Short Stories
nLouise Sellers

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Chapter 1

Nightmare of Bethlehem

A Doctor Who Short Story

The mourners stood around the grave. The day was grey and drizzling. There was a damp haze in the autumn air insufficient to penetrate the thick wool stuff of the mourners coats but misting their faces. Their faces were all solemn; “but they will all sleep sound tonight, nevertheless” thought one gravedigger. He was too old and cynical to be much impressed by the relatives; a man and woman standing together a discreet distance from the vicar. Opposite the couple stood a third man. He was wearing somber brown with a black armband and his hands kept moving, clasped together within his black leather gloves, writhing over and over each other.

“I am the resurrection and the life, sayeth the Lord, and he that believeth in me though he be dead yet shall he live and he that liveth and believeth will never die”.

The mourners left the graveside after the vicar had ended the ceremony. The words seemed to hang on the air in the silence that followed. But as their feet reached the path, they broke into low conversation that reached the two gravediggers waiting respectfully on the sidelines.

“My thanks for agreeing to officiate,” the woman was saying to the vicar, “in such difficult circumstances.”

“By which she means the girl shouldn’t have been buried on sanctified grounds at all,” muttered the second gravedigger who was younger and more garrulous than his companion, “still I expect you’re used enough to this up at Parris House, eh, Frank?”

Frank grunted non-commitally into his whiskers and hefted his spade. His companion fell silent. Frank had worked at Parris House for nigh on three decades

and he was known to be protective of the place. The younger gravedigger wondered whether he had gone too far.

"Still, there's no proof, I suppose," he said by way of a peace offering. "She might just have tripped. You can get a nasty fall from stairs."

"It was a tragic accident." The lone man had remained behind the departing vicar. "You two have work to do. I suggest you do it rather than engaging in idle gossip."

Frank touched his cap and scowled at his companion. Wordlessly they began filling in the grave. The lone man strode off in the opposite direction to the mourners, to the large 17th century manor house behind which the small chapel and graveyard were situated.

The elder gravedigger sent the young man away once they had finished. He remained in the graveyard, tidying up around the headstones and locking the heavy wooden gates so that no one could get in or out that way. He became aware of footsteps echoing on the pathway that lead down from the Parris House. He turned to look but the fog had rolled down obscuring its facade and he couldn't see who approached. He suppressed a feeling of dread that was only natural with the lowering skies. He tried not to think of the whispers among the guests at Parris House that Abigail Barnett had been chased to her death by a terrifying stranger who lurked in the empty rooms of its unused wing.

To be on the safe side however, he returned to his tools and lifted his spade. The footsteps continued to come closer at a measured slow pace and a form gradually resolved itself in the mist. Its looming shapelessness made Frank take a step back until he realised it was a man in an inverness coat without a hat. The coat's short cape had concealed the outline of his arms giving him more the appearance of a shambling mound than man. The mists parted to reveal his features; brown hair, beard and mustache. He walked purposefully down the pathway.

"Hello, sir," said Frank. He'd not seen this man before, but his coat was well-made and he didn't have the look of a servant.

"Good day, I wondered if you could be so good as to let me out."

"I'm sorry sir, you'll have to get Dr. Gordon to do that." Frank might not have recognised the man, but he had worked too long at Parris House to let people out. The doctors could do that if he was a visitor, not a guest.

"Don't be an idiot man! I'm in a hurry. Open the gates!"

"I'm sorry sir, I can't do that." Frank eyed the man and, though he was not aware of the movement, he hefted the spade and braced himself as if to meet an onslaught.

The man walked to the graveside looking down at the newly laid earth. "There is evil afoot up there," he said not looking at Frank. "This was only the first death." Now he looked at him, his eyes angry. "I will not forget that you refused to let me out." Then he turned and the mist swallowed him up once more.

Part I

Laura Croy sat with her sister in the bay window of the visitors' parlour. A pale autumn sunshine fell through the window and sparkled on the silverware before them. The staff had brought them tea. A teapot sat between them and small cakes were arranged on a decorative plate. The plate was chipped Laura noticed. Nothing in this place was ever quite right.

"Why don't you serve the tea?" she prompted gently. Kate had been sitting placidly opposite her for a while now, as the tea had first brewed and now probably stewed between them.

"You think I should?" asked Kate nervously.

"You are the hostess and I'm the guest."

A look of mild panic crossed Kate's face. But she stood up and hovered uncertainly over the silver teapot and the china mugs. Her hands stopping first over the small milk jug, and then the sugar bowl and then the teapot.

"I'd like some milk in mine, please," said Laura hoping to help her out.

Kate picked up the milk jug and with shaking hands poured a splash of milk into each teacup then filled them with tea. With a look of relief she sat down again.

Laura picked up her teacup. "This is a much more civilised place to meet than the old room," she observed. "I think the new owners have some very sensible ideas. It is much better to have as normal a life as possible, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is much better," said Kate.

"I hear they have new treatment methods," said Laura, probing for a real opinion.

Kate smiled suddenly, "Yes it is much better. They don't lock us up so much," she paused and her face fell, "but I have bad dreams," she whispered.

Laura and Kate went for a walk round the gardens. Laura rather valued the opportunity. Under the old administration she had always had to meet Kate in a small, enclosed, wood-paneled room. A stocky, grumpy looking nurse had sat stoically and disinterestedly in a hard upright chair by the door. Laura had never understood the need for that. Kate might have been of a highly nervous disposition, too swayed by her emotions and not enough by her sense nor her morals, but she was hardly a *physical* threat to anyone - let alone her own sister.

"Oh look! There's Mr. Hardcourt!" said Kate, her face lighting with genuine interest for the first time. She let go of Laura's arm and ran across the lawn, the train of her cream day dress rustling over the grass behind here. She stopped before an ancient gardener who was weeding among the flower bed. Laura frowned in disapproval. It was hardly the way to greet a servant. She followed at a more dignified pace.

The gardener waited for her to arrive, his cap in his hands. Laura could see that Kate was talking to him excitedly and that he was replying to her in a quiet tone. As Laura came up he fell silent. Kate looked at her and then at the gardener again. He must have been in his fifties, his face tanned by wind, rain and sun. He had short, curly white hair. A wide mustache and side burns framed his face. He was not especially large but Laura guessed that he was surprisingly strong. His arms had a muscled look beneath his shirt-sleeves and the garden grime. An awkward silence fell while Laura and the gardener both looked expectantly at Kate.

"Perhaps you could introduce me?" asked Laura.

"Oh," said Kate, "Laura, this is Mr. Hardcourt. Mr. Hardcourt, this is Laura."

Mr. Hardcourt nodded his head at her. "Mrs. Croy?" he asked, uncertain.

"That's right," said Laura.

"Miss Young has been so good as to take an interest in the garden," he said. "I was just explaining how I'm hoping to plant a hedge along this drive here."

The path swept up through formal gardens, from the wrought iron gates of Parris House to the imposing facade of columns and stone swagged windows built by some restoration noble.

"I think it's such a shame," said Kate. "I like to be able to see all across the gardens."

The gardener grunted, "That's all very well, Miss, but anyone in the gardens can be seen from the gate." He glanced at Laura. "The local children will come and shout things," he said. "It weren't a problem when no one came out into the gardens much, but now they do..."

Laura nodded in understanding, “It sounds like a sensible idea. Was it Dr. Gordon’s?”

The gardener looked embarrassed, “No Ma’am, I don’t think he has much interest in the gardens except insofar as the guests like them. But he has given me permission to maintain them as I see fit.”

“I’m sure he has chosen wisely.” Laura looked at this gardener and ventured a probing question. “It seems much better; the new administration of Dr. Gordon’s.”

The gardener scratched his head. “Yes Ma’am,” he said after a moments hesitation. The unspoken “but...” floated in the air between them. To press him further would have been well beyond the bounds of propriety and, with Kate there, it was possible it would be repeated to someone inappropriate.

She thought a moment and then hazarded, “I hope the change has not unsettled the guests too much.”

“They have been,” he hesitated, “more troubled of late but I am sure they will settle down.” He paused and scratched his cheek, a habitual gesture, she guessed. Then he seemed to shrug mentally and heaved his spade. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” It was clear he would say no more.

He had been running for some time now. At some point, he knew, he had been aware of where it was he was heading. But somewhere along the way he had lost his bearings. Now he passed trees and bushes and hedges as they loomed up out of the fog with the vague feeling that he knew them and should be able to work out the way but all the time the terror was at his heels. It hounded him through the avenues, breathing on his neck, pounding along behind him and he never had the opportunity to stop and think or to stop and plan. If for a minute or two he could lose it and gain a moment of equilibrium then he would be able to get out of here. On he ran. This one is beginning to rationalise. Rationalise, yes, he needed to rationalise. His heart was pounding, safety was so close but he had lost his way. He turned through an archway and ducked under the branches of a weeping willow and nearly fell into the stream. The stream! he was on the wrong side of the stream, how had he ended up on the wrong side of the stream? He was going to have to go all the way back. He kept running. There was a second archway ahead. If he went through that then the terror would follow him but he could backtrack. He ducked through the archway. He didn’t recognise this avenue but he’d been sure it led back the way he had come. No time to stop and think. He pounded

on. He heard the snuffling baying sound of terror approaching the archway. Don't think, just run. No, no, think. If he didn't think he would never get out of here. Think. He kept running. Think. The hedge, could he hide in the hedge? Get a moment to think. He leapt for the hedge and to his surprise scrambled over it. Keep running. The terror would be over the hedge too in a minute. No stop. The idea was to stop. The terror hadn't turned into the last avenue yet. It would lose him. He must think. I think its working! I think he's gaining control. Wait that wasn't his thought. He stopped, panting. The panic still rose in his throat, urged him on, but there was someone else in his head, someone was watching this. Slow breathing, close them out, shut down a few neural pathways, so, slow breathing, slow breathing.

Kate was sitting in the main parlour reading one of the romances Laura had left behind her. She didn't much mind living in Parris house. She'd been there since she was about fifteen when something bad had happened and it had been easiest to hide from the world. Sometimes she wondered what it was like out in the world, away from the regular hours and locked doors, but by and large she had no real desire to find out. It sounded like a frighteningly complex place full of money problems and strange rituals with which you had to conform and endless decisions that had to be taken. In Parris House you never had to make a decision. You were told when to eat and when to sleep and when to sit quietly in the parlour with a book. Though of late, she had sensed that there was something or someone in the corridors. Some of the other residents had whispered to her of a man who stalked at night and who had chased Abigail to her death. Dr. Gordon had assured her this was not the case but she shuddered and crossed herself as she had seen Daniela Guinchiglia do.

There was a sound of shouting in the hallway. Kate looked up. It was unmistakably the sound of Mr. Jones' voice. Mr. Jones shouted a lot. The door burst open and in he came followed by one of the new doctors; a small nervous man called Dr. Smith who always looked vaguely as if he was being chased by something.

"Kate!" shouted Mr. Jones. Kate spent much of her time trying to get nice men, like Frank Hardcourt, to call her by her Christian name whereas Mr. Jones had never even asked for permission. He always called her 'Kate' and she found she resented the familiarity. She put down her book.

"Do you know what this is?" he shoved a small crystal under her nose.

"Some sort of crystal? I'm afraid I know nothing of geology, Mr. Jones," she shrugged, trying to show she wasn't interested in his crystal.

"Doctor," he corrected. He was always insisting he was a Doctor of something. Today, it seemed, he was a doctor of geology.

"Yes Doctor," she said meekly, Dr. Smith had advised her to humour him. He was suffering a mania, said Dr. Smith, and the important thing was to try and keep him calm.

He looked at her intently, his eyes wide and goggling. She always felt discomfited by that stare. It was if some part of him thought that he was the sort of person that stared wildly at people and yet, in his quieter moments, he had a sort of withdrawn thoughtfulness that suited his face much better. "It's a memory crystal," he said.

"Oh."

He stood up, suddenly withdrawing into himself once more, the heavy eyelids lowering. "You don't know what a memory crystal is, do you?" he asked. Mutely she shook her head. At moments like these when he suddenly became the still point in the midst of all the action, he was transformed. A sense of real power emanated from him and she trembled.

"Mr. Jones," said Dr. Smith, "it is just a small ornament, nothing more."

Mr. Jones closed his eyes. He was an ugly man. His nose was big and shapeless. Kate had sometimes wondered whether it had been broken at some point in the past, though the crook was not so pronounced that she could be sure. He had close cropped brown hair, beard, mustache and side-burns, although he had been clean-shaven when he first arrived. He had been semi-conscious and ill for most of his first few weeks there. The barber they had sent for, once he recovered, had insisted on the facial hair, saying it suited him. Kate thought it did. When he was quiet it gave him the air of an elder statesmen and she didn't think she could have refused anything he ordered her to do in his low, quiet, serious voice. She shivered and shrank back at the memory. He opened his eyes and looked at her again.

"I'm sorry," he said as if he had read her memories better than she herself. He turned slowly to regard Dr. Smith. "I thought so," he said slowly, standing so still he might have been frozen. He still held the crystal in one hand. "Not even human, some sort of avian life-form."

"You have had a bad dream, Mr. Jones," said Dr. Smith. "Here, give me the crystal and let us go back to your room."

He advanced slowly towards Mr. Jones his eyes darting about in an even more panic stricken fashion than normal. One had convulsively grasping for the crystal.

Mr. Jones stood stock still. Then he looked straight at Kate. "You are all in terrible danger. Warn the other patients." He said it with such terrible calm that Kate couldn't even protest at the use of the word "patient" to refer to the guests. She just stared at him, a feeling of terror remembered from some nightmare making her heart beat faster. Then, suddenly, he leapt for her his hands reaching forward as if grasping for her throat.

Part II

The leap took him right past her, through the bay windows and out into the garden. Kate screamed in fright, the terror was at her heels. She began to scramble out of the window after him. As long as she didn't stop it wouldn't catch up with her. Hands grasped at her skirts and she found herself pulled back, still screaming.

"It's alright, you're awake now," Dr. Smith was shouting. "This isn't your dream."

