The Doctor looked briefly irritated, but shook it off. He gestured towards the frame.

'Please Colonel, if you could stand here?' Hesitantly, Striker stood within the frame. At the Doctor's urging, he gripped both main struts, watching with increasing concern as the Doctor connected the cabling to a unit, then another cable from the unit to a connection in the base of the metal frame.

Punching a series of commands into the unit, the Doctor yelled to Striker.

'We need to lock onto a rift that has an association with your planet, Colonel. Of the two of us, you have the greater link. Your signature is redolent with the energies swirling around the Earth, so, if we are very, very, very lucky, when I flick this switch...' At that moment, the building shuddered. Lokdar and his people were scattered by the blow, but they scrambled and reformed the circle, linking arms and resuming their chanting. A massive crack ran through the window facing a swirling mass of whipping tentacles that smashed repeatedly against it.

Hurriedly, the Doctor pushed the switch, and Striker felt a surge of energy run from the metal struts and through his body in a lash. His back arched and he cried out as his body seemed to catch ablaze. When he opened his eyes, he was surrounded by a blazing blue corona that chilled him to the bone. He could see the Doctor, but the noise of the energy surge was gone, replaced by utter silence that terrified him. He turned around, and impossibly, he could see the night skyline of Calcorn. Turning once more, he saw the Doctor looking passed him with horror on his face. There was a detonation, and the pillar cracked right through, energy spilling out in waves.

Time slowed. The Doctor, his face a silent 'O' of panic, leapt for the doorway as the room flashed as brightly as the heart of the sun. Outside, clinging to the side of the building, the Dreadnought had time to give one great bellow, before the entire city was consumed in a golden sunburst that was visible from orbit.

'Ooof.' The Doctor and Striker landed in a heap on the cold soil. With a snap like a mousetrap closing on its prey, the rift vanished, leaving only afterimages burned into the air.

Clambering to his feet, the Doctor helped Striker stand. It was full dark, and by what little light there was, the Doctor checked his watch. 'One hour, Colonel. Minute for minute, we were gone. Not too shabby, I must say.' Wiping dirt and ash from his jacket, and generally looking pleased with himself, the Doctor tssked at the singe marks on his hat. There was a sudden 'whumph' and a blaze of light and both men flinched, turning to see the lighthouse erupt in a ball of flame.

The Doctor was already running towards the village, Striker on his heels, the Doctor's voice hanging in the air like a promise.

'Silver!'

Silver prised Shelby from her, smiling shakily at him as she struggled to her knees. Her head was pounding and her vision swam for a moment, then she felt a hand on her shoulder steady her. Looking up, she could see Baxter looking at her, concerned.

'Are you all right? We couldn't rouse you there for a while and Shelby began to get anxious.'

Shaking her head, Silver stood, leaning against a wall for support when a wave of dizziness washed over her. When it passed she looked up again.

'Sorry, Private. I've just had the weirdest dream you could imagine.'

'Anything important?' Baxter asked, half jokingly.

'If the Doctor were here, he would say everything was important.' She frowned. 'I can't really say. It's just a jumble of images slipping away. The more I try to remember, the more I forget.' Her voice trailed off, and her frown deepened.

'Have you heard anything from the Doctor?'

'Nothing. You've been asleep for about half an hour. I thought I'd let you have some rest.'

Silver frowned. 'Where is he?' she wondered. 'The circle isn't that far, is it?'

'Not that far, no.' His head turned. 'Shelby? What are you doing? Leave Riggs alone.' Baxter moved over to where Shelby stood. He stretched his arm towards the boy, then stopped. His hand went to his mouth, then he looked away.

'Silver, you'd best come have a look at this.' His voice was a strained whisper.

Hurrying to his side, Silver looked passed him and recoiled.

'Oh.' The word hung in the air and she felt the inadequacy of her response, if not the surging queasiness in her stomach.

The light was dim, but Silver could see that some kind of covering obscured Riggs' upper body. Tentatively reaching out, she was brought up short when Shelby grabbed her wrist with surprising strength. He looked at her, his eyes wide and a little frightened.

'No Silver. Bad.' His voice quavered and he backed away, taking Silver with him, such was the force of his grip.

'Wait, Shelby. We have to see if Riggs is all right.' Shelby shook his head, stubbornly, but relented, releasing Silver's hand and taking another step back.

Baxter and Silver apprehensively approached Riggs. In the gloom, their eyes strained to make out what covered him. With shocking suddenness, the clouds broke and a shaft of moonlight cut through the gloom, illuminating them all in a frozen tableau.

The carapace covered Riggs him from head to waist. Like well-worn leather, it cracked and ridged and a rusted red colour. Nudging it with her foot, Silver felt the shell flex with a soft crackling that made her flinch. It was translucent, and they could see tendrils rippling underneath the scabrous covering, waving like fronds on the seabed. Riggs shifted suddenly and they all jumped. With a barely audible sigh, the body settled back and lay still again.

‘What in God’s name has happened to him?’ Baxter’s voice shook.

‘Nothing good,’ Silver managed through a mouth suddenly dry. ‘I wish the Doctor were here.’ She looked at the doorway, half expecting him to appear with an answer and a dazzling smile. It stood half-open, empty and dark.

‘Where are they?’ she asked in frustration, her voice tinged with impatience.

‘Where are they indeed?’ The voice echoed around them. In the opposite corner, the darkness coalesced and the figure of a man stepped towards them.

Baxter automatically reached for his pistol, but the voice laughed. Disconcerted, Baxter’s hand wavered his holster. He moved to stand in front of Silver.

‘I’ve seen you before,’ Silver whispered, fear rising as she struggled to pin down the image of a face that flashed repeatedly through her mind.

‘The dream?’ Wincing as pain lanced through her head, Silver gingerly touched her temple. ‘Who are you?’ she said heatedly. ‘Why do I know your face?’

‘You know my face, Rachel, because we have met before.’ He chuckled, a full-throated sound that sent gooseflesh rippling up Silver’s arms.

Baxter pulled his pistol from the holster and levelled it at the figure. The click of the safety coming off was loud.