The terror was at his heels again but now it had shape and substance. Its wings flapped the air like a breeze around him. Its terrible claws reached for his back. Huge talons stretched out to shred his coat. The great beak opened wide to peck at his eyes. He bellowed in terror and ran on towards safety. He was not lost now although he didn't know where he was he knew where he was heading. He felt his destination calling him like a beacon and he ran on.

Strong arms grabbed him and hurled him to the ground.

"Now where do you think you're going?" said a voice.

He found himself grabbing at a shirt front made of some rough material and staring into hard flinty eyes; a tanned and weathered face with a mouth set into a grim and stubborn line. It was the gardener who had foiled his last attempt at escape. The terror was still at his heels. He raised his arms in a motion that felt both strange and familiar.

"Hai-ya!" he called making a chopping motion. A strong hand grabbed his wrist, muscle intercepting muscle. Ah, now the trick was to use the man's strength against him, somehow. Strong arms grabbed him round the chest and began to haul him back towards the terror.

"No!" he cried. "Not that way. It's coming after me I must get back to, back to.." he paused.

"You're not going anywhere," said the man, still dragging him back towards the house. He blinked and stared, looking for the creature that had pursued him.

"I was being chased," he said, "by a large bird, a..." a memory struck him, "I do believe it was a Cartorian. Odd that, they are usually a remarkably peaceful species."

"Well maybe you only imagined it," said the man.

"They come from the planet Cartor, you know," he continued. "It's very odd to find them so far from home. Space travel disorients them. Their brains are very closely attuned to the magnetic field of the planet. Only a few have ever successfully survived off it. That would explain things. It must have been driven mad by the different magnetic field here. You do realise it's almost certainly psychotic, don't you."

"Whatever you say, sir." The man continued to drag him back to the house. Once again he struggled in the vice-like grip.

"It's driving us mad, you know; the patients. It's giving us dreams. You realise that! Dreams related to its own terror and disorientation." There was a slight break in the man's stride. "Dr. Smith is driving us all mad. Even I am beginning to break under the strain. You can't take me back there. I have to get away!" The stride fell back into its old beat.

"Right you are, sir."

"I have to get to the TARDIS. That's it! the TARDIS. You must understand. She'll calm me. We're linked, mentally. She'll calm me and then I'll be able to think and if I can think clearly then, then I'll know what to do. Because I always, do you see. It's my forte, you might say, knowing what to do. I have to get to the TARDIS. She looks like a police box. No, that's no good. I don't suppose you've ever seen a police box." He paused panting while he was dragged on, then he resumed. "She's blue, about 2 yards high and maybe a yard wide. I have to get there. She's that way," he gestured wildly in the direction of the beacon that was calling him. "If you won't let me go, at least find my TARDIS. I beg of you."

The man shoved him through the door of the house, where Dr. Smith came to meet them. More hands, belonging to orderlies seized him. "Fetch my TARDIS. I need my TARDIS," he shouted as he was dragged away.

Frank Hardcourt watched the rambling man being taken in. He'd seen him around Parris House a few times recently and thought him to be an new guest. But he was so unlike the rest of the guests that Hardcourt found it hard to account for him. Parris House was not really a Bedlam. The patients were always kept under control but none of them were violent. Those prone to escape attempts were all elderly and easily restrained. Parris House had always been a middle class answer to bedlam, somewhere where the odd but not obviously insane could be sent to keep them out of harm's way.

He was still standing in the entrance hall contemplating this when Dr. Gordon came to see him. Dr. Gordon was the new head doctor at Parris House. Like all the new doctors he seemed to be a bit twitchy but Frank had heard that they had all come from a German hospital abroad where the patients were violent so he attributed much of their nervousness to that. They'd settle down when they realised that at Parris House no one was likely to attack them.

"Thank you for detaining our escapee," he said.

"No problem sir. But if he's going to continue like that you'll have to keep a closer watch on him. He looks strong enough to climb the main gate even with the spikes atop of it, if he ever got that far."

"Indeed, the matter will be seen to. Dr. Smith, from whom he escaped, tells me that he took with him a small crystal belonging to Smith's mother. I don't suppose you saw it, did you? Dr. Smith is quite upset. It had sentimental value for him."

Frank frowned. He'd seen nothing. "Sorry sir. If he doesn't have it now he must have dropped it in the garden somewhere. I'll have a look."

"Thank you."

Frank hesitated in the hallway, a thought occurring to him.

"Yes?" asked Dr. Gordon nervously.

"Well sir, he was asking about some sort of box. He called it a TARDIS and said it was over Southwark way. He seemed to think it would help him calm down. It sounded pretty big. I wondered if I should take a look sir. Just in case there is something there? If you think it would help?"

Dr. Gordon wrung his hands and nodded his head. "Find it, if it exists," he said. "Something that calms him could be of great use. Yes, indeed."

Frank left, but when he glanced back as he walked down the path, he saw Dr. Gordon still standing in the doorway, wringing his hands and looking after Frank with a plaintive expression.

It was several days before Hardcourt took an afternoon off to seek out Mr. Jones' box. He found it about three streets away, tucked into a side alley, the persistent smoggy mist curling around it in drifts. It was roughly the dimensions Mr. Jones had stated and Frank had never seen anything like it. After walking around it twice in amazement he took himself into the nearby pub and bought a drink.

"That blue box out there?" he asked the landlord.

"Oh aye," he replied. A slow smile appeared on his face. Frank knew there was a story to be told here but that the landlord was waiting to be prompted.

"Been there long?"

"To tell you the truth no. It's been there about two weeks," said the landlord. "Why do you ask?"

"I work up at Parris House. One of our inmates claims to own something like it."

"That'll be the man we found near it," said the landlord with some satisfaction. "It was the middle of the night and Clara and I were asleep upstairs when we heard this dreadful noise. I've never heard anything like it in all my born days and I hope never to hear its like again. Clara grabbed a hold of me. 'Matthew' she says, 'the Devil has come for us!'. Clara had been worrying about the devil. We maybe don't go to Church as often as we should. I'm not saying as that's a good thing but I'm a busy man. The Lord may have said Sunday was a day of rest but it's a luxury I can't afford with a family to raise and all," He paused watching for Frank's reaction.

In normal circumstances Frank, who took churchgoing seriously, would have had an argument with him at that point. But he wanted to hear the story of the box so a deep streak of pragmatism kept him quiet and he merely shrugged and nodded.

"Well, as I said, Clara had been worrying about the Devil because the vicar had been round that evening, having a drink and dropping a few hints about seeing us in Church that Sunday coming. Which, I tell you, after the fright we had we attended and I feel the better for it, knowing I've done my dues by God and that he'll be watching over us while that devil box is here. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, so we was woken up by this terrible noise and Clara was on her knees praying convinced that the Day of Judgment was upon us but I thought I should check and see in case someone was doing some mischief downstairs, trying to get into the beer cellar or some such. So I slipped downstairs, quietly as I could, and I grabbed this here club I keep behind the bar in case of trouble."

He showed Frank a large hefty club which he hoisted out from below the bar on which he was leaning. He placed it between them on the bar like an item of evidence in a court hearing.

"Well, there was no one down here or in the cellar, but I could hear a voice outside. Just the one, talking to itself, though I couldn't hear the words. And then, suddenly, I heard a scream, a grown man scream I tell you, and it sent shivers down my spine I don't mind admitting. It was outside the main door there," he pointed at the door Frank had entered by, "but I couldn't hear any other sound, so after a moment I decided I should check outside just in case someone was in trouble."

He picked up the club, swinging it over one shoulder and glancing from side to side to demonstrate how he went outside. "Well," he said, "it was a foggy night and at first I couldn't see anyone but then I heard this voice talking and I looked down to find this man lying on the ground." He swung the club down and leant on it to illustrate his sense of anti-climax.

"He were an odd one though. He had rolling eyes and was babbling all sorts of nonsense. His sentences made sense, if you follow my meaning, but none of the words did. But it seemed he felt there was some urgency; that someone or something were threatening an invasion and we had to stop it. But we couldn't get any more sense out of him than that. I say we because by that time some of the neighbours had come out as well and we'd brought him in here and given him a brandy," the landlord looked slightly aggrieved, "on the house," he added with emphasis. "He looked like a gentleman, you see. He was nicely dressed and sometimes he'd give out these orders and you know, if I'd known what they'd meant, I'd have jumped to quick as quick. He had that sort of air about him. It was odd and no mistake. And sometimes, when he wasn't giving orders, he'd look you in the eye and make some suggestion. You'd feel like he was taking you in a confidence and that it was a clever and sensible suggestion, except that it was nonsense of course."

The landlord shook his head, "Well in the end we gave him a dose of laudanum and hoped he'd be better in the morning. But he wasn't much better to tell the truth and he'd begun running a fever. He said he was a doctor but that was the most we could get out of him, so in the end we took him up to Parris House, reckoned your lot would know what to do with him," the landlord sighed. "So, that's the story here. What's been happening up your end?"

Frank was not by nature a story teller but he knew the landlord was expecting an addition to the story, which he could tell to his customers. Frank outlined briefly the story of Mr. Jones', or maybe it should have been Dr. Jones', escape.

"So, he's a Jones, is he?" asked the landlord.

"Reckon he must be," said Frank. "Though I suppose they might just have given him that name, if he still couldn't remember his own. They couldn't just call him Doctor, could they?"

The landlord thought for a minute over his beer, "I don't know. He had an air you know, and 'the mysterious Doctor' sums it up more than just 'Dr. Jones', don't you think."

Frank thought it was nonsense but didn't say so. He let the landlord have the story his way. "Anyway I'm here to collect the Doctor's box," he said.

"And heartily glad I am to see such an unnatural thing go," responded the landlord somewhat wistfully. Frank suspected he'd rather enjoyed the notoriety and extra custom it had caused.

"I'll send a cart down from Parris House to collect it," said Frank.

He left some more money as a tip and headed back. He hoped that returning the box would make the Doctor calmer but privately he had his doubts. It was only then he realised that he was now thinking of Mr. Jones as the Doctor. Frank shook his head. He wasn't about to agree with some of the landlord's more fanciful notions but the name did have a certain rightness about it that he couldn't shake off.

Miss Young was waiting for him by the gate when he returned. She looked pale and there were bags under her eyes.

"Hello, Miss. Young," he said as he locked the gate behind him. He took off his hat.

"Where have you been?" she asked curiously.

"Went to find a box for the, for that Mr. Jones. Seems he lost it. I'm going to arrange for a cart to bring it up here for him." They walked up towards the house. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"My dreams are worsening," she admitted looking down. "I don't know why, but my nights are filled with terror. I feel as though I'm being chased by something terrible and although I know the way to safety, somehow I have become lost," she shuddered in the sunlight.

"Have you told the doctors about this?" asked Frank.

She glanced nervously behind her and Frank saw Dr. Harding, sitting on one of the ornamental benches. He was staring directly at Miss Young, his hand resting

on his knees, clenching and unclenching in time to the swinging of his legs.

"He's been following me," whispered Miss Young. "I found him outside my room this morning, sitting in the chair across the hall, watching."

"I'll walk you back up to the house," said Frank.

They walked side by side up the drive, Frank keeping between Miss Young and Dr. Harding. But as they passed him he stood up. He took one step towards them planting a hand squarely in Frank's chest pushing him back. Frank gasped, winded. Confused, he looked up and saw a huge bird staring down at him, then it was gone and Dr. Harding was holding Miss Young. He had his head pressed up against hers and was grasping her round the chest and waist. Miss Young had frozen rigid, her eyes glazed, too scared even to scream. Frank scrambled forward to meet an arm in a second swipe. The hand was extended this time and Frank felt a raking pain in his chest. He fell backwards blood oozing out of five gashes.

Frank saw a blur of movement. Someone threw something that looked like a small weighted net over Dr. Harding. He screeched, letting go of Kate and scrabbling at the thing over his head. Then he turned and began blindly running across the lawn, batting at his head until he tripped and fell over shrub. Then he lay on the ground still screeching.

Several of the doctors came running out of the house. They stood around the man but none of them seemed prepared to approach him. His view was obscured as he saw Mr. Jones, the Doctor, bending over him. He began tearing strips off Frank's shirt and binding his chest with them.

"You were lucky," he said, "it barely scratched you."

"I'm alright," said Frank crossly, struggling to sit up. The Doctor stepped back. Miss Young lay collapsed on the ground. The Doctor stirred her with his foot.

"Fainted," he said contemptuously.

"Don't treat her like that!" said Frank, angry and scared. He glanced across the lawn. One of the orderlies who had been at Parris House almost as long as Frank, approached Dr. Harding and removed the net from his head. The man remained on the ground, curled into a foetal position. Frank struggled over to Miss Young and tried to lift her upright, but he stopped as pain seared across his chest.

"No heavy lifting for you, for a while," said the Doctor. He stood looking down at them. his hands thrust in his pockets.

"Help me then!" said Frank crossly.

The Doctor looked at him a moment more and then bent down. Frank noticed lines of strain around the Doctor's mouth and eyes and realised that the he too looked tired and drawn, though he hid it better than did Miss Young. The Doctor

picked up Miss Young and carried her to the bench. She was already stirring and her eyes opened as he set her down. The Doctor stood back gazing across the lawn to where the small group was breaking up. Two of the doctors were helping Dr. Harding towards the house.

"You realise that they are causing the dreams," he said, watching the party.

"You don't mean that," said Frank crossly because he was unsettled. "An educated man like you shouldn't go making up tales like that to frighten Miss. Young with."

"Oh Doctor!" whispered Miss Young, "Do you really think so?"

"Why do you call him Doctor?" asked Frank angrily. "He doesn't know what he's talking about. He's just trying to frighten you."

"I asked her to call me that," said the Doctor grimly, "and I am not trying to frighten her. Terrible things are afoot in this place. These so-called doctors are not what they seem. They are engendering the nightmares and running foul experiments of some kind. Even you must realise that! How do you think you got those?" He gestured to the scratches across Frank's chest.

"There's something wrong with Dr. Harding, all right!" said Frank. "I'm going to have a word with Dr. Gordon about it but one rotten apple doesn't mean the whole lot are bad. Talk like this will frighten everyone and it does no one any good. You have no proof of any of this."

"Don't I?" asked the Doctor. He drew his hand out of his pocket to reveal a small magnet on a string. He held it up and it swung in the breeze.