‘I suggest you keep your manners civil. Answer her questions.’

A wolfish grin lit up the dark and the figure drew closer. Baxter’s eyes narrowed and he centred the pistol over the man’s heart.

‘I’m warning yo-’

Several things happened at once. The figure leaped at him, a shadow that flew through the air. Rolling, Baxter kept his pistol trained on the figure and fired. The muzzle flash illuminated a man in a slicker and hat. Silver and Baxter rolled away from him. At the same time, with a rending crack, Riggs stood, pieces of the carapace falling heavily to the floor.

Scrambling to her feet, Silver caught a glimpse of what Riggs had become and almost vomited. Like a melted candle, his face and torso had twisted and collapsed, leaving his features hidden underneath a shapeless mass of ruptured flesh. His eyes glistened behind thick folds of flesh laced with veins that throbbed and twitched. Thick, ropy muscle crawled up his arms and into his shoulders. The flesh twitched and shook, and thick black veins flexed like worms in the earth. Advancing on them, his mouth opened and he gave a guttural roar.

Baxter’s pistol fired twice. Staggering, Riggs went down on one knee, his head shaking. A steady rain of blood spattered onto the floor and his hands scrambled at the holes in his chest. Despite his injuries, Riggs surged to his feet and came at them. Silver bolted for the door while Baxter swept Shelby up. Wells made no attempt to stop them.

Standing in the doorway, Silver saw Wells join Riggs. His hand ran over Riggs’ glistening head, petting him like a dog. Behind them, the rustling grew louder, a horrible susurration of unnatural sound. The mob gathered around Wells, and as one, they fell to their knees, looking up at him with twisted adoration across their damaged features. Wells laughed once more and called out.

‘Run along then, children. If we don’t catch you, the Weaver certainly will.’

‘Ignore him, it’s them that wants watching.’ The crowd of people had lurched to their feet and moved towards the door.

‘That’s it,’ Baxter shouted. ‘Let’s go.’ The pack suddenly surged forward, breaking into a savage chattering noise.

Silver ran into the street. The rain had let up, but the road was covered with water. The moon appeared through rents in the milling clouds, shimmering wanly in the flooded street.

‘Where’s the best place to hole up?’ she asked Baxter as she hurried away from the hall. Baxter shifted his shoulders so that Shelby, who had moved around so that he piggybacked Baxter, was better settled. Both arms free, Baxter kept his pistol by his side, eyes scanning the shadows for any more movement.

‘The only defensible place would be the lighthouse. It’s not that far if we keep a steady pace. We need somewhere remote that we can barricade and wait it out for the others.’

Behind them, the creatures spilled out onto the street. Their moaning rose up with the wind, a noise that set Silver’s teeth on edge.

‘We don’t have much choice,’ she said, pointing up the street.

Baxter looked. ‘No, we don’t do we?’ They made their way down the flooded footpath. Silver had forgotten the last time she had been dry, shivering in the breeze that turned her clammy clothes to ice. They halted opposite the pier. Though he knew it would be useless, Baxter trained his pistol up the street while Silver checked in both directions. Satisfied that they were alone, she looked briefly across the water, her gaze drawn by the massive silhouette of the trawler.

Was that movement, she saw, hidden by the darkness? Something seemed to writhe within the shadows, but without a torch, she couldn’t be sure. Still, she felt a prickling run down her spine, and was glad they didn’t have to use the pier to escape.

‘How do we get to the lighthouse?’

Baxter pointed to the silhouette of a stubby column in the distance. The land curved around to the left, before jutting into the harbour.

‘There’s an access road, but that’ll add an extra couple of miles, and I don’t think we have the time. The beach is the best option.’

‘You’re joking aren’t you? After what happened to that soldier this afternoon?’ Silver’s look was incredulous.

‘Well, short of flying, are there any other options?’ Baxter snapped, and then had the grace to look embarrassed. His eyes lighted on a metal box sitting at the bottom of the steps leading onto the sand. He grinned.

‘You little beauty,’ he breathed, jogging down the steps. Silver followed, anxiously watching behind her for any movement or sound. For the moment, they were alone.

The metal box had a large gash down one side, but was otherwise intact. With the butt of his pistol, Baxter smashed the lock, lifting the lid open.

‘Brilliant,’ he said, his smile growing broader as he took stock of the contents. Clinging to his back like a limpet, Shelby looked over Baxter’s shoulder with wide eyes.

He pulled out a small case and opened it. Next to a long, heavy-duty torch, Silver could see a dozen stubby cylinders held securely within a metal frame.

‘The AN-M14 incendiary grenade. Perfect for this sort of thing.’ Whistling in appreciation, Baxter pulled one out and showed Silver.

‘You can’t be serious? I’ve barely handled a weapon, let alone grenades!’

‘Can you throw a ball?’ Baxter said, stuffing several of the grenades inside his jacket.

‘I know I’m a girl, but don’t patronise me too much, okay?’ Baxter’s smile widened and he mouthed an apology.

‘Good then. This is the same principle. Grip in your throwing hand, pull the pin and throw it in the direction of the enemy. The beauty of these is that they have a thermite charge in them, so they’ll burn on land and underwater, if you get my drift.’

Silver nodded. Taking two, she stuffed one in her jeans pocket and held the other in her right hand.

‘So, what’s the plan?’

Baxter looked up from checking the torch. A beam of light flashed out, illuminating a wide expanse of the beach. Hurriedly, he clicked it off and held it by his side. ‘Basically, we move along the beach towards the lighthouse. I’m relying on you to keep pace with me and keep an eye out for anything from the sea.’ He flicked on the torch, and pointed the light towards the water.

‘Since the sand closest to the water is firmer, it is the fastest route. More dangerous, though. We could follow a route higher up the beach, but the sand is softer. Safer, but heavier going. What do you think?’

‘Either option doesn’t thrill me, when you get down to it. I suppose the quicker we reach safety, the better.’ Silver knew she didn’t sound so confident, but tried to put a cheery smile on for Shelby’s benefit.

Shelby stiffened, his head whipping around towards the pier.

‘They’re coming,’ he said, his voice low and fearful. Swinging around, Baxter clicked on the torch. The beam revealed a mass of twisted people clambering onto the pier, their arms thrown up as one against the harsh light. Their growling rose up to a collective roar and despite their fear of the light, they began to move more quickly towards them.

‘That’s it then.’ Baxter jogged off, the torch in one hand, pistol in the other. Watching Baxter move off with the only reliable light source, and with the deformed humans coming after her, Silver felt a momentary shiver of fear. Angry with herself, she hurried to catch him, splashing in his footprints as the surf swirled closer and closer.

They both fell into a steady rhythm, skipping away to avoid the worst of the waves boiling onto the beach. The moon came out several times, illuminating the harbour in ghostly hues, different shades of grey resolving into clouds and water and the lighthouse.

Something whipped through the air and Silver ducked instinctively. She fell to her knees, water splashing all around her as something else hissed through the air over her head. She heard Baxter give an inarticulate cry and there was sudden, dull crump, followed by an intense blue-white light, which illuminated a mass of thrashing tentacles whipping through the air. Phosphorus, hissing and burning, had sprayed the tentacles, which began to writhe with greater intensity. Silver watched as they sank quickly into the water, tracing their descent by the trail of bubbles that erupted along the surface.

‘Stop gawking Silver. Hurry!’ Baxter ran on and Silver could see Shelby’s face, shockingly white in the gloom, staring back at her, his eyes wide with fright. Spurred on,

Silver raced after them, the water hissing at her feet as the beach began its long curve towards the lighthouse.

On several further occasions, they were attacked from out of the darkness. At one point, Baxter was knocked off his feet, sending him and Shelby splashing into the water. Without hesitation, Silver followed Baxter’s instructions. Hold, pull throw, run. The explosion blew her off her feet. Winded, she had staggered upright, frantically checking that she was unharmed, then raced over and pulled Shelby out of the surf before he was dragged into the water. They stumbled on, the flickering phosphorus light casting monstrous shadows ahead of them.

The lighthouse loomed out of the darkness. Silver hugged Shelby close, protecting him as best she could from the cold, while Baxter struggled with the door. Eventually, he resorted to shooting out the lock, the report of the pistol loud. Kicking the door open, he ushered them both inside, checking to see behind how far away the mass of mutant humans were.

Inside, Silver looked around curiously.

'I've never been inside one of these,' she remarked, as Baxter wrestled the door shut and looked around for something to block it.

'I hate to interrupt your sightseeing, but would you mind giving me a hand with this?' Baxter pushed at a crate that lay to one side. Silver hurried over and added her weight to the task. With a loud grating noise, the crate grudgingly slid over the stone floor until it came to rest up against the door.

'There's nothing more down here we can use. We'll try upstairs.' Baxter headed for the stairs which swept up the inside wall.

Silver made to follow, but saw that Shelby hadn't moved. Kneeling down beside him, she touched his shoulder. Alarmed at how cold he was, Silver looked around, and found an old blanket lying in a corner. Wrapping him in it, she held him close.

'Don't worry, Shelby,' she said, trying to sound confident. 'My friend the Doctor will find us and sort all this out.'

Shelby looked at her, his eyes wide and unfocused.

'The sky burns,' he whispered hoarsely. 'Where the Doctor is – the sky burns and the sun has risen again.' He shivered. His eyes focussed on Silver and he tiredly smiled.

Leaning his head against her shoulder, Shelby allowed himself to be picked up. He clasped his arms around her neck, then they moved off. Her foot on the first step, Silver started when someone began hammering at the door, the sound multiplying as more fists joined in. She hurried up the stairs, the sound echoing all around them.

Baxter had already begun to build a barricade on the first landing, using a table and several chairs. Leaning in, Silver could see a modest kitchen, now stripped of its furniture. Baxter pushed past her, and grabbed some netting which hung from a hook.

'Something for a rainy day,' he said. His eyes held an excited gleam.

'That lot won't hold them for too long,' Silver said, nodding at the makeshift barrier.

'It's only a delaying tactic, Silver. It should give me enough time for my master plan to come to fruition, and you the time to prepare to leap into the water.'

Hustled up the stairs, Baxter had Silver trailing behind, attempting to come to grips with his last words.

'Hang on Baxter, what exactly did you mean by that?'

Before he could answer, the sound of splintering wood echoed up the stairs. Grabbing Shelby from her and tucking him under an arm, Baxter beckoned urgently to her.

'The lamp room is just up and around the corner.' Shaking her head in frustration, Silver followed him up.

The lamp room was an enclosed space skirted by a balcony. The lamp reminded her of a diamond set in white gold, dull now, but ready to spark into life. Baxter set Shelby aside then slammed the trapdoor shut and threw the bolt. He nodded to a door on the far side, which led out to the balcony.

'Have a look out there and see if you can see anything.' He pulled out the netting and a pocketknife, then removed the remaining grenades from his jacket and set them carefully down, side by side. Watching him, Silver began to get a very bad feeling.

She ventured outside. The night was still cold, and the crashing of the waves against the rocky promontory upon which the lighthouse sat seemed distant, a constant

blur of noise that rose and fell. The darker mass of the village, set against the hills behind it, was visible, but the sea itself was a roiling mass of darkness, only occasionally illuminated by the moon as it tracked through the sky.

Leaning over the edge of the balcony, Silver saw the door burst in and a group of tainted humans pour into the gap.

‘Baxter, whatever it is you’re doing, do it faster,’ she called.

‘Just get Shelby and stay out on the balcony,’ Baxter yelled. His hands worked frantically at the netting and Silver could see he was wiring the remaining grenades together. Realisation blossomed, and she quickly grabbed Shelby, who had his face pressed up against the glass, staring out at the dark.

‘Come on Shelby,’ she urged, picking him up and hurrying through the low door onto the balcony.

Through the glass, she watched Baxter move to the trapdoor. Pulling it open, he fell back as several arms reached for him. He kicked at them until they sank from view. He pulled a pin from a grenade poking out of the netting then threw it into the gap. Hastily jamming the trapdoor closed, he scrambled onto the balcony, grabbing Shelby from Silver.