"Your point being," said Frank.

"That way is north," said the Doctor, and pointed at a right-angle to the alignment of the magnet.

"It can't be!" said Frank, looking in surprise at the direction he pointed. "You must have got something wrong."

"I haven't," said the Doctor. "There is a very strange magnetic field in this House and grounds. I'd say it was being created by magnetic monopoles, an extremely rare particle. I've been tracking them. They must have several here, which is amazing. They are very hard to come by." He paused. "Cartorians are very susceptible to the magnetic field of their planet," the Doctor looked at Frank. "I told you that and now I find that the magnetic field in these grounds is being artificially maintained which would take up immense resources for whoever is doing it. I've also discovered that a small net with magnets attached to it seriously discomforts them. How do you think I got rid of Dr. Harding? Think on it!"

He put the magnet back into his pocket and walked away. After a short distance Frank thought he staggered and stumbled, but he couldn't be sure.

"He's a very strange man," said Miss Young. "You know he's a charity case, no one is paying for his keep."

"They should send him to a proper Bedlam then," replied Frank. "He shouldn't scare you like that about the doctors."

Dr. Gordon stood by as Frank and the hired man heaved the blue box off the cart. They stood panting slightly while Dr. Gordon, as Frank had done when he first found it, walked round it. He paused at last before the two doors reached up and pulled one. It refused to open. Dr. Gordon stared at the box and frowned.

"What do you reckon it is?" asked Frank. "It says police on it, perhaps we should contact them about the Doctor. I mean Mr. Jones?"

Dr. Gordon shook his head. "We contacted them when he first came in. I would have expected them to have said then if they knew him. No I don't think so. Perhaps the name is there to prevent the inquisitive from tampering."

"What are you going to do with it now?" asked Frank.

"We found a key among the Doctor's possessions when he first arrived," said Dr. Gordon, "I have it in my office. I think we shall open this box and see what's inside it. Then, if it seems safe, we will let the Doctor have access to it."

Frank wondered when Dr. Gordon had started referring to Mr. Jones as the Doctor.

"I should apologise for the behaviour of Dr. Harding, earlier today," said Dr. Gordon. "It seems he had been under more strain than I had realised. I hope you were not badly hurt."

"Just a few scratches Sir. He must have long fingernails."

"Indeed. He had been letting himself go somewhat. We have him under lock and key for the time being until we can effect a cure. There shouldn't be any more trouble."

"I'm relieved to hear it sir. What was it the Doctor did to him? He certainly intervened at the right moment."

"Hmmm, yes, the Doctor certainly intervened and I'm sure we're all grateful to him," Dr. Gordon sounded far from grateful. "However I have decided that in the light of his continuing aggressive behaviour he will be confined to the house from now on. His actions may have been for the best on that occasion but I think that was more by accident than anything else."

After Dr. Gordon had gone Frank dismissed the hired man and then turned back to the blue box. He felt a hand fall on his shoulder.

"Good man." It was the Doctor. He stood there one hand resting on his waistcoat pocket, the other on Frank's shoulder. He stared at the blue box his face calm but otherwise unreadable. Then he walked up to the box and stroked it with one hand, closing his eyes as if drawing strength from the contact.

Suddenly he stepped back and took off his shoe. He up-ended it as if expecting something to fall out. But nothing did. He frowned and took off his other shoe repeating the behaviour. Then he stood still again gazing at the blue box, a shoe in either hand. His face was once more expressionless, but Frank noticed that his breathing had increased pace.

"Dr. Gordon says he found a key among your possessions when you first arrived," said Frank.

Frank's feet left the ground. He realised the Doctor had lifted him up and was surprised at the strength of the man. "Where is it?" asked the Doctor and his voice had a fierce edge to it.

"Put me down!" demanded Frank.

They remained as they were for a moment and then the Doctor put him down, but did not release his grip. "You don't understand," he whispered. "I can not continue like this much longer. No one here can. Do you really think you could have faced me down as you did just now if I were at full strength?"

Frank seriously considered hitting him for a moment. The Doctor did not strike him like many of the patients. He might have acted strangely but Frank felt that there was great purpose and intelligence in his actions and he should not be excused improprieties in the way many of the others were. However he contented himself with seizing the Doctor's wrists and detaching him from his shirt. They remained like that a while longer both gazing firmly into each others eyes, their faces impassive.

The Doctor broke first shielding his eyes with the back of his hand. "What can I do to convince you of what is happening here?" he asked. "You saw how that Harding man behaved, you can't believe that was normal."

"I don't rightly know, sir. Dr. Gordon says he broke under the strain. You have to admit that is more likely than he's a bird intent on driving you mad through nightmares."

The heavily lidded eyes blinked slowly once and then abruptly the Doctor was gone, striding back down the corridor. Frank let him go.

Kate was sitting in her room waiting for treatment to begin. She sat on the bed with her hands folded in her lap. She was afraid. She knew that dreaming therapy, as Dr. Gordon called it, was to come and she feared the dreams. The door handle turned. She shrank back onto the bed. Dr. Harding came in and she drew back even further away from him.

"Peace," he whispered, "I want peace!"

He grabbed her head between his hands and she cried out quietly, squirming in his grasp. She felt his nails digging into her head as he loomed closer. His staring eyes filling her vision. Suddenly the Doctor was in the room, pulling him off her. There was a scuffle and a muffled thumping sound. Then the Doctor was helping her off the bed and out of the room.

"Where shall we go?"

"I can't get out of the house but they'll let you out while its still light," he said in a low voice, hurrying her to the top of the stairs.

Her head hurt where Dr. Harding had gripped it. She felt her face and her hand came away red with blood. "I'm bleeding," she whispered faintly.

"No time for that! you'll live. Don't even think about fainting," the Doctor gave her a shake and she gulped back a scream.

"Now," he said, "go out and find Frank. I saw him in the garden through the window only moments ago down by the shed. Tell him what happened. Tell him to hide you and come and help me. Have you got that?" he shook her again.

She nodded mutely.

"Doctor! Doctor! time for your treatment!" came a Dr. Gordon's voice.

A look of fear that Kate understood only too well crossed his face. "Quickly!" he said.

She turned and fled down the stairs.

He was being dissected alive. Unable to move, he was pinned down but conscious, desperately conscious. The surgeons reached into him and pulled out his organs, examining each one with curiosity. He roared with pain and struggled to move. He watched, soon they would reach something vital. With greedy hands the surgeons cast aside the organ they had been examining and reached in seeking something else. Fingers clutching under his ribcage for the heart. Interesting, he was correct

that there is link with the box - the question is can we learn anything from it? Can the link help us? He roared once more in pain and agony as hands closed around his hearts and tugged, pain shooting through every part of his body. I'd leave that if I was you. It must be something vital. The hand let go and scrabbled around for something else. There was a wrench somewhere in the back of his throat and something came away. He wept with pain and watched as the surgeon examined the circuit board. His lips managed to form words "Temporal steerage". He forced his eyes open. This had to be another dream, though it was different in quality to the others. He gasped. Before him stood the TARDIS, her doors open and a flock of large bird-like creatures all over her and within her. Talons and beaks pulling apart wires and circuitry, one of them holding in its claws the temporal steerage circuit. He tried to lurch off the bed, but he had been strapped down. He saw between them a large screen still projecting his last dream image the surgeon in the same pose as the bird, holding the circuit. Another memory cube storing the readings. The Doctor screamed.

Part III

Frank found Kate hiding in the small shed he used for tools. She was shivering with fear and weeping. There was blood in her hair and on her hands.

"Miss Young, Kate, what are you doing in here?"

"Dr. Harding!" she cried, "he attacked me again."

"Oh, Kate."

She wiped her face with her hands, smearing blood across her mouth. "The Doctor rescued me. He said to get you for help. You have to go to him Frank, please say you will go to him."

Frank hesitated, unsure of what to do. He didn't entirely trust the Doctor. But there was clearly something strange happening, and more than anything, he knew Kate could not spend the night here in the light summer dress she had been wearing.

"I'll fetch some blankets," he said. He walked unhappily back to the house.

Frank heard the scream as he entered the hallway and ran in the direction of the sound. He met Dr. Smith coming the other way with the Doctor in his arms. The

Doctor was sweating and seemed to be allowing himself to be meekly taken along.

"Mr. Hardcourt, thank goodness," said Dr. Smith nervously and he licked his lips. "The Doctor here as had a shock while in treatment. Can you take him back to his room and lock him in?" He passed the Doctor over who hung like a dead weight in Frank's arms. "We've lost Miss Young and she's due for treatment. Last time she was hiding in the cellar. It's most unfortunate." Frank felt the Doctor's grip tighten on his arm. He glanced at him and the Doctor minutely shook his head with a warning look in his eyes.

"I'll think you'll find her hiding in the shed in the grounds," said Dr. Gordon, coming up behind Dr. Smith. The Doctor sagged in Frank's arms. "You shouldn't talk in your sleep so much Doctor, however it is fortunate for us. It was very irresponsible of you frightening the poor girl out into the grounds. Her constitution is not strong. She could easily catch consumption if she remains in the grounds all night."

"I don't sleep," said the Doctor slowly. "What are you doing to me that makes me sleep?"

Dr. Gordon clucked and shook his head, nodded to Frank and he and Dr. Smith headed for the entrance hall.

Frank helped the Doctor to a chair where he sat with his head in his hands. "I'm getting careless," he said. "Do you realise how much it is costing me to stay sane under this onslaught?" He leant back, resting his head against the wall behind the chair, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You have to help me recover the TARDIS key. It'll be in Dr. Gordon's office."

"I spoke to the people who found you in Southwark," said Frank. "I don't think you've ever been sane."

"That was post-regenerative trauma. I'd have been completely recovered by now were it not for this place. I *am* recovering, but it is taking its toll. The scars will never properly heal now and I'm wearing out this body in the attempt." He tapped his chest gently and then his arm fell limp at his side.

There came a commotion from the hallway below. Looking down, Frank saw Dr. Smith carrying Miss Young up the stairway, skirts drooping down and brushing the stair carpet. She seemed to be unconscious.

"Show me to the office and I may just be able to help her." The Doctor hadn't moved, he still sat in the chair, gazing at Frank. "You must know she is getting worse. Her mind was not strong in the first place. It must be close to breaking point by now." He leaned forward, staring Frank in the eye, all his strength and will going into the effort. "You have to realise all is not as it seems. How do you account for Dr. Harding? You can accept Gordon's explanation that he is stressed

or you can help me find the true cause of his malaise, and Kate's and mine. I," he hesitated, "I can not do this alone, Frank. It all depends on you."

Frank debated this internally. With his everyday mind he knew he could explain away all the oddness. But put all the oddness together and you needed too many strange random occurrences and coincidences to make it all fit. Small incidents he had hardly registered but which had troubled him. Patients, or guests if you preferred, accosting him in the garden always with the same question of late, "which is the way?"; Dr. Harding; the Doctor himself and his box; the strange behaviour of the compasses. None of it more than an oddity on its own, but together... "All right then," he said, "I will help you. But, I'm not believing you implicitly." He started to walk down the corridor towards Dr. Gordon's room.

The Doctor didn't move. He just kept his eyes fixed on Frank. "You'll have to help me, I don't think I can walk."

Frank helped the Doctor to Dr. Gordon's office. The office door was locked. Frank shrugged. The Doctor slipped to his knees and peered into the keyhole. He glanced up at Frank, "Belt buckle."

"What?"

"Belt buckle. Give me your belt buckle. I need to pick the lock."

Frank looked doubtful.

The Doctor reached across and pulled a crystal cube out of Frank's jacket inner pocket.

"How did that get there?"

"I put it there. It's a record of my thoughts while in the dream."

Frank snorted, unimpressed, "it's Dr. Smith's ornament. You stole it."

"Watch!" said the Doctor, "and learn."

Out of his pockets he pulled various oddments of wires, cutlery and strange pieces of some substance with which Frank was not familiar. It had a sort of uniformity in colour and texture that seemed unnatural. Into it were embedded pieces of what was metal in lines and dots.

"What's that?" asked Frank.

"I found it in the treatment room."

"Oh really," Frank contrived to sound less impressed.

"Tell me you've seen anything like it before and I'll call you a liar."

The Doctor began rapidly assembling the oddments together and then he placed the crystal in the centre and Frank saw...

Hedges and trees rushed past. There was the sound of someone gasping for breath. Lines crackled and jumped across the screen. It was like looking out of someone's eyes, far more realistic than a painting. Frank watched entranced as whoever it was turned under an archway, reaching a weeping willow and a stream. Then there was a sudden fizzle, the picture broke up and steam rose from the Doctor's device.

"That," said the Doctor forcefully, leaning against the door of the office, "that is the dream I have had every time they have taken me in for treatment and I'll wager you anything you like every other patient here has had the same. You have to help us."

Frank knew he could be sacked for breaking into the office. But what the Doctor had just shown him was so beyond his experience that he knew he was unable to judge the rights and wrongs of the situation. He would have to rely on someone else to guide him. All he had was the Doctor who, for all his idiosyncratic behaviour, was clearly an educated man. He was Frank's best hope to find out whether terrible things really were happening within the House. Reluctantly Frank unthreaded his belt.

"Thank you," said the Doctor and he began to fiddle with the lock.

Moments later the door clicked open. The Doctor stood, propping himself up against the door jam. "Simplistic mechanism," he said, handing the belt back to Frank. He staggered into the room, leaning on the desk and sinking into Dr. Gordon's chair. He began to rifle through the drawers looking for his key. Frank watched him from the door listening for movement in the corridor. The Doctor stopped looking through the drawers and stared intently at the large globe in front of him. He spun it thoughtfully, "You see this here?"

"It's a globe."

"Is it now? Point out Great Britain to me."

Frank moved into the room, remembering the rudimentary geography he'd been taught as a child. He spun the globe, but he couldn't find the country. In fact he found he couldn't recognise any of the land masses. He glanced at the Doctor.

"It's Cartor," he said. "I told you they were Cartorians."

"I've not seen any birds," said Frank stubbornly.