‘You’ve got ten seconds to decide if this is a good idea or not,’ he yelled, clambering onto the rail. Following suit, Silver felt as if she were watching events unfold on television. The crash of the sea faded away and she saw Baxter’s lips moving, but no sound issued. He leapt from the balcony and as light began to bloom behind her, Silver followed.

A mighty cracking noise returned her to reality. A sensation of heat rode over her, and the sound of brick exploding nearly burst her eardrums. She gasped as she plunged into the water, then began kicking frantically for the rapidly failing light.

Surfacing, she looked around for Baxter and Shelby. Several metres away, she saw them surface and began swimming swam towards them. Baxter’s eyes looked wild, and Shelby held him by the throat. Silver prised the boy away and Baxter wheezed and spluttered.

‘Come on,’ she called, watching as the shattered stump of the lighthouse collapsed in on itself. ‘We can’t be to far from shore.’

The lighthouse’s burning innards provided sufficient light to guide them to shore. All the way, Silver’s thoughts turned to what lurked beneath. Concentrating on the shore, she saw two figures emerge from the darkness, and even though she couldn’t make out their features, her heart leaped.

Baxter helped her onto the shore, and one of the men relieved her of Shelby. Wading out into the surf, she saw the other figure reach out a hand. Taking it, she looked up to see the Doctor smiling warmly down at her.

‘Your shoes, Doctor,’ she exclaimed.

Lifting one leg from the water, the Doctor carefully examined his drenched patent leather shoes. Wagging his foot, he smiled.

‘No matter, Silver,’ he said, the smile growing wider. ‘No matter at all. Now, best we get onto the beach. I have an idea that might wrap our problem up before the sun comes up.’

Five minutes before

'That'll be Baxter,' Striker huffed as they pounded down the main street. 'The man has a genius for explosives.'

'Quite,' the Doctor huffed back. He skittered to one side, almost losing his footing on the slick cobblestones as a figure erupted from a side alley and lashed out, its heavy frame ponderous and lethal.

'Watch out, Colonel,' the Doctor yelled as he ducked under a clumsy blow and moved away.

Slowing, Striker had enough time to circle around the figure.

'It's the same as the others we saw,' he said, his voice tinged with concern. 'Surely the same isn't going to happen here?'

'We saw the evidence in the council chambers.' The Doctor pointed at more figures stumbling from an alley. They mewled and chattered, the sound eerie in the dark.

'A Dreadnought infestation always follows the same path. Insinuation, conversion then conquest.' Casting a glance at the burning lighthouse, his agitation grew.

'We must find Silver and the others before we can affect my plan.' Hurrying through the night, they clattered down the steps and onto the sand.

Down on the beach, Striker paused over an open metal trunk. Despite the gloom, he could see darker patch where items had been removed.

'Resourceful beggar,' he said, smiling briefly before jogging away.

Half expecting something to uncoil from the sea, Striker kept a watchful eye on the water. He passed a burning piece of timber, the sticky phosphorus flickering along its length. Up ahead, the Doctor had paused by a large object jutting from the sand.

Racing to his side, Striker heard the Doctor say 'Perfect.'

Turning, the Doctor looked at Striker. He pointed to the object, a multifaceted section of metal shorn away from larger piece.

'This is essential for my plan to work, Colonel. We must take it back with us when we return. Now, where is that blessed girl?'

Striker saw several figures struggling in the surf. He raced passed the Doctor, who followed.

Taking Shelby from Silver, who was being helped ashore by Baxter, Striker waded back onto the sand, feeling the boy shivering in his arms. Gently setting him down for a moment, Striker removed his jacket and draped it around Shelby's thin shoulders.

'There lad,' he said, rubbing his arms vigorously. 'That should keep you warm until we get back to the village.' He looked around.

'Baxter,' he called. 'Are you all right?' Baxter had handed Silver over to the Doctor and he moved over to where Striker and Shelby were. Looking up, Striker was struck by the look of weariness etched into Baxter's face.

'What happened up there?' he said, nodding towards the remains of the lighthouse.

Despite his exhaustion, and the enervating cold, Baxter managed to sketch out a coherent explanation of the past hour. When he finished, he staggered a little, and Striker steadied him with one hand.

'Good work,' he said gruffly, nodding towards the lighthouse. Baxter managed a smile. It faded when he looked about.

'Colonel, where's Dunstan?' Baxter's quiet voice betrayed his suspicions.

Striker ran a hand through his hair. 'Didn't make it son. It wasn't...it wasn't pretty.' He patted Shelby on the shoulder.

'We have to concentrate on those who are still with us, Baxter, you know that?'

Baxter stood quietly for a moment, staring out at the water.

'Yes sir,' he sighed. 'Not much we can do about it, I suppose.'

'Nevertheless, there is much we can do here,' the Doctor said, moving up beside them. Silver stood next to him, beaming.

'And what can we do against that?' Striker asked heatedly, pointing in the direction of the trawler. 'We saw what happened to that planet, to those people. And it's happening here.'

Looking grave, the Doctor nodded.

'The situation is indeed perilous, Colonel, but not terminal. We have the tools around us to defeat this creature before it becomes impossible to do so. So, to that end.' He looked at Baxter.

'Private, is there a hardware store in the village? I need access to wire and lengths of steel.'

Glad of the distraction, Baxter thought for a moment.

'There'll be old man Curnow's store. You'll find it on the next street passed the high street. Jasper, I think. It's been years since I've been there.'

'Excellent.' The Doctor rubbed his hands in satisfaction. He pointed to a glittering object further up the beach.

'It's essential we move that remnant of the lighthouse's reflector up to the Three Regents. It will mean being exposed up there until Silver and I can return with the equipment I need from the hardware store. Can you manage that, Colonel?'

Colonel Striker stood straighter. 'Baxter and I can manage Doctor. Just you make sure that your plan works. I've no desire to throw anymore lives away, especially on a hare brained lash up dependent on bits of wire and metal.'

The Doctor's lips thinned into a tight smile.

'Trust me, Colonel. My lash up, as you so eloquently put it, will do the job well enough.'

They were startled by the sound of someone clapping slowly. They all spun around, and a figure resolved out of the darkness in front of them.

'Wells,' Silver spat, surprised by the loathing in her voice. Striker felt Shelby's grip on his leg grow painfully tight.

'Hello, little Rachel. Had anymore pleasant dreams?' Wells laughed, the sound echoing flatly across the sand.

'I don't believe we've been introduced,' the Doctor said mildly, holding out his hand.

Wells looked at it with all the pleasure of seeing a snake squirming in front of him.

'He calls himself the Vessel, Doctor.' Silver's voice was strained.

'Aah, the Dreadnought's mouthpiece. Someone who has sold his species out for a few extra days of existence. Pitiful and pitiable, I suppose,' the Doctor casually said, though his eyes watched keenly for a reaction.

Wells hands clenched into claws and he advanced forward a step before restraining himself. There was a sharp click and they saw Striker aiming his weapon at Wells.

'No,' shouted the Doctor, holding his hand up. At that moment, they all heard a series of splashes, and then the air began to keen with the whipping movement of tentacles around them. A black wall of writhing flesh formed behind Wells. His smile grew wider and his face took on a look of ecstasy as a tentacle draped itself around his shoulders and stroked his face.

'Whatever plans you have are as nothing compared to the power of the Weaver,' he crooned, his eyes rolling back into his head and his body shuddering. His voice then took on a flat, accent less aspect.

‘The folly of your efforts will soon be proven.’ Silver shivered. The cadence of the words were inhuman, the stress put on each word all wrong. ‘This planet and its creatures will be mine in a matter of days. We Dreadnought’s are an unstoppable force. Who are you to presume to stand in the way of inevitability?’

Ignoring the tentacles, the Doctor stepped towards Wells. Two large tentacles, tipped with wicked looking ivory coloured hooks, lifted menacingly above Wells.

‘Why the universe saw fit to spawn your kind is beyond me,’ he snapped, stabbing the air with a finger. ‘You are nothing but pathetic parasites battenning on the existence of every species you come across. Show me one thing that you have created that has inspired, that has uplifted, that has given meaning and hope to existence. *One. Thing.*’ He stopped, panting.

An inhuman chuckle rolled over them.

‘Existence, Doctor. That is all I require. And if that existence is purchased at the expense of any number of species, so be it.’

‘Purchased?’ The Doctor spat the word. ‘With the coin of billions of lives?’ He stopped, visibly controlling himself.

‘Go away,’ he said quietly. ‘Before you make me angry.’

‘Communion is so close now Doctor,’ the voice said, fading into Well’s deeper timbre. ‘Communion with all.’

Well’s staggered slightly as the Dreadnought left him. For a few precious seconds, the remnants of his humanity flickered in his eyes. A terrible, unreasoning panic rippled across his face and Silver felt a yawning pit of horror open within her. Then, control was resumed and whatever was left of Wells was abruptly swallowed up.

He smiled, waved a finger at them, then faded back into the darkness.

‘A neat trick,’ the Doctor mused, rubbing his chin. ‘No matter.’ He turned, and hefted up the remnants of the reflector.

‘Baxter, you look a strapping sort. I’ll rely on you to get this to the henge in one piece.’ He consulted his pocketwatch in the dim flickering light. ‘Silver and I will see you in an hour, which should be around sun up. Take Shelby with you and keep a good eye on him. I think he’ll be the key to this all, tonight.’

Bidding farewell, the group split, Shelby leading the soldiers through a gap in the bushes towards the village. Silver and the Doctor watched them go, letting the darkness settle over them for a few moments. Silver felt sound of the waves wash hypnotically over her, easing the tension she felt. She saw with a start that a hint of light was gleaming on the horizon.

‘Are you all right Silver?’ the Doctor asked.

‘I...I think so,’ she said, feeling a great sense of tiredness. ‘I had this awful dream but I can’t remember the details. I think Well’s was in it.’ Her voice trailed off in confusion.

Placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, the Doctor began leading her up the beach.

‘The Dreadnought weaves a world of dreams around those who fall into its clutches. A dream world so real, so terrifying, that few escape its clutches with their sanity intact. At the apex of its power, a Dreadnought is able to warp reality so completely that those caught within remained trapped forever.’

Shivering at the thought, Silver leaned against the Doctor. Surprised, he let her linger for a moment, then sought a distraction.

‘Ah, there she is,’ he said, bounding forward with Silver in his wake. The reassuring bulk of the TARDIS resolved into view.

Silver watched the Doctor pat the door affectionately, and she thought he drew strength and renewed confidence from it. He took out his key and opened the door. Before Silver could say anything, he ducked inside. The sudden silence and the distant crash of the waves made Silver very nervous.

Within moments, the Doctor had returned. He held a small metal cylinder with an attachment fixed to one end. Heavy gloves were stuffed into a pocket and a pair of dark glasses hung around his neck.

‘Still quiet out? Excellent. It must still be drawing its strength together. Right then, let’s be off. We’ll keep to the shadows while we find Curnow’s. I’m sure you’ve seen some of those poor unfortunates the Dreadnought has warped for its amusement.’ Silver grimaced, but doggedly walked on.

A few minutes later, they left the beach. The bell tolled at the far end, and they could see the trawler’s bulk shifting in the swell. Water lapped at the bottom of the steps.

‘The tide’s coming in, Doctor.’ Silver nodded at the water. On the horizon, the glow had brightened to the palest pink. ‘Not long before sunrise. I wonder what it will bring?’ she mused, her gaze locked on the trawler and the crawling darkness that surrounded it.

‘Better times,’ he reassured her. ‘But only if we hurry.’

Away from the beach, the streets lay in darkness. Shapes moved in the distance, but kept their distance. Turning from the beach road, they walked past several shops before the Doctor stopped in front of a small hardware store. Gently, the Doctor tried the door. It swung open with a creak at his touch.