"You don't lie well, you know," said the Doctor. "But it's true. They're projecting some sort of mental image. It must be the same mechanism they use to create the dreams only more limited. Just enough to make those nearby think they look normal." He spun the globe again. "What's this?" he asked, tapping the pivot.

Frank looked. A word had been crossed out and another replaced it. Frank didn't recognise the word or even the alphabet. He shrugged.

"Do you ever do think at all?" asked the Doctor crossly. "Look, they've crossed out North and substituted South!"

"Have they now?" said Frank.

"Yes, can't you see?" the Doctor looked at him again. "No I don't suppose you can. Idiot humans!" he muttered. Then he slapped his forehead. "Of course! the poles have reversed. That's why they've changed the globes."

"The poles have reversed?"

"Yes, it must have caused chaos. The Cartorians will have lost all sense of direction..." he tailed off. "They would have known where they were trying to go, but would have felt lost and unable to get there."

"Like the dreams?" said Frank.

"Like the dreams."

"So why would they be giving the dreams to people here?" asked Frank.

"Yours is a species which is not so dependent upon magnetism to find it's way. It's incredible, they must have found a way to record and project thoughts at a sufficiently abstract level to cross the species barrier. I imagining they are trying to learn how you cope."

"But it hasn't worked, has it?" said Frank, "If what you say is true, and I'm not saying it is, everyone here is confused anyway so they can't get a proper reading. Can they?"

The Doctor looked at him, the lids once more drooping across his eyes.

"No."

There was a scream from along the corridor. "Kate!" cried Frank.

Kate was standing in the window. She was framed against the moon, still wearing her cream summer dress, although the bustle seemed to have slipped awry leaving it hanging in awkward folds down behind her. Frank charged into the room and, perhaps because he was half expecting it, he looked towards the doctors and he saw birds: huge taloned and beaked birds. Their talons were long and flexible; flexible as hands. One held a notebook and pencil, pouring over the readings on some machine making notes. Another flapped near Kate, clearly not brave enough to approach close to. Frank blinked and the room was back to normal. Dr. Gordon

was taking notes while Dr. Smith hovered near Kate, alternately beseeching and threatening her in an attempt to get her out of the window.

Kate screamed and swayed in the opening.

"She's seen through the illusion," said the Doctor's voice in his ear. "She no longer knows what should be normal, so she's seeing things as they are. Her mental defenses have gone."

Frank looked at the scene. Kate was staring at Dr. Smith as he twittered around her. The other new doctors stood nervously clustered around the Doctor's blue box, clearly uncertain what to do. The door of the box was open and wires poured out of it. A heap of machinery, strange to the eye, was cluttered around its base. Dr. Smith moved towards Kate and she cowered from him, screaming once more. Hurriedly Dr. Smith retreated.

"Kate, Miss Young," said Frank approaching towards her.

"Frank?" she asked. "Is that really you?"

"Yes, it's really me," he said. He walked carefully towards the window, as he would towards a frightened animal.

She glanced around the room. "Can you see the birds?" she whispered. Frank considered that. He glanced towards Dr. Gordon. He nodded, a look of concern on his face.

"Best tell her the truth," said the Doctor behind him.

"I saw them, for a moment," said Frank.

"I'm not mad then?"

"No Kate, you're not mad, just nervous."

"I've been having dreams. They're coming for me. The terror, it's them, it's coming for me. I have to find somewhere safe." She glanced out of the window.

"You don't need to find anywhere safe," said Frank, "I'm here. I'll look after you."

She looked at him uncertainly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Doctor pulling Dr. Smith back.

"They're chasing me," she whispered.

"No they're not," he said. "They're lost too. They're just scared."

"Scared?"

Frank took a step closer to her, "Come down Kate. There'll be no more dreams, I promise you."

She looked at him uncertainly. He held out his hand. Cautiously she took hold of it. She more fell than stepped into his arms. He lifted her down and placed her feet on the floor. He began to lead her from the room. The Doctor lounged in the

doorway, though Frank suspected the lounging covered real weakness. But there was a sardonic and detached expression on his face.

"Good job, Mr. Hardcourt, good job," said Dr. Gordon. He walked towards them. Frank felt Kate stiffen in his arms. "I'll take over from here," and Dr. Gordon reached towards Kate.

She screamed once more and Frank felt her slip from his grasp.

"Kate!" he cried as she ran once more towards the window. He grabbed for her and his hands closed around the trailing skirts. He felt her weight on them and he gripped and pulled. Then there was a tearing sound and another scream and the weight on his arms suddenly vanished. He was left with a strip of torn cloth in his hands and the gaping window before him.

The doctors hurried out of the room, all but Dr. Gordon who remained behind standing eye to eye with the Doctor in the doorway.

"Someone let Dr. Harding out of his room."

The Doctor stared blankly back at him, "that was careless of them."

"Yes," Dr. Gordon brushed some dust of his shoulders, "whoever it was should be feeling very guilty right now. Miss Young was scared badly by his presence. So much so that she dreamed she was being chased by him."

Dr. Gordon flicked a switch on the apparatus beside the door and the image flickered into life. Someone running down avenues and pathways. Every time the person looked over their shoulder it was clear who pursued them. Dr. Harding grown to monstrous size, his hand elongated into claws, his face set into a grin bore down on the unseen victim.

"Think on that, Doctor," said Dr. Gordon and then left the room, brushing close to the Doctor's motionless form, still propped up in the doorway.

Frank had remained in the window watching the doctors below fussing round the body, the piece of cream coloured cloth still gripped in his hands. Slowly he became aware of movement behind him. The Doctor was piling the clutter of mechanical equipment back into his blue box.

"What are you doing?"

The Doctor leant against the box a moment, "Dr. Gordon bumped against me as he left." He produced a key from his pocket and displayed it in the moonlight.

"You picked his pocket!"

"It's my key," said the Doctor equanimically. He pushed the last tangle of wires inside the doors. "Come with me, Mr. Hardcourt."

"Come with you where?"

"Anywhere; away from this place at any rate."

"What, and leave these people behind?"

The Doctor regarded him carefully. "Which people would that be? You hardly know any of the inmates now Kate Young is dead and you can't mean the Cartorians."

Frank looked out of the window at the doctors flapping agitatedly around the body.

"I don't think they meant any harm. If the dreams are what they were feeling then," he paused, "then they need help too."

"Stay here then, for all the good it will do," the Doctor's voice took on a sneer.

"Did you let out Dr. Harding?"

The Doctor had the grace not to look him in the eye, "She was near breaking anyway. I doubt she would have made it through this session whatever the circumstances. I know more of human psychology than your Dr. Gordon. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think it imperative to get her out of the house."

"I can't pretend to like you much Doctor, but then you're above the likes or dislikes of people such as myself. But I'll need help to sort this out. I don't want any more deaths."

"You have more resourcefulness than you think," said the Doctor shortly. "I owe them, you and this miserable planet nothing. Nothing at all. Save them yourself."

Frank heard the door of the box slam shut. There was a noise. A noise such as the landlord in Southwark had probably heard. A straining pulsing sound and the blue box faded away before his eyes. Leaving him alone in the room with his strip of torn cloth.

The Doctor rested on a six sided console. His arms braced, holding the weight of his body. Lights flashed and blinked. The central column rose and fell. He straightened up, the strain showing visibly on his face for the first time in days. He walked carefully to an armchair and sat, eyes closed. Around him the TARDIS hummed. Scattered pieces of equipment poured across the floor.

"It's not my fault," he said quietly. "I am too tired. I had to leave."

No one answered him.

Epilogue

The mourners stood around the grave. The day was grey and drizzling. There was a damp haze in the autumn air insufficient to penetrate the thick wool stuff of the mourners coats but misting their faces. Their faces were all solemn, a man and woman standing together a discreet distance from the vicar. Opposite the couple stood Dr. Gordon. He was wearing somber brown with a black armband and his hands kept moving clasped together within his black leather gloves, writhing over and over each other.

"I am the resurrection and the life, sayeth the Lord, and he that believeth in me though he be dead yet shall he live and he that liveth and believeth will never die".

As the mourners left the graveside their muttered conversations reached the two gravediggers waiting respectfully on the sidelines.

"My thanks for agreeing to officiate," the woman was saying to the vicar, "in such difficult circumstances."

"By which she means the girl shouldn't have been buried on sanctified grounds at all."

"Don't speak of what you don't know," said Frank fiercely.

His companion lapsed into silence.

"It was a tragic accident." Dr. Gordon had remained behind the departing vicar. "You two have work to do. I suggest you do it rather than engaging in idle gossip."

Frank looked him in the eye. "I think I should have a word, Dr. Gordon."

"This is hardly the place."

"This is exactly the place. Run along!" Frank commanded his companion. The young man looked at the set of his face, then left.

"What is this?" asked Dr. Gordon.

"You need someone to show you how to find your way without magnetism. Is that right?"

Dr. Gordon's eyes narrowed for a moment and then he said, "Suppose it is."

"But everyone up there is weak in the head, right? So none of them can help you."

"I think you'll find that your race has a very catholic definition of 'weak in the head'."

"Still," persisted Frank, "none of them have lived outside the walls of Parris House, and not one of them could find their way out of a paper bag with the end open."

Dr. Gordon tilted his head to one side, but said nothing.

"So," persisted Frank, "I reckon, to solve your problem, you need a volunteer. Someone who isn't too timid or too afraid or too confused to stand up for himself."

Dr. Gordon looked at Frank interestedly, "And why do you volunteer?"

Frank looked down at the plain surface of Kate's coffin. "Because there have been too many deaths."

Chapter 2

Christmas in the Pleistocene

A Primeval Flashfic

Even in her survival bag it was bloody cold. Helen knew she had to get up soon if she were to reach the anomaly - or even get up at all, for that matter. She forced her eyes open. The pale light in the tent meant that the feeble sun must have risen and she should start making good use of the limited daylight. It was three days past the equinox which made it Christmas Day in this dismal corner of the Pleistocene. Not that Christmas was particularly relevant. She had always hated Christmas, with its awkward trips in order to sit and be polite to Nick's dour relatives.

It had been a shitty, shitty month. Whenever she closed her eyes she recalled that final glimpse of Stephen's face as he shut himself in with the creatures. Nick hated her. The government no doubt had her on a most wanted list. She couldn't go back to the 21st century even if she had wanted to.

She forced herself out of the bag, packed it in her rucksack and hauled on her furs, the gloves, the snow goggles and all the other paraphernalia needed to survive out here. Then she crept out of the tent.

She almost didn't see the small parcel placed just outside the entrance. But the brightness of the red wrapping paper and the golden stars caught her eye beneath the light dusting of snow. Clumsily she picked it up, tiny in her bulky mittens. She retreated back into the tent to examine it.

Carefully she tore off the wrapping paper. It was a small box of handmade chocolates. Someone had gone somewhere very exclusive and very expensive to get hold of them. Wrapped around it was a loose sheet of paper, torn from an exercise book. Words were scrawled across the paper.

"Hang on in there," it said in Nick's distinctively untidy hand.

Chapter 3

Rivalries

A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Short Story

Sunnydale Museum was something of an embarrassment to the authorities. It wasn't that it was too small and under funded to make it convincing, a surprising number of high profile exhibitions had passed through Sunnydale over the years, due to its convenient location and somewhat colourful history. No, it was the number of deaths that had occurred in the museum that were the major cause of embarrassment. Every time an exhibit of macabre nature came through the museum and left without incident, the authorities heaved a collective, though silent, sigh of relief.

It was with some trepidation that the curator found himself preparing for the latest exhibit. Carl Hunsicker had been curator of Sunnydale museum for forty years. He attributed his long tenure in the job to the fact that, as policy, he never entered the place after dark. However this was an unusual case. He had been phoned at home, late in the evening, by the manager of the 'Historic China' exhibit. This exhibit had been due to arrive that day, but had failed to turn up. Now, close to midnight, it was here and the manager wanted the museum opened and her exhibit safely placed therein. Carl had had no intention of going to the museum at that time of night, but the manager of Historic China proved to be more stubborn than he was. It was with considerable reluctance and not a little fear that Carl found himself alone in the museum except for a truck driver and the elderly but domineering presence of Clarice Shelbourne, manager of Historic China and expert on Sino-Japanese trade in the nineteenth century.

Carl and the lorry driver struggled with the heavy boxes whilst Ms. Shelbourne directed their activity.

"Be careful, young man" she admonished him, "that contains a full size wax

model of the 3rd emperor of the Manchu dynasty. It's priceless."

Carl was unimpressed, but he handled the box a little more carefully. The last thing he wanted was the old bat to demand they open everything to check for damage. However, to his alarm, once they were all inside, she showed every sign of doing just that.

"I'm not paid to work this time of night," complained Carl grimly. "You can unpack them in the morning."

"Young man, I don't think you appreciate the value of these exhibits."

"I appreciate that there are safety regulations," Carl played a last card, "if you persist in staying here I shall have to have you removed." He pondered whether any of the local policemen would actually be prepared to turn up at the museum at this time of night to remove one dotty old woman. Privately he doubted it. He wondered what would happen if he just walked away and left her there. He couldn't lock her in, but he could just leave the place open. Problem was, there'd been trouble when he'd accidentally left it open a few weeks ago and an exhibit had been damaged. He wasn't sure he could afford to do it again.

Fortunately some, but not all, of these thought processes must have shown in his face. Miss Shelbourne suddenly compromised.

"Let me just check everything off on the manifest and then you can lock up. It'll only take a few minutes."

Carl agreed. He waited by the door, next to the model of the old Chinese emperor, while she disappeared into the interior of the storage space. The lid of the Emperor's box had come loose, he noticed. Superstitiously he looked around for something to fix it back in place. His office was nearby and he could fetch a hammer from there and bang the nails back in. He set off. Behind him a long thin hand with sharpened nails forced its way out through the gap between the lid and the box and began to work it open.

When Carl returned with his hammer, he saw with alarm that several of the nails were now on the floor. Hurriedly he gathered them up and began to hammer them back into place. He failed to notice the shadow fall over him until claw-like hands grabbed him and teeth sank into his neck.

He gasped, once. Miss Shelbourne, engrossed in her work, didn't even hear him. When she returned and found him missing she simply assumed that he had finally given up and left her to it. She made a mental note to write a complaint to the municipal authorities about his slackness. Then she left. No one ever found Carl's body.