Following, Silver whispered. ‘What are we looking for?’ The room felt close and stuffy, heavy with the smell of sawdust.

‘Wire,’ the Doctor whispered back, his eyes roaming the walls. ‘A spool of bailing wire as thick as a strand of spaghetti. And I want several lengths of steel, the thicker the better. Fence posts, preferably.’

There was a sudden clatter several shelves along and they both froze. Silver felt her pulse pounding and sweat beaded on her face. The Doctor knelt, dipping his head below the shelves as he searched for the source of the noise. He looked up and smiled.

‘Clichés are clichés precisely because they happen so often,’ he said, cryptically. Clicking his tongue, he called out gently. ‘Here kitty-kitty.’ A brindle cat, wild eyed and hungry looking, stalked carefully around the corner and towards the Doctor. It looked up at him warily, then relaxed when the Doctor fished a small treat from a pocket, sliding it towards the cat in one smooth movement.

Shaking her head while the Doctor fussed over the purring cat, Silver edged around the end of the shelving and into the next aisle. Glinting metal and she nodded in satisfaction.

‘Doctor.’ She kept her voice low. He rounded the shelf and joined her. Several bundles of black, three edged fencing posts sat against a wall.

‘Well done, Silver,’ he said eagerly, loosening the wire holding the nearest bundle together. Pulling several posts out, he quickly handed them to Silver before retying the bundle and gently leaning it back against the wall.

‘Now, about that wire.’ He stopped, his head tilting to one side. He put a finger to his lips, then tapped an ear, motioning towards the other side of the shelf.

Her skin crawling, Silver strained to hear. Nothing. Then, it dawned on her that the cat had gone quiet. There was a sudden heavy footfall, and she and the Doctor fled down the aisle as two shapes chased them.

Sliding around a corner, they found themselves in front of a set of double doors. The Doctor charged them, the doors crashing open. Following, Silver found herself in a large yard, open to the sky, filled with all sorts of shapes hidden in the gloom.

The Doctor was already several yards ahead of her. 'Over here,' he hissed, looking over his shoulder and pointing to a dark corner. Kneeling beside him, Silver found herself pressed up against several steel drums reeking of oil.

Looking between the drums, Silver saw two indistinct shapes fill the open doorway, their twisted forms jostling for space. She heard their squealing, a sickening chittering noise that reminded her of cicadas. Their heads swung towards them and Silver froze, feeling their eyes sweep over her. She tensed, ready to run, when she felt the Doctor grip her arm, squeezing it reassuringly. Reaching over, he grabbed a short length of steel half buried in the dirt. Without effort, he twisted it free and threw it towards the far corner.

The clatter was loud and the creatures raced towards it. The Doctor and Silver quickly re-entered the store.

'There,' he whispered, hurrying over to a display area. Piled up on a wooden pallet were bundled wire hoops. Quickly, the Doctor lifted one onto each shoulder, while Silver grabbed the fence posts. They hurried from the store with the frenzied cries of the creatures rooting through the junk yard echoing behind them.

Outside, Silver savoured the cool, salt laden air for a moment, free from the stores stuff confines. A loud scuffling noise from a nearby alley jolted her back to attention. Putting a finger to his lips, the Doctor pointed towards the top of the street. Careful to avoid making a noise, they padded away. At one point, at the far end of an alley, spot lit by the moon, Silver saw several of the creatures gathered around a crate, blankly staring at it. Unbidden, a memory rose and she shuddered at the horrible image in her mind. At an intersection, the Doctor turned right. They quickly emerged onto the high street, then turned and headed up the hill away from the beach.

At the top of the hill, Silver turned and surveyed the town below. Light crept along the horizon, and the harbour looked less dark and forbidding. Still, the air moaned with a chill wind, and the bell continued its maddening clang. She could see the trawler now, no longer a dark shape against the night. The decks crawled with tentacles, a writhing mass of darkness that looked like living oil.

When she turned to speak to the Doctor, she saw that stood next to a telephone pole. It was the last of a number that marched down the hill towards the beach. Years of exposure to the elements had polished the wooden post it to a dull gleam, visible through a patina of salt clinging to it. At the top, two wires were strung over either end of a cross bar. She could see that several more poles marched to the top of the next hill, while the telephone wires terminated at a pole, which stood at the landward end of the pier.

'Perfect,' the Doctor said, patting the pole and looking eagerly at Silver. Dropping one of the bundles, he quickly shinned up the pole with a speed that surprised Silver. At the top, he sat cross-legged on the bar.

Craning her neck, Silver saw him pull the cylinder out from his coat pocket, and loosen one end of the wire from the spool. There was a spark, and a tongue of blue flame hissed into life. Sweeping the goggles over his eyes, the Doctor set to work. After a few minutes, he doused the flame, and tested the weld with a tap of the cylinder. Apparently satisfied, Silver watched as he undid the rest of the ties securing the spool, then slid down the pole and rejoined her, the wire uncoiling with a low, twangy hum.

'Good quality stuff, this,' the Doctor commented absently. 'Strong, yet supple to avoid snagging along the way.' They started up the hill.

'What's the plan, then, Doctor?'

‘The core of this world rotates, generating a series of magnetic lines of force which radiate across the globe.’ He paused, ducking under a low hanging branch.

‘The energy pools in certain places, usually due to concentrations of particular minerals, or if there is an aquifer beneath, before running off again. Ancient cultures, say, the Egyptians with their pyramids, or the Easter Islanders with their giant stone heads, built those structures over the top of those power loci. The power manifests itself in different ways – sometimes as lights in the sky, or ghostly appearances that are tapping into the local inhabitant’s subconscious, that sort of thing.’ He ignored the start she gave when he mentioned ghosts.

‘There is a way of channelling and focusing the power so that it is magnified. It doesn’t take much for a harmless, natural phenomenon to become a very lethal, very dangerous force.’

Rounding a bend, Silver saw the top of one hill, shrouded in shadows. The Doctor pointed.

‘And the Celts, who dominated these isles for many centuries, erected numerous standing stones, like those up there...’

His voice trailed off when he heard a shot, shockingly loud in the chill gloom. The summit of the hill seethed with activity. Strange howls and chittering drifted to them on the breeze.

Silver turned to see the Doctor bounding away and she gave chase, following the wire as it trailed behind him in a glinting thread.

* * * * *

Just beneath the summit of the hill, Striker paused, turning his head to listen for something. Baxter halted, glad of the chance to rest his bruised body. He hefted the reflector, cursing it for the twentieth time. He caught Shelby’s pale face staring at him, and winked reassuringly at him. He looked over at Striker.

‘Anything sir?’ he whispered. He stared into the undergrowth. Was that movement?

Shaking his head, Striker moved. ‘Nothing, Private. Just the wind in the trees. How are you going with that reflector?’

‘No worries, sir,’ he said, straightening. ‘Not far now?’

‘Good man. The summit isn’t far, just over that rise. Come along Shelby.’ The boy trotted after them.

In a few minutes, they had reached the stones. With a grateful sigh, Baxter gently laid the reflector against the closest one, then stretched his back and groaned. Feeling his tense muscles ease, he joined Striker, who was holding Shelby in his arms.

‘How are you, laddie?’ Baxter asked, noting with concern the feverish glint in the boy’s eyes. Pressing a hand against his forehead, Baxter was dismayed to feel how hot Shelby was.

‘He’s burning up, Colonel.’

Looking down briefly, Striker nodded. ‘This has taken a toll on us all.’ He stopped.

‘Baxter, get Shelby safely stowed behind the farthest stone, will you?’ There was a crackling noise, then they saw a large number of figures swarming up the hill towards them, accompanied by a buzzing noise that filled the air.

Constrained by his order, Baxter unwillingly ventured into the shadows. He watched Striker unholster his pistol, then pointed it into the air. The figures surged, their horribly misshapen bodies limping and scuttling. Striker fired into the sky, the sharp crack rolling over them. The creatures stumbled to a halt, watching Striker warily as his arm

came down and trained the weapon on the lead members. Despite the threat, they started to edge closer.

One leapt from the head of the pack and Striker fired again, clipping it high on one arm. It spun in the air, a misshapen hand clawing at the wound. Falling to the ground, it screeched in agony as its companions trampled it. Striker fell back, looking about frantically for cover. With a start, Baxter felt Shelby slip fluidly from his arms and watched in amazement as the boy walked passed Striker to stand alone as the pack swept onto the summit.

Halting once more, the group of creatures split into two groups, slowly approaching Shelby from both sides. His hands rested by his legs, fists clenched. Baxter could see the tension in the boy's back. With a start, he felt the stone he was leaning against shift, then a tremor ran through it. He leapt back when it grew hot, steam rising off it. Moving away, Baxter saw the two other stones steaming. Baxter looked in amazement at Striker, then they both turned to Shelby.

The pack had halted, then it divided completely in two. Each group collapsed to their knees, and a keening noise rose from them as they clutched their heads and swayed from side to side. Looking over them, Baxter saw with a start that there was some sort of commotion coming from the harbour. In the dull light, he could see the trawler listing badly to one side.

'Baxter!' Looking towards the Colonel, Baxter followed his arm and saw Silver and the Doctor hastening towards them through the gap Shelby had created. The Doctor was trailing what looked to be a wire, of all things. Reaching the summit, the Doctor passed by Shelby, while Silver stopped and stood next to the boy, looking back in awe at the humbled creatures.

'Glad you could make it,' Striker remarked dryly. 'It was a bit tense.'

'Glad to see you too, Colonel,' the Doctor said, gasping. After a few seconds, he had regained his breath and set to work on the reflector.

'I see young Shelby has finally tapped into his powers,' the Doctor commented, busily wrapping the reflector to the standing stone with the wire. 'No doubt the stress of events coupled with proximity to these stones.' Striker looked at him quizzically and the Doctor shook his head.

'Honestly, how humanity ever had the wit to climb down from the trees is beyond me. The boy's a psychic, Colonel. The latent energies underneath the standing stones have effected generations of people living in this area. Often it shows in low-level psychic activity: déjà vu, precognitive dreams, even a little healing ability. Shelby is by far the strongest I've seen for many a year, but even he needs to tap into the power here to realise his full potential.' He looked at the boy.

'My little lash up here goes some of the way to focussing the energy resident here, but Shelby is the key to magnifying it to the level required. Otherwise, it is too diffuse to use effectively. He won't remember any of this, and chances are the experience will burn the ability from him. It's probably for the best. The older you are with it that strong, the worse the side effects. Now, I'm sure you're wanting to hear my amazing plan...'

An enormous explosion rocked the village below. The end of the pier disappeared in a fountain of water which gouted hundreds of feet into the air. Chunks of metal and stone rained down on the village, punching holes into roofs and shattering windows for hundreds of metres. Into the stunned silence that followed, a horrible keening noise grew up, and the kneeling creatures stood as one. Shelby had been knocked to the ground, and Silver held him in her arms, tears streaking her face.

‘He’s not breathing, Doctor,’ she screamed. A trumpeting bellow filled the air as the Doctor raced to the boy’s side. Baxter, caught up in the noise of the explosion, suddenly felt the ground shift beneath him. Cast to the ground, he watched helplessly as the creatures swarmed over them in a frenzy.

For a moment, Baxter thought he was about to be overwhelmed, then when he wasn’t, saw with astonishment that the creatures were running backwards and forth, cannoning off each other, hands waving in the air, their mouths opened in silent screams. Had they gone mad, he wondered.

The Doctor probed Shelby’s chest, and felt nothing. His face twisted in fury, he pounded a fist against the boy’s chest, then listened. Again, another punch. Silver feared that he would break the boy’s ribs.

‘No,’ shouted the Doctor in anger. He looked to the harbour, and the creature that was slowly rising from the water. ‘You will not have this one, not him.’ He struck Shelby again and the boy shuddered convulsively, his lips peeling back to reveal clenched teeth. With a great heave, he sucked air into his lungs, then his eyes opened.