Act 1

Buffy was on her way to the Bronze. Autumn was closing in. Although, during the day, the sun had blazed, the nights were cool and she found herself shivering in the thin shirt she'd thrown over her dress. She always felt some trepidation and excitement when approaching the Bronze. It was the only happening place in Sunnydale but, as a result, well, things tended to happen there. One way or another Buffy had rarely spent an uneventful evening at the Bronze.

She sensed rather than saw someone step out of a side street as she passed. Turning, she was relieved, but not altogether surprised, to see it was Angel. He was a soft tailored jacket, made of velvet and a white shirt. Large, dark eyes stared out at her under a short spiky haircut. In short, he looked drop dead gorgeous as usual. She lowered her aggressive stance, but did not relax. Angel had some problem with their relationship which Buffy couldn't quite fathom. OK, she could fathom it - he thought he was too old for her, plus the rest - she didn't really see why this was such a big problem. After all, if they didn't give it a chance how would they ever know. It was just that, as a result, she was never quite sure how he would behave. Would he be up tight and standoffish, as he normally was, or gentle and shy as she'd found him the once or twice she'd managed to persuade him to get off his high horse and talk to her as an equal, a friend and possibly a lover?

"Hello," he said carefully.

"Hello, what are you doing here?" already she was throwing up the defenses and the question sounded like an accusation.

"Something's happening," he began. Buffy's heart sank.

"Business then," she said, "not pleasure."

She could see he didn't know how to react to that. His uncertainty made her mellow. "OK, so what's the problem".

"I'm not sure, but the local vampires, they're behaving strangely."

"In what way?"

"Well they're not gathering where they normally do. But there are meetings of some sort happening, I'm not sure where, and there's more of them in town than usual - you must have noticed that and... and I think they're scared of something."

"Yeah, I'd noticed there were a lot around at the moment," Buffy agreed reluctantly. "So, what do you suggest?"

That threw him. Forward planning wasn't really Angel's strong point.

"Oh great," she muttered, "you think there's something weird happening and you want me to find it and slay it. Cool, well I had no other plans this evening.

A night out at the Bronze, see some friends, you know socialize. Nothing that can't be dropped just like that to trudge round Sunnydale looking for meetings of vampires." She was getting angry, not his fault, but he would just stand there looking a bit helpless, incredibly handsome, but helpless.

There were days, in fact there were lots of days, when Buffy felt that being the chosen one, the Slayer, the one in a generation gifted with the strength and speed to take on the legions of vampires, was a real pain. People expected her to take the lead, to drop everything and go hunting. Angel wasn't here to see her, he was here to enlist the help of the Slayer. Unconsciously, her face set itself into a pout.

Angel attempted a small smile and took a step towards her. "I'll come with you, if you like."

'Result!' thought Buffy triumphantly to herself, surprised and pleased, but aloud all she said, in an off-hand manner, was, "If you like."

Half an hour later they were in a alleyway behind some warehouses. Several of them were disused and Buffy had marked them down previously as potential meeting places for vampires. She was checking them out by the rather unsubtle means of ripping off the padlocks and looking in. Angel stood at her shoulder and she found it comforting to know that she wasn't on her own.

"Uh Oh!" murmured Angel quietly.

Buffy looked up. At the end of the alley were three figures. Two of them carried what looked like clubs and one had a torch which he pointed at them, catching Buffy and Angel in its glare.

"Well what have we here?" asked one of the figures. The three of them sauntered down the alleyway. Behind the torch light it was impossible to make out their features. Instinctively, Buffy backed up and glanced over her shoulder at the far end. She looked at Angel, unsure what he would do. She saw her uncertainty reflected back in his eyes. Buffy had a creeping sensation at the back of her neck which probably meant they were vampires. She adopted a fighting stance.

"Who are you?" she called.

One of the figures laughed. "Your worst nightmare," it growled melodramatically and then began to run towards her. She dodged it easily and staked it as it went past. She turned back to the others, but they had not attacked at the same time and now hung back. One of them backed out the alleyway, looked around and then shouted something.

"Time to get out of here," said Angel. He grabbed her hand and pulled her in the opposite direction. Even with the peril they were in, Buffy felt a little thrill of pleasure that they were holding hands. They were only about half way there when three more figures appeared ahead of them. Another torch was shone in their eyes. They halted and looked behind, five people now stood at the other end boxing them in. Buffy took four stakes out of her bag. She handed two to Angel.

"This is bad," he said.

"I know."

This was very bad. They had nowhere to retreat to and they were heavily outnumbered. What was worse, the vampires were showing more signs of organisation than she was used to. They were being cautious and careful. There were very few vampires who she would have described as cautious and careful.

"Let's try and take out the three at the far end," she suggested.

Silently Angel nodded. The two of them ran down the alleyway. She heard the sound of feet behind her.

The first vampire she met parried her blow with a baseball bat. Meanwhile a second tried to out flank her, shining a torch in her eyes as she did so. Buffy had to divide her attention between the two of them. The combination of torch and baseball bat made it difficult to do anything except concentrate on dodging. Keeping them at a distance, but not getting close enough to either to stake. She didn't have the time to worry about Angel - she hoped he'd deal with his one assailant quickly. Not long now until the others caught up.

Suddenly the torch dropped. Buffy saw a thin neatly carved piece of wood protruding through the woman's chest. For a second the woman remained held, a look of surprise on her features then she disintegrated into dust. Buffy seized the opportunity to close in on the other vampire and stake him. She was dimly aware of a long coat and a sword. Someone tall with long curling hair tied in a pony tail stood at her back meeting the on rush of the other five.

A woman's voice, with an English accent, said, "Hello Angel, long time no see," and then the enemy were upon them. Three abreast they spanned the alley, Angel having despatched his assailant. Buffy was a natural fighter. That was part of what it meant to be the Slayer. She could pick up any weapon and already be part way competent in its use. It also meant she could analyse and understand another's fighting technique almost instinctively. Although she was concentrating on the woman and the club before her, Buffy could tell, although she would have had trouble explaining why, that Angel and the mystery woman with the sword were fighting together. While she had to worry, in a fight, whether Angel would pick up on the cues she gave him, this woman didn't. She and Angel fought

together with the understanding born only of long practice. Angel concentrated on keeping blows off himself and the woman while she concentrated on dispatching her opponent. In a second only three vampires remained. Seizing an opportunity Buffy rammed her second stake into the heart of the vampire before her. Nothing happened. She kicked it in further, to make sure. The vampire laughed, pulled the wood from her chest and tossed it over her shoulder.

Next to her, Buffy heard the woman swear. "Cover me, concentrate on keeping them back," she said and then dropped behind.

Angel closed up, the fabric of his jacket brushing Buffy's shoulder through her shirt. It was a long few minutes. Then Buffy felt the woman just behind her.

"Stick this to her forehead," she said. Buffy glanced down to see a hand holding a yellow post-it note with Chinese characters scrawled on it.

"You what?" she asked.

"Stick it to her forehead," repeated the woman.

Mentally shrugging, Buffy took the post-it. She was aware of Angel taking another. 'Hearts, heads, what's the difference¿ she thought. She ducked in again under the swinging bat and pressed the sticky strip to the woman's head. The vampire keeled over backwards and dropped like a stone. Seconds later they were alone in the alleyway. The strange woman began tying up the bodies in red string.

"Excuse me," asked Buffy, "what exactly are you doing?"

"Disposing of the bodies."

"Oh right, silly me, obvious really," Buffy rolled her eyes.

Once the vampires were tied up, the woman removed the post-it notes and the three bodies disintegrated as if they had been staked. She started gathering up the string. She looked up, and Buffy saw her face properly for the first time. She had strong features, a graceful, sharply defined nose, elegant cheekbones, and delicate arched eyebrows. Classically beautiful, the type of beauty that aged well without sagging or blurring. Wisps of curling hair floated round her face, looking a bit like a halo in the security light. She was old - not old old, but as old as Giles or Buffy's mother. There were lines at the corners of her eyes and her temple that would soon mature into wrinkles. She smiled at Buffy.

"Hello," she said, "I don't believe we've met."

"Buffy," gingerly Buffy shook her hand, "Buffy Summers, who are you?"

"Catherine," said Angel suddenly.

"Catherine, right," Buffy nodded seriously.

Catherine turned to Angel. They were the same height, Buffy noticed, staring at each other eye to eye. Angel reached out and pulled out one of the wisps of hair examining it in the light.

"Grey hairs," he said.

"I got old. It happens."

Buffy was beginning to feel left out of this. "Hello, would anyone care to tell me what all that stuff with string and sticky notes was?"

The woman, Catherine apparently, sheathed her sword. "They weren't vampires," she said, "at least, not the western kind. They have a lot in common with western vampires, but differences too."

"Like no stakes?" asked Buffy.

"Like no stakes."

"Where are they from then?"

"The east. China these ones."

"They didn't look Chinese," Buffy frowned, feeling sure she'd have noticed if they'd been oriental. She was fairly sure the woman she'd post-ited had had blonde, or at least light coloured, hair.

"No they didn't, did they," said Catherine thoughtfully.

"But you knew all about them, right?" asked Buffy, "you're here because of them."

Catherine suddenly looked doubtful and glanced at Angel.

"Don't worry," he said, "you can trust her. She's the slayer."

"It's a long story," she said. "We should get out of here, there may be more of them around. Besides," she looked apologetic, "I've only just arrived in town, I need to find a hotel and unpack."

"OK," said Buffy, "let's meet again tomorrow evening. The library, Sunnydale High School."

Catherine smiled, "I'll be there." They had walked out of the alleyway now and there was a new looking car standing on the curve. "Can I give you a lift?"

"No thanks, I'll be OK."

"Suit yourself," Catherine opened the door and climbed in, "Angel?"

Angel glanced worriedly at Buffy and hesitated a moment, "yes, please," he said suddenly. "See you tomorrow," he smiled faintly at Buffy and then opened the near door.

"Sure, just carry on as if I wasn't here," said Buffy forlornly to herself as the car drove away.

The dim security light showed the long empty straight road. Buffy shivered in the slight wind. Strands of hair blew across her face. Disconsolately, she considered how rumpled and disheveled she probably looked as she began the long walk back home.

"... and he just left you, all on your own?" asked Willow, incredulously.

"Yep."

"Didn't offer to walk you home."

"Nope."

"The beast," said Xander, "with all those Chinese vampires around just waiting to rip you limb from limb."

Buffy and Willow ignored him.

"I'd have accepted the lift, if I hadn't wanted to ask Angel about this Catherine person."

"Maybe Angel wanted to talk to Catherine," suggested Willow.

"Maybe," suggested Xander, "they are secret lovers, with a stormy passionate past." He put an arm round Buffy's shoulders, "I'm sorry Buffy but there is another woman." He paused a moment, "after all - they were heading off to find a hotel."

"But she's, like, my Mom's age," said Buffy.

"But then Angel's a lot older," put in Willow, "Oops," she shook her head fiercely, "forget I said that. Yes, real old. Not attractive at all."

"You know," said Xander, as they walked into the library, "I'm beginning to like this woman already."

Catherine surveyed Sunnydale high school as she walked up to its gates. Typical American High School, as far as she could tell, not that she really counted herself as knowledgeable about such things. She found her way to the library without much difficulty, but there was no one there, or so she thought. Then she heard movement among the shelves. Rounding a corner, she found herself face to face with a middle-aged man in tweed and glasses, carrying a heavy, leather bound volume.

"Rupert Giles, I presume?"

"Well, yes," he looked mildly surprised, "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

"Catherine Quigley," She held out her hand, "I hunt vampires, not full time anymore, but its sort of a family thing, you know. I bumped into Buffy last night."

Giles shook her hand gingerly and awkwardly while clutching the tome, "Pleased

to meet you, I haven't seen Buffy yet today, so you'll have to forgive my ignorance."

"It's sort of complicated."

"Mr. Giles," a determined voice floated up from the main area.

"That's the principal," said Giles. Nervously he rounded the end of the bookcase. Catherine behind him.

"Mr. Giles," said a small bald man, who looked startlingly like a goblin, "may I remind you that there is a staff meeting."

"Oh yes, umm."

Catherine took the book from him, "I'll see you later."

"And may I remind you that it is not appropriate to meet with lady friends on school premises," the goblin was saying as it shepherded the protesting Giles from the room.

Catherine smiled to herself and flicked through the book. She didn't have long to wait.

"Well I don't," Buffy was saying as she walked through the doors. There were two people with her. One was a small girl who would have been prettier with some more self-confidence, long straight brown hair hung unflatteringly down either side of a round childish face. The second was a boy with dark short curls who still had that unfinished look about his face, with full lips and the traces of puppy fat around his chin and eyes, which made you wonder whether he would mature to good looks or a florid overweight. Buffy, herself, was easily the most striking of the three, demanding that you look at her. She was dressed in a short mini-skirt and tight top. Her blonde hair was sculpted into what Catherine could best describe as a bob although she suspected that such a plain term would have insulted the hairdresser responsible. Buffy had a fresh-faced, youthful beauty and confidence that Catherine had long ago lost, if she had ever had it in her gawky, lanky teenage years.

"Hello," said Catherine.

"Hi," said Buffy. "Catherine, this is Xander and Willow."

"Interesting names."

"... and Giles should be around here somewhere."

"I already met him, briefly. He had to go to a staff meeting."

"Oh," Buffy was put out. "I was hoping he'd know all about the Chinese stuff."

"Well, I imagine he'll be back soon."

"I don't know," said Willow, "these staff meetings can go on for ages and they're discussing next year's budget today?"

"How do you know that?" asked Buffy.

"Oh, you know, I pick these things up."

There was an awkward silence.

"You fight vampires then?" asked Xander.

"That's right," said Catherine. "I don't know how much Buffy has told you. I'm here on the trail of a Chinese one."

"She did mention it," said Xander.

"It's really lucky for me that you people are here. It saves me spending days trying to locate the various haunts and find out what the local vampires are like."

"So," said Willow, "you want the tour of Sunnydale?"

"The supernatural tour anyway."

"Well, the Bronze has to be the starting point doesn't it?" said Xander, "for almost any tour. Besides which," he added, "it'll be a much nicer place to wait for Giles than this library. Too many books. Makes me think of homework. Why, don't we all go to the Bronze, for a friendly chat?"

"The Bronze?" asked Catherine.

"It's a bar. They play music and stuff," said Willow.

"A young people's place," said Catherine doubtfully.

"But it's a major vampire hunting ground, so you'll need to check it out. Sounds like a plan," said Buffy firmly, obscurely enjoying Catherine's apparent discomfort. "I'll leave a note for Giles and Angel." She began fishing about in her bag.

"I'm not sure about this," said Catherine.

"Believe me, you'll love the place," said Xander, "I'll bet it's just like an English pub." He slipped his arm through hers and began leading her towards the door.

"... and even if it's not," said Willow grabbing her other arm, "it'll be a cultural experience."

"Right," grinned Buffy placing a note on Giles desk, "all set."

The main route from Sunnydale high to the Bronze lay through the more industrial part of town; semi-deserted streets at this time of day when the shadows were lengthening. Buffy and Willow lagged behind Xander who was giving an extravagant potted history of Sunnydale to Catherine.

"He seems to like her," said Willow.

Buffy shrugged, “you know Xander. You don’t think anything serious will come of it though. I mean she really is twice his age.”

“I suppose not,” said Willow.

Suddenly there was a loud wolf whistle from somewhere. Buffy groaned in disgust, but Catherine had stopped in her tracks and was scanning the area.

“Just ignore them,” advised Buffy.

“Up there,” Catherine pointed.

Looking up Buffy saw someone on top of a roof just ducking away. Seconds later Buffy heard the screech of tyres cornering. Willow was facing her and she saw her eyes widen at something. The others all started running. Buffy turned round to look. She was staring into the headlights of a car. She couldn’t see its form or shape behind the glare, but it was only meters away and bearing down on her at top speed.

Act 2

Someone thudded into Buffy, knocking her aside. The car slipped past, long, sleek and black, narrowly missing them.

“What?” began Buffy.

“Someone was looking out for us, probably for you,” said Catherine helping her to her feet. “You walk this way often I guess.”

“Well yes,” admitted Buffy.

The car screeched round and headed back towards them. Buffy waited for as long as she dared, as the car approached and then jumped aside, giving it as little time as possible to adjust its course and run her over. She wondered how long they could keep this up.

“In here,” shouted Xander, he was standing in the entrance to a small alley, too narrow for the car to get down. They ducked in.

“I don’t like this,” said Catherine. “It feels like a trap.”

“Too right,” said a voice. A large figure moved out from behind some packing cases before them. Looking back Buffy noticed that the car had parked across the alley’s entrance and two more people stepped out. There was a rattling sound up above. More people, a man and a woman, had stepped out onto the one fire escape that lead out of a warehouse flanking the passage.

“Stake,” said Buffy.

“I doubt it’ll work,” said Catherine, “I’m guessing these are Chen’s lot, otherwise I’d expect more of them to set a trap and be sure of taking you out.” She was

already scribbling. Buffy took out a stake anyway.

"The one at the end."

"That's the best way out," agreed Catherine, she held a loop of red string in one hand and a small post-it in the other. "Keep right behind us," she said to Xander and Willow.

"Believe me, we're not going anywhere," said Xander.

Catherine and Buffy charged. Buffy got to the man seconds before Catherine. He didn't even look nervous and was laughing, with his arms spread wide as she rammed the stake into his chest. She was not altogether surprised when nothing happened. As she staked him, however, he grabbed her and picked her up.

"Oi," she shouted.

"You," he said, "are coming with me."

Catherine was upon them. One hand whisked over Buffy's head. The man's eyes, which had been gloating into her's slammed shut. Buffy had to brace herself as he began to topple, his arms still clasped round her. A loop of red slipped over his head, Catherine ripped off the sticky and he was gone. It had taken less than a minute. Buffy risked a look over her shoulder as they raced out of the alley. No one was following them. The vampires were obviously too shocked to do anything, having discovered they weren't as invulnerable as they had thought.

"Cultural experience right?" asked Catherine, staring rather dubiously at the weak beer in front of her. She sipped it and made a face. "I'm surprised they even bother to sell this stuff. I must be the only person over twenty in the place."

Willow thought she looked rather uncomfortable. Conversation was not really flowing. It was mostly dominated by Xander who continued to regale Catherine with a mixture of local gossip, tales of their exploits and compliments on the way she'd dealt with the ambush earlier.

"Be careful," Buffy whispered to him, not as quietly as she might have done, "you're starting to dribble on the table."

"Tell us about these other vampires?" Willow asked, hoping to lighten the atmosphere a bit by concentrating on facts.

"It's all a bit complicated. No one really knows where vampires came from in the first place."

"Giles said it all started with some demon," put in Buffy.

Catherine nodded, "Yes, that is the most likely theory. Anyway, there has, for a long time, as far as anyone can tell, been a separate strain of vampirism in the East. The basic stuff is the same, drinking blood and immortality, but lots of the peripherals are different. Staking is no use, for instance, as you've seen. Oh there's all sorts of stuff, you can prevent the infection taking control of a corpse by burying it properly and there are lots of really weird cures. The main way of getting rid of the things is inscribing certain taoist prayers on the vampire's forehead - there are heaps of theories about why it works, none of which are terribly convincing - and obviously attaching paper with the prayer written on it also works. Once the prayer is removed then the vampire returns to animation unless bound in blessed rope,"

"The red string," said Buffy.

"Yes, in which case, once the prayer is removed the vampire is destroyed."

"Well, may I say, that it all sounds truly bizarre," said Xander.

"It may seem bizarre to us - but then staking and crosses seem bizarre to the Chinese."

"Can you let me have some of these prayers?" asked Buffy.

"It's not as simple as that, the prayer needs to contain a description of the vampire in question, of some sort, and a reference to the time it is applied. Basically you have to write them on the spot."

"Why is nothing ever simple?" complained Buffy.

"Where does Angel fit into all this?" asked Willow. This was was she really wanted to know and she guessed Buffy did too. Vampiric and other supernatural threats were tenapenny in their lives - but old and mysterious friends of Angel's were a novelty.

"He doesn't, so far as I know. In fact, I had no idea he was here. Last time I saw him was in Boston about 20, maybe 25 years ago."

"But you know each other," prompted Xander, "well," he added.

Catherine laughed, a short nervous bark, "We did. I must have been about sixteen at the time." She pursed her lips and then shook her head, "I was *so* in love with him. I used to sneak out the back window of the house we'd rented and snog him desperately in the garden. Heaven knows what Daddy thought was going on. Probably had no idea. He had fairly strong views about vampires. I imagine he'd have thought it was all right for Angel and I to fight together, but he'd have had a blue fit at the thought of us sleeping together."

"Sleeping together!" said Buffy, Willow and Xander, almost in unison.

Catherine laughed again, more naturally this time, "don't look so shocked. It was the seventies. But no, we never slept together. Angel wasn't having any of it.

I tried desperately hard to get into his knickers but no luck."

"Why not?" asked Willow in horrified fascination.

"Don't know - we never discussed it. At the time I thought I was being pretty subtle. You know, I'd turn up in some skimpy dress in the middle of the Boston winter and drape myself, I thought seductively, over the scenery while Angel would appear oblivious of the hint. I never actually brought the subject up - I thought subtle was the way to go. Mind you, looking back the word 'blatant' seems more appropriate. I guess he came over all responsible"

"That figures," grumbled Buffy. Willow guessed she now knew more than she'd ever wanted to about Catherine and Angel.

"You know," remarked Xander, "no one has ever dressed in a skimpy dress and draped themselves seductively in front of me."

Catherine smiled, "Well, wait 'til you're two hundred odd. It'll probably happen all the time. Teenage girls tend to have a real weakness for good looking older men."

Seeing the look on Buffy's face, Willow tried to interrupt. "I don't know Xander. Remember that dance Buffy did with you. That was pretty seductive."

"Thanks Willow," said Buffy, "I really needed that brought up right now."

Embarrassed, Willow lapsed into silence. The way things were going almost anything was going to be the wrong thing to say to Buffy. Xander, she could see, was determined to keep the conversation focussed on the subject of Catherine and Angel's relationship.

"So, is this going to be the big reunion?" he was asking. "Will you ride off happily into the sunset together. Avoiding the fact that the groom will be burnt to a crisp if you do."

Catherine laughed again, she sounded slightly embarrassed Willow thought, although it was hard to tell. "I don't think so..." she began but was interrupted by the arrival of Giles, looking deeply uncomfortable in the surroundings of the Bronze.

"Er, hello again," he said.

"Hello," replied Catherine, "I was just telling these three about Chinese vampires."

"Chinese ones, you mean the ones the taoists fight?"

"That's right."

Spike was in a bad mood. He paced around the interior of his deserted warehouse. Normally, there would have been a respectable crowd of vampires here, but not tonight. Only a few, if any at all, were likely to turn up tonight, or any night in the near future. He kicked an empty crate to pieces in sheer frustration.

"Spike's not happy," observed Drusilla.

"Too right I'm not happy," growled Spike, "The bloody wog is bloody indestructible."

"He is powerful," said Drusilla, staring up through the ceiling as if she saw something beyond, her pale face seemed almost luminous in the half light. "He is one of us. It's more important to get rid of the Slayer - she is the still the main threat. Get rid of her for me Spike," she pleaded.

Spike grunted noncommitally.

Drusilla rose, hugging herself with her arms. She still gazed into the distance a smile of almost rapture on her face. "He has so much power," she whispered, "can't you feel it." She looked at Spike, hunger and desire in her face. This didn't improve Spike's mood. He kicked at another box petulantly.

"Join him, love," said Drusilla, "join him for your Drusilla. She needs his power."

"It's alright love, I'll join him, at least until you're better." Spike twined his arms round her, "He'll want to get rid of the Slayer too. Maybe he's the solution to one of our problems."

"That's right," cooed Drusilla, stroking his hair, "he's a solution. He is strong and cunning. He's a bad enemy, Spike."

A door banged open at the far end of the hall. Spike looked up. Harry, a former associate, hurried in.

"I though you were off with the wog," said Spike hostilely.

"Come off it Spike. What choice did I have? he made his terms pretty clear."

"Join me or die. Yes I was there too. "

"He'll be coming after you soon, you know."

"I know, is this supposed to be a friendly warning?"

"No," Harry glanced around nervously, as if expecting to find Chen lurking in the shadows. He dropped his voice to a whisper, "Something's changed, he can be destroyed."

Drusilla hissed quietly, curling her arms around Spike as if to hold him back.

"How?" asked Spike.

"I don't know. There was a plan to take out the Slayer and it went wrong."

"Nice to know it doesn't just happen to me," interrupted Spike, "what did she do?"

"I... I don't know, but one of Chen's lot didn't come back. According to the others it was like he was staked."

Spike smiled and kissed Drusilla, "You know you said he was a solution, love? Well, I think I might have the start of a plan."

"What's your interest in all this?" asked Giles. They had moved back to the library. Buffy had suggested a vote on staying at the Bronze. But Giles and Catherine had simply got up and left, leaving Buffy, Willow and Xander to follow or not as they chose. Angel was waiting for them when they arrived. Catherine had smiled at him and he'd smiled nervously back. Buffy wondered if that was significant or not.

"My family has been fighting vampires since way back when, much like yours."

"Your family?" interrupted Giles.

"I'm a Harker."

"Goodness, Charles Harker's daughter?"

"That's right."

"We all thought you were the next slayer for a bit."

"Yes, wishful thinking on Daddy's part. If he'd stopped to think about it he'd have realized it was utter nonsense, but I must have been 5 or 6 before he finally gave up on the idea."

"I met your father once. It was a while back. He'd come to consult our library, something to do with ghosts of vampires, I think."

"Oh yes, we had some trouble up in Scotland. Daddy went haring off down south as soon as we realized what we were up against. We had no clue how to deal with something stakes just passed straight through."

"Fascinating, I must look it up," Giles started towards the stacks.

Buffy coughed meaningfully, "don't you think the current problem is just a bit more pressing?"

"Oh, yes," Giles stopped looking a bit non-plussed and slightly disappointed.

"You've still not explained how you know about these Chinese vampires," Buffy prompted Catherine.

"Right, well, at some point Daddy made some contact with the Chinese side of things, just after the war, I think. The situation is a lot different out there. There

is a sort of unofficial, uneasy truce between the government and the vampires. An understanding that if the vampires keep their activity low key then they won't be sought out and destroyed."

Buffy boggled, "You mean vampires are part of the system?"

"Maybe it's a communist thing," hazarded Willow.

"I think it goes a lot further back than Chairman Mao. It's a very hierarchical society. In Europe there was once a time when a significant subset of the nobility were vampires. In the same way, there was a time when a significant subset of the Chinese nobility were vampires. Unlike in Europe however, where the vampires by and large kept themselves to themselves and didn't get involved much in politics, in China, the vampires did get involved. Perhaps they retained some sense of family, who knows? You got vampiric factions lining up against each other in similar ways to the mortal factions, dealing with mortal leaders on the quiet and becoming part of mortal strategic thinking. Mao found them uniquely useful. Occasionally he would give them the nod and havoc would reign somewhere. He saw it as part of the process of revolution or something."

"... and now they've come to Sunnydale," said Buffy.

"One has certainly gone walkabout. The details aren't clear. I'm guessing there is some political struggle behind it. The vampires tipped off the Chinese government. The Chinese don't want the US government working with vampires, who they regard as some sort of secret weapon, so they tipped us off. They all want this chap got rid of with the minimum of fuss."

"You're here on behalf of the Chinese government?" asked Xander.

"No, they simply alerted me to the situation. This vampire has been hiding out in the Historic China exhibition."

"The one at the museum?" asked Willow.

Catherine nodded, "He's not there anymore though, I checked this morning."

"But still," protested Buffy picking up on Xander's thoughts, "if we get rid of this bloke then we'll basically be doing what China wants."

"Hey, she agrees with me!", said Xander surprised.

"Don't let it go to your head," murmured Willow.

"Is that a problem?" asked Catherine.

"Well, you say they want us to stop this vampire helping our government against China. Now, I don't know about anyone else, but that sounds like helping China against America," Buffy continued to push the point, although she wasn't really sure why. Catherine seemed too self-assured and confident about the whole thing for her liking.

"She has a point," said Willow, loyally.

"But the Chinese are wrong," said Catherine. "Vampires aren't some secret weapon that act on behalf of the government. Historically they've failed to deliver as often as they have actually delivered. It's just tradition and wilful blindness which makes the Chinese think they have some sort of deal. If anything the vampires who tipped the government off about this one are using them."

"In which case we're helping the vampires!" said Buffy. "We're back to 'you're the Slayer and you slay vampires regardless of anything else.' He's not even my sort of vampire."

"If America goes the way of China then you won't be able to just go out and slay vampires. They will effectively have legal protection, certainly the more powerful ones will," persisted Catherine.

"I can't really see Buffy up in court for Vampire slaying," said Willow.

"Oh she wouldn't be prosecuted for that, but she'd be prosecuted for murder, assault or kidnapping, or something similar."

"How very X-files," said Buffy sarcastically. "One massive government conspiracy."

"Listen, if your security services don't already know about the existence of vampires, in fact, if they're not aware that Sunnydale has some attraction for them then they are *really* bad at their jobs. Do you believe that you are the only four people in America who know about Vampires and the Slayer?"

"There were the men who took away Marcie," said Willow.

"I'm still not buying it," said Buffy. "I can see it would be very convenient for China but I don't see why I should help them out against America."

Giles looked puzzled, "This is unusually patriotic for you. I have to agree with Catherine. We can not afford to let vampires become an accepted part of the system."

Angel nodded seriously, "He has to be stopped."

"Somehow I just knew you two would take her side," said Buffy.

"Excuse me, have I missed something?" asked Catherine, "when did we start being on different sides?"

A very promising argument was about to start when the door to the library was suddenly thrown back with a bang. Spike stood framed in the entrance and laughed.

Act 3

Buffy began to run towards Spike shouting “Stake someone”. He was too fast for them. Willow had been standing nearest the door and he lunged for her. By the time Buffy had crossed half the distance he had Willow in a head lock.

“Let’s not be hasty now,” said Spike. “I just want a friendly chat, although I think I might hold onto this little thing as insurance.” He gave Willow a shake and she made a stifled noise halfway between a scream and a gasp of pain. Buffy heard Catherine draw her sword.

“Impressive,” remarked Spike, although there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “I suggest you’re careful where you point that thing. Take one step closer, any of you, and I’ll break her neck.” He shook Willow again for emphasis.

“What do you want?” asked Angel.

“I have a little problem.”

“My heart weeps,” said Buffy.

“You know, I was hoping you’d say that. Here am I, no one to turn to in the whole world, and I thought, I thought ‘I know a girl: pretty, intelligent, brave. I’m sure,‘ I thought, ‘if I appeal to her. Call out in my hour of need, as it were. I’m sure,‘ I thought, ‘she’d be only too willing to help out,‘ and I was right. My faith in humanity is restored.”

“Ha, ha,” said Buffy, “so what do you want.”

“I have a small, what you might call, political problem. Nothing I can’t handle, but any help would be appreciated.”

“A political problem,” said Buffy.

“Xin Chen,” said Catherine.

“If you mean the wog, then yes. Give the woman a banana, I’m glad to see you already appreciate the full complexity of the situation.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Giles. “You want us to help you get rid of this Chinese person, umm...”

“Xin Chen,” put in Catherine.

“Errr, yes, Xin Chen.”

“That’s right. He’s poaching on my territory. He’s organizing the vampires and I’m sure you don’t want that.”

“So what’s the deal,” asked Xander, “what do you want us to do?”

“I’m going to arrange a little meeting. The wog and me, to sort things out. We agree numbers. Now, I’m asking, friendly like, whether you would consider being part of my team?”

“Why?” asked Buffy.

Spike sighed, “Because the wog’s lot are immune to stakes. But, from what I hear, you took one out. Without me you can’t get close enough to take him and without you, I can’t do anything even if I am close enough.”

“Why should we help you?” persisted Buffy.

“You mean apart from the fact that this little lady comes with me if you refuse?” Spike gave Willow another shake. “No skin off my nose. If you won’t help, I’ll strike a genuine deal with him - then you’ll have both of us to worry about. Your choice.”

“You’re bluffing,” said Angel, “you don’t have any followers left.”

“All the more reason for me to make a deal with him. So no deal then,” Spike pushed Willow’s head to one side and snarled.

“Umm, Buffy?” said Willow.

“No wait!” said Buffy.

“Deal?” asked Spike.

“He’s right you know,” said Giles, “despicable as he is. I’d rather be fighting Spike than him and this Xin, ummm, chap.”

“How do we know you’re on the level?” asked Catherine.

“You don’t,” said Spike.

“Tell you what,” suggested Catherine, “let us have the girl back, as a sign of good faith, and 24 hours to think about it. Then you can have your answer.”

“And where do we meet for me to get this answer? I’m not so stupid I’m going to walk into some trap you’ve set up.”

“Phone me,” carefully Catherine put down the sword. Then opening her handbag, she scribbled something on a scrap of paper and cautiously approached Spike with her arms held wide. “This is my mobile number,” she held it out.

Spike watched her closely for a second or two.

“All right then,” he said. In one movement he pushed Willow at her and snatched the paper. By the time Willow and Catherine had picked themselves off the floor, he’d already gone.

“Well,” said Catherine, brushing herself down, “local colour, I suppose.”

“You could say that,” said Angel with a slight smile.

“Yeah, local colour,” said Buffy, “just a provincial vampire, nothing special.”

“Are you OK?” Catherine asked Willow.

“I guess,” said Willow. “That was pretty intense. Are you going to take the deal?”

Buffy noticed that Willow was asking Catherine, not her.

“No,” said Buffy firmly, “we are not going to take the deal.”

“Buffy, are you sure about this?” asked Giles.

"As far as I'm concerned, anything that makes Spike happy is out of the question. I've already made it clear I have some reservations about this whole situation. I say it's clearly Spike's problem, and Catherine's too, if she chooses to make it so. "

"We can't just, like, not do anything," said Willow.

"Watch me. Look, Spike wouldn't have come to us, unless he was really against this Xin person so, I say, let him deal with it. Catch him helping us in a similar situation."

There was a short pause.

"But..." began Catherine.

"Look, I'm sure you're a really nice person and you have good reasons for being here, but I have the world's worst history assignment which has to be in by tomorrow. So if you'll excuse me," and Buffy walked out of the room.

"Wait," said Catherine running after her.

"What?" asked Buffy.

"At least take this," Catherine hurriedly scribbled a post it.

"What for?" asked Buffy, "you said they have to be written the spot."

"I said they had to be tailored to the time and the vampire. That'll work on Chen for, umm, probably the next 24 hours or so. 'Soon' is a fairly vague concept. You know you're a target, at least take some defense."

Reluctantly Buffy took the scrap of paper, then turned on her heel and left.

"You know," said Catherine, "I don't think Buffy likes me all that much."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Giles, "she gets rather worked up about History. She's just worrying about her assignment. I'll talk to her tomorrow evening. Hopefully she'll have calmed down by then."

"If you say so," said Catherine dubiously.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Willow the next day. They were in a school corridor between classes. It was the first chance Willow had had to talk to Buffy alone. She sympathized with Buffy's dislike of Catherine. She wasn't all that keen on her herself, not because of Xander's rather exaggerated pretense at admiration (he'd spent most of the morning extolling her virtues and harping on about how he could appreciate what Angel saw in her). Willow could have lived without seeing him make such a fool of himself in an attempt to drive a wedge between Buffy

and Angel, but it was hardly the first time. However she, too, felt that Catherine seemed to be representing a lot of dubious interests.

"Absolutely sure. If that Catherine person's so convinced, then she can handle it. Giles and Angel can help her if they feel like it."

"And you wouldn't mind?"

"What's to mind?"

"Well, she did go out with Angel. It was a long time ago but," Willow shrugged, "you know."

"I know what?" asked Buffy aggressively, stopping still and turning to face Willow, blocking her path, while the rest of the school flowed around them.

"Well, you know, you don't know how he still might feel, or what might be going on."

"Nothing happened between them right? You heard what she said. Angel wasn't interested."

"She said she kissed him."

"Well, so have I, no big deal. If I was going to get worked up about someone who Angel kissed twenty years ago..."

"Oh," said Willow, "so you're not even a little bit jealous?"

Buffy lightened up, "OK, so maybe I'm a little bit jealous. But it's not as if Angel and I are even dating properly."

"I'd like to know what's going on. I'd like to know what Angel thinks is going on."

"Have you ever tried finding out what Angel thinks?"

Willow shook her head, "but then, I'm not the person who's not dating Angel."

Buffy made a face.

"Why don't you go round to Angel's place, after school," suggested Willow, "and ask him?"

"Ask him what?"

"Well, about Catherine, you don't have to say you want to know what they're up to, just can you trust her. Ask his advice about this Chen business, you know," Willow shrugged.

"OK, maybe I'll drop round."

"Can't hurt," said Willow as they went into class. She hoped Buffy hadn't noticed that, behind her back, her fingers were crossed.

Catherine had never been all that good at subtlety. The complexities of human behaviour tended to pass her by. On the whole she figured that if she needed to know, someone would tell her. However, Buffy clearly had a problem, and Giles was obviously even less tuned in to the sixteen year-old brain than she was. She needed Buffy's help. She very much doubted she could take Chen alone, certainly not now he'd started to build a power base. Racking her brains to work out what the problem might be, one nasty thought had sprung to mind, based on her own past. The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed, particularly when she thought about some of the questions the teenagers had asked her. She rather rapidly convinced herself that her suspicions were correct and shortly afterwards had decided who was to blame. Worked up into what she considered a righteous fury, she went to confront the culprit.

"You're involved with Buffy, aren't you?" she challenged when Angel opened the door.

An expression crossed his face which she remembered from years back. At the time it had made her heart melt at the tragedy of the whole thing. Twenty years later it merely irritated her. She pushed past him into a gloomy, sparsely furnished room. Heavy blinds covered small windows. She could picture him here, enjoying his depression.

"Idiot," she almost shouted, "you short-sighted, stupid, selfish, idiot," she spluttered searching for more effective insults.

"Are we arguing again?" he asked.

"Yes, we are arguing again. We are arguing because your emotional incompetence is complicating that young girl's life unnecessarily and making my job more difficult to boot."

"Who are you calling an emotional incompetent? I wasn't the one who ran away, as I recall."

"I was sixteen, Angel. Daddy was going home, were you seriously expecting me to stay in Boston with you? You could have come with us, you know."

"To England?" there was an edge of anger in his voice.

"Yes, to England. What's the problem, you're prepared to kiss an English girl but not return to her country?"

Angel turned away. There was a sudden silence. Catherine waited for his reply, determined to make him answer her. A clock was ticking somewhere and she counted it five times before he answered.

"This is different," he said.

"This is not different! That is the weakest excuse in the book. You're just a serial cradle-snatcher, you realize that? I was lucky, my life went on, but you could seriously ruin Buffy's life, get her killed even."

"You think I don't know that."

"You didn't show much sign of knowing it 20 years ago."

"Can we just, for a moment, get off the subject of your apparently broken heart and talk about Buffy!" demanded Angel angrily.

The sudden change of tack threw her, "My broken heart!"

"Yes, this is all about you, isn't it? That's why you're here, isn't it? You knew Sunnydale was a Hellmouth and so I'd probably be here. You didn't need to come. You could have contacted Giles. You would've known how."

Catherine was stunned, he was turning the conversation against her, trying to put her into the wrong, "I don't believe the arrogance of you. You assume that I'm still pining after you after all this time!"

"Look me in the eye and tell me that this conversation isn't all about the fact that I've got over you, just as easily as you claim you got over me!"

"This conversation is about the fact that you've apparently learnt nothing since then."

"You think that do you. You don't think I don't worry about it all the time. You think I don't know where this will probably all lead?"

"Then why are you doing it?"

"I'm trying not to. But I can't just up and leave. Leave her to cope alone with everything my kind may throw at her. I have to try and protect her. I've been trying to do most of it through Giles, but it's not as easy to keep out of her way as I thought."

"Especially, when she'd prepared to show a bit of leg and collapse into your arms with a sigh at the first opportunity."

"Don't assume she's like you. She's old for her years."

Catherine ignored the insult, "Not judging by the way she was behaving last night."

"Oh, and you wouldn't have started a huge slanging match in her position? I thought she was pretty cool about it!"

"Cool! what kind of a word is cool."

"Do try and keep to the point and not follow Daddy's slavish interest in the English language."

Catherine felt that the argument had somehow got out of her control. It was supposed to be about his behaviour not hers and suddenly she was feeling on the defensive, obscurely she felt as though she was being compared to Buffy and

found wanting, “What exactly is the point?” she said, more irritably than angrily, thrown off her stride, playing for time to rebuild her anger and focus back on its cause.

“Buffy’s handling it all pretty well. Better than you, as far as I can see.”

“She may be, that doesn’t put you in the right.”

“I’m not sure I’m in the right. But I’m not going to run away from this one. I’ll do things differently this time.”

Catherine stopped, she had lost the momentum of her anger, “I wish I believed that. I wish I could believe you’ve thought hard about what happened between us. I wish I could believe that this time you knew what you were doing. Especially when she’s the Slayer of all people.”

“I wish I could too, but it can’t be helped.”

“You just muddle through, eh?”

“I just muddle through.”

There was a silence. Catherine’s rage had burnt itself out, but she still wasn’t happy. Worse, she was no closer to enlisting Buffy’s help. “What are you going to do about it?” she asked at last.

“Do?”

“You’ve got to talk to her about you and me. I may not be a psychologist, but even I can tell that she’s upset. Pretending everything is business as usual isn’t going to help.”

“I suppose not. I’m just not very good at... ”

“Personal stuff? yes, I know. Neither of us are. I guess that was half the problem. If I’m upset I just shout at people, and if you’re upset you go hide in a corner and pretend nothing is happening.”

“That’s not true.”

Catherine raised her hands in a gesture of surrender, “Let’s not argue about it. Talk to her, OK. If possible, talk to her before this Spike person phones and try and get her on side. We, I could use her help.”

Gradually it got dark, the shadows lengthening until they owned the alleyways and streets of Sunnydale. Across the town the undesirables were gathering on street corners, in warehouses and bars. The word had gone out, things were afoot. Tonight was the night. Even the mortal population felt it. People hurried home more quickly than usual, the atmosphere of suppressed violence frightening them

from the streets. By tomorrow there would be a hierarchy of vampires in Sunnydale or there would be Spike and his form of controlled anarchy.

Catherine met Spike under a disused railway arch some way out of town.

"You brought me a long way," she said.

"I wanted to make sure you couldn't engineer a set up."

He was flanked by five others, she noticed. Five, not many against the dozens Chen must have.

"Where are Buffy and Angel?" asked Spike.

"Waiting a call from me," she lied, "no point all of us walking into a trap."

"Do you know how to get rid of Chen," he asked.

"Yes, but I won't tell you until we're there. Let's call it an insurance policy."

"If you're going to call Buffy and Angel I suggest you do it now then," he said, "I'm meeting Chen for negotiation in the container lot to the west of town in 15 minutes."

"15 minutes, you're not leaving much time."

"So phone them."

Catherine switched on her phone and dialed Angel's number. He sounded tense when he answered. Things were, presumably, not going well with Buffy. Hurriedly she relayed the details of the meeting, conscious that Spike was listening. Thankfully, Angel didn't start trying to explain whether or not Buffy would be coming.

"They'll be there," she said.

"Guess what?" said Spike.

"What?" Catherine was always uneasy in situations like these but that unease suddenly deepened into a very deep foreboding. She thumbed redial.

"Change of plan," said Spike and he hit her.

Twenty years earlier Catherine would have dodged that blow. But twenty years earlier she had been quicker and more supple. The mobile phone beeped as someone picked up the call. Spike ground it underfoot.

Act 4

Angel wasn't at all confident about talking to Buffy. He waited for dark, sitting alone in his bare room, not sure whether he was waiting with impatience or reluctance. In three hours he hardly moved, pondering what he was going to say and also pondering his own feelings and actions. In the event he didn't have to go and find her. Buffy was knocking at his door in the later afternoon, before it was

dark enough for him to venture forth. She looked angry, he thought, although he wasn't sure. However, when she spoke, she sounded unconcerned.

"Hiya! I thought I'd just drop round."

"Hello," he said, aware that Buffy had never "just dropped round" before. There was a pause.

"Well, are you going to invite me in? I may not be a vampire but I don't really fancy forcing my way past you."

"Oh, yes," he stood back and let her in. She spotted a note Catherine had left with her mobile number on it almost immediately and walked across, picking it up and fiddling with the small piece of paper.

"Catherine's number," she said in a strange tone of voice, somewhere between a statement and a question.

"Yes, she dropped by earlier."

"I see."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about Catherine," he began and then stopped.

"It's probably about time. You dated her right?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of yes, or sort of no?"

"Sort of yes, it was a long time ago."

"But then you're an old guy, as you never miss the opportunity to point out to me. Will you get back together?"

"It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"It's over, it was over twenty years ago. It wasn't anything, not really. It wasn't like..."

"Like what?"

"Nothing," he mumbled, uncomfortably aware that he'd been through this once today already and the assertion hadn't gone down well then, however true it might have been.

"It wasn't like you and me?" she asked, he could hear the sarcasm in her voice. "I bet you say that to all the girl's," she added bitterly.

"No, honestly, apart from Catherine you're the only one. I just, it was just, I don't know. It's complicated."

"Yes, life is complicated, tell me about it," she looked painfully unhappy. "How come you were happy to date her and you're not happy to date me?"

"It's not like that."

"Oh, you view me just as a friend, right?"

Angel hesitated over what to say. He wanted to say that his feelings for her were so totally different from what he had felt for Catherine that, looking back on it, he couldn't understand how he had let himself believe there was anything there. But he didn't know how to say it in a way Buffy would believe and he wasn't even sure if it would be right to say such a thing, to burden her with it. He fell back on awkward denials, "No, I mean. It was a mistake. I shouldn't have dated her."

"So why did you?"

He shrugged, "I made a mistake. She was... I mean I didn't... I mean when a girl..."

"When a girl throws herself at a man, what's he supposed to do about it? It's not his fault. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"No!"

"So what are you trying to say."

"I made a mistake. I was lonely and for a while I didn't listen to my better judgment."

Buffy sighed to herself. She didn't really know what to say to this. It wasn't really unexpected, but it didn't seem to take things forward any. She still didn't really know how he felt about her nor did she seem any closer to finding out.

In the silence, the phone rang. Cautiously Angel picked it up glancing at Buffy as if asking her permission, "Hello?"

Buffy watched as Angel listened to someone at the other end reeling off instructions. Catherine, she guessed, not only because of the faintly English tone of the voice, as far as she could decipher it, but also because it was clearly someone who had no second thoughts about bossing Angel around. Angel put down the phone, "that was Catherine. We're to meet her and Spike in that container lot to the west."

"So now we go and do what she asks?" Buffy was still not at all sure she wanted any part of whatever Catherine was up to. Some of it was to do with her relationship with Angel, but some was because of that constricting feeling she had when forced to act simply because she was the Slayer.

The phone rang again, Angel picked it up.

"No one there," he said in surprise.

"So, it was a wrong number."

Angel looked at her with a worried expression.

"Why not check the number," asked Buffy. Seeing his bemused look she took the phone from him and read off the number, "another of your ex-girlfriends?" she asked archly.

"That's Catherine number," he said. Buffy pressed the buttons to return the call.

"Mailbox," she said. "She must have switched it off. I guess she pressed redial by mistake just beforehand."

"And if she didn't?" asked Angel.

Buffy made a face. Right now the last thing she wanted to do was go along with Catherine's plans. On the other hand, she couldn't actually stand by and let her be killed by Spike, or worse.

"I guess we better check out this container lot," she said. Obscurely she felt happier. Perhaps rescuing Catherine was a much simpler objective than the web of politics that surrounded Chen. Perhaps it was simply the possibility that Catherine had got something wrong that cheered her. "It's our best chance to rescue Catherine, if she is in trouble. With a bit of luck they won't know know I've got this," she produced the note Catherine had given her for getting rid of Chen, "which should at least give us an edge." She tucked it into the back pocket of her jeans, picked up her bag and grinned. "Let's go slay," she said.

When Catherine came to, she was bound and there was a bag over her head. She judged that she was in the back of a car. Patiently she waited until she felt the it stop. Spike spoke, "better tell me how to get rid of the wog, there's not much time left."

"Go to hell," she said.

"I'm still on your side, you know. Well, my side anyway. We're just doing things the more interesting way."

"You'll have to untie me."

"Wrong answer. Lots of vampires watching. If I untie you then it'll give the game right away."

"I guess you'll just have to hope Buffy turns up then," this was not exactly the witty and biting response Catherine would like to have given, but it was better than nothing.

"Buffy can get rid of him?"

"Buffy has something that might take him out if stuck to his head. Then again it might not," Catherine almost immediately regretted this, nerves had made her over chatty. She had told him too much. It suggested she might be expendable.

"But only him," she added, trying to rectify the mistake, "it won't take out any of his followers and only I know how to make more."

"Time's up," said Spike.

She heard the whir of a window descending.

"Why hello Spike," said a voice. It was a man's voice with what Catherine believed to be a Southern drawl, that made her think of big, ponderous, slow farmers. Big, ponderous, slow, murderous and racist, she reminded herself, and wondered briefly what the American south was really like. "Finally admitted you're beat," there was an undercurrent of gloating pleasure in the voice.

"Hi, Nathaniel, as you can see, I've humbly recognised a superior and come to join the fold. I've even brought a small offering."

The southern man laughed, a slow "Ha, ha," that was almost spoken. "You know Spike. I never thought I would see you kow tow. I'm looking forward to having you under me."

"I bet you are," said Spike, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

Catherine heard the side door open. She was lifted out, carried some distance and tied to a chair. Then the bag was removed. Standing before her was a large black man, Nathaniel, presumably. So much for the burning crosses idea. Catherine shook her head at her own prejudice. Above her was the night sky, but she was surrounded by the gloomy forms of stacked containers. One, to her right, had been opened. In the entrance sat Xin Chen in a large chair, like a throne. He looked like he'd been old when he was sired. There were deep weathered wrinkles on his face and the skin in his cheeks sagged. His hair though, belied this, being thick and jet black. It hung loose and long over his shoulders. In the darkness his eyes were black pits with no sign of white. His finger nails were as long as small knives and Catherine had no doubt they were as deadly. The obvious fear and reverence shown by the vampires around suggested that there was a great deal of raw power in that small wizened form. She knew very little about him, but this was clearly no small time, weak renegade. This was one of the elders of the Chinese tribes. She had not been warned and had not expected him to be this powerful. She was afraid.

Behind him were the dim forms of more furniture and more people. Spike stood before him, a respectable distance away. Nathaniel moved back to stand by Chen, a bodyguard.

"And this is the sign of your good faith?" asked Chen. His head turned slowly to regard her. His dark eyes looked into hers and she almost felt the tendrils of his intelligence probing into her brain. She focused on her fear, hoping the rising sense of panic would block out the knowledge that she could kill him.

"This is part one," said Spike, "part two should be arriving soon."

The gaze switched away. Catherine drew short sharp breaths, the fear still with her, clawing at her mind.

"And what is part two?"

"The Slayer, what else?" Spike grinned.

"You have captured the Slayer?"

"She is on her way, as we speak. She shouldn't be expecting trouble though, so a well thought out ambush would be sufficient."

Chen nodded and spoke a few quiet words to Nathaniel. Nathaniel left his side briefly and began issuing orders. Catherine saw several vampires slip away into the darkness between the containers.

Cautiously, Buffy and Angel entered the lot. There was no one to be seen, but it was a large place. They began to thread their way between the large containers. Angel heard the sound of feet running on metal. He glanced up but could see no one. There was the sound of more running and this time he saw a shadow of a man briefly skylined against the stars.

"They're up on the containers," he said.

"Tell me about it," said Buffy.

They proceeded in. Buffy removed two stakes from her bag and handed him one. They had walked maybe hundred yards further when two vampires jumped down, one in front and one behind them. Buffy had staked the first almost before she landed. She ignored it and grabbed for Buffy. Apparently expecting the move Buffy danced to one side and delivered two quick kicks to the vampire's knees, knocking her legs from under her. She ran up the passageway. Angel moved to follow, but someone grabbed him from behind. Buffy was fighting two more vampires up ahead. One had a hold on her, but she was kicking out at the other keeping them back.

Angel saw no more, the adrenaline, or whatever it was fueled him in combat, pumped round his system like blood. He could feel the violence rising within him. He snarled, turning to face his opponent, knowing that his true face must have appeared at the promise of blood. The vampires before him hesitated and he leapt at them. He didn't think to use the stake, assuming, if he thought at all, that they would all be immune. He succumbed to the instinct to bite and tear. He felt hair in his hands and realised he was dragging a woman, long blonde locks wrapped

again and again around his fist. She was screaming, fear in her voice, while he used her as a shield, thrusting her between himself and the others. She struggled in his grip, but he was older and stronger than she. He shifted his grip to her neck before she decided that her hair was expendable and let him tear it out so she could escape. Someone else was clubbing at him from behind with a baseball bat. He tried to swing round, to bring his shield up between them, but a blow hit the back of his head and made him stagger. In that moment the woman dragged herself free and he felt hands clutch him and drag him down. He struggled for balance, but the second of disorientation had undone him. The woman threw herself back at him, leaping at his chest, knocking him backwards, fatally unbalancing him so that the hands could drag him to the ground. She sat on his chest, screaming and pummeling his face with her fists while the others, holding his arms and legs prevented him from movement or escape. Then someone prised the stake he had been holding from his hand and passed it to her. Her eyes widened and an unpleasant smile gradually appeared on her face. She placed the stake carefully over his heart and then drew it back to plunge in.

Act 5

Buffy managed to kick the man before her in the head, knocking him over backwards. A woman was holding Buffy from behind too far off the ground for Buffy to get a purchase and throw her. Instead Buffy curled up her legs and kicked backwards. The woman yelped in surprise and dropped her. She turned to see how Angel was doing. He was pinned to the ground by four vampires. A woman sat astride his chest, long tangled blonde hair hanging down her back. One hand was raised high holding a stake, preparing to plunge it into his heart. Angel was struggling, his head, the only thing not pinned to the ground, thrashing from side to side. He caught Buffy's eye and she saw in it both relief and silent entreaty. She couldn't reach him in time, she knew.

"Alright, stop!" shouted Buffy. "We surrender." The woman hesitated and looked at one of the men holding Angel down. There was a pause, then he got up and looked thoughtfully between Buffy and the still prone Angel.

"OK," he said, "you," he indicated the woman who had been holding Buffy, "take her."

Rather gingerly the woman took hold of her, then with more confidence placed her in an arm lock. At a sign from the man, the four holding Angel dragged him to his feet.

"We'll hang on to your boyfriend," said the leader, "any false moves and Maria, here, will be more than happy to stake the bastard. Do I make myself clear?"

Buffy nodded, the blonde woman stood behind Angel, clutching the stake, its tip pointed into his back. She looked wild eyed, frightened and angry.

"What's your story?" asked the man, turning to Angel. "She's the Slayer you know."

Angel smiled, but said nothing.

Giles and Willow stared dubiously at the ladder Xander was holding.

"Honestly," he whispered, "we'll be much less conspicuous if we travel over the containers."

"But if Buffy needs help we'll be 12 feet too high," whispered back Willow.

"We'll take the ladder with us, that way we can get down if necessary."

Willow looked at Giles for support.

"Umm... he's probably right," said Giles, "they may have patrols on the ground."

"Right!" said Xander and began to climb.

They were led to the central clearing where Chen sat in state, surrounded by what Buffy guessed were a mixture of vampires of his own making and the local home grown variety who had flocked to his banner. Buffy felt a frisson of fear in his presence, the tingling sensation she so often felt in the presence of vampires coupled with a sudden restriction in her chest. He didn