Silver was struck by the intensity of the gaze; each pupil expanding until the iris had been swallowed.

‘Give him to me,’ the Doctor said, taking Shelby from Silver. She watched as he dodged through the melee, reaching the reflector and resting Shelby against it.

For a few moments, the Doctor looked on anxiously. Then they all felt the air begin to hum and go cold. The temperature plummeted, and a sheen of ice rapidly formed over the standing stones. As one, the creatures fell to the ground, curling into balls. A new carapace swarmed over their silent bodies, until their twisted features were obscured.

Down at the harbour, the circle of birds had vanished, swallowed up by the monstrous form rising into the air. Water spouted off it in white plumes and a forest of tentacles waved frenziedly about. Invisible to those on the hill, a figure danced beneath the Dreadnought on the remains of the pier, his face exultant, his mind completely enslaved to the Weaver. At that moment, the creature’s single, massive eye opened, and the world plunged into darkness.

On the hill, a bubble of light surrounded them, with Shelby at its centre. The Doctor shook his head, his mouth working anxiously.

‘Come on, my boy,’ he urged. ‘You can do it. Just a little bit more effort.’

Deep within his trance, Shelby heard the Doctor’s distant words. Latching onto them, he reached out with his senses, seeking the heart of the power buried deep within the hill. When he found it, its might almost overwhelmed him. Struggling, Shelby mastered it with an effort, and when he did, something wild and exultant blossomed within him.

‘There,’ shouted the Doctor. The reflector blazed with energy and a silver light spilled from it, an argent thread racing down the wire to the first of the telephone poles. They too blazed into life, and the energy streamed towards the harbour. They saw the light leap from the last pole, just as a thrashing tentacle smashed it to the ground.

For a moment, they all held their breaths. Then, a massive corona of light blazed around the Dreadnought. It bellowed in agony, a long, shuddering noise that crashed over them like an avalanche. They saw its tentacles lash about in a maddened frenzy and its eye began to smoke. It shuddered, then staggered, sending wave after wave surging over the foreshore. Crouched in its shadow, Wells had time to give one pitiful shriek before a burning tentacle smashed him from existence.

The hill bucked and trembled as Shelby drew on more power. The Doctor helped Silver to her feet, and he pointed to the harbour again, cackling madly with delight.

The Dreadnought stood silently, its tentacles still, the corona of light rapidly eating into its form. A spire of light punched from it into the sky, and the creature began to waver. The rising sun broke free of the horizon and its light swamped the creature until it dwindled away into nothing more than a stain against the golden glare.

Then it was gone.

On the hilltop, there was a stunned silence. Baxter wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, while Silver turned to the Doctor and hugged him fiercely, tears in her eyes. At the moment when the light overwhelmed the Dreadnought, she had felt a great weight lift from her, and exulted in the freedom. Nodding his head with quiet satisfaction, the Doctor prised himself free of Silver's grip, and turned to Striker.

'Not bad for a lash up, eh, Colonel?' Striker smiled ruefully in reply.

'Not bad all, Doctor. Not bad at all.'

'Shelby!' Silver ran over to where the boy was slumped against the menhir. His head lolled to one side and he sat amidst bits of crumbling wire and reflector. Shaking him, Silver was relieved to see his eyes flutter open. They were clear and blue. His face broke into a smile.

'Hello Silver,' he said, yawning mightily and stretching his arms as only children can do. He stopped and pointed passed her shoulder.

All around, the bodies of the mutated people shuddered within their shells. There was a cracking noise and the shells began to split and dissolve. From the remains of each emerged a confused person, features and limbs normal, looking as lost and disoriented as newborns. After a few moments of confusion, they began talking excitedly to one another. One of them, an old woman with wispy grey hair, walked over to them, waving her arms.

'Shelby! Oh, my poor Shelby.' She swept him up from Silver's arms and took him in a fierce hug, tears streaming down her face. Shelby smiled down at Silver while he patted the woman's shoulder awkwardly.

'Hello gran,' he said. 'I forgot to get the eggs and bacon.'

She looked him square in the face and burst out with laughter, picking him up and swinging him around until he laughed with delight.

Silver felt a tugging on her elbow.

'We should be away, Silver. Best let everyone come to terms with what happened on their own.' Silver began to protest, before nodding in agreement. They wandered over to where Baxter and Striker stood, a little lost.

'Well gentlemen, we'll be off.' Squinting, the Doctor surveyed the scene before them, as the sun broke free of the horizon.

'A good night's work, I think.'

'These people will be all right, then?' Striker asked.

'Oh yes. Nothing more than a few bad dreams and lingering memories, which will eventually fade. We were just in time to avoid a catastrophe, no small thanks to you and Private Baxter.' Baxter beamed when the Doctor took his shook his hand, then reddened when Silver reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Taking their leave, the Doctor and Silver began walking down the hill, nodding and smiling to the people scattered around them.

'Another job well done, then Doctor?' Despite her exhaustion, Silver's smile was infectious.

'Most satisfying, Silver, most satisfying indeed. Even better for being such a close run thing.' He pointed to the shattered remains of the pier, and the flock of birds that feasted on the surface of the water.

They walked on in silence, contemplating the harbour choked with upturned boats, netting and broken wood. Turning down the steps and onto the beach, they headed for the TARDIS.

‘So, no chance of a miraculous resurrection? The Dreadnought is gone for good?’ It wasn’t until they reached the TARDIS that the Doctor answered.

‘This one is,’ the Doctor said at last. His eyes narrowed against the glare of the light sparkling off the water like silver pennies. ‘Some battles are won.’ He nodded to the water, then inserted his key into the lock. Standing in the shadow of the doorway, the Doctor glanced at the sky.

‘But others are lost.’ He was lost in thought for a moment, his features sharp and intense. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he ushered Silver inside.

‘Now, about that holiday on Phobos...’

On the water, the gulls were distracted from their feast when the TARDIS groaned into life. When the last of the time engine’s echoes faded away, their cries began again, spiralling into the bright morning sky.

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT



For millennia,
the name Dreadnought struck fear across the galaxy.

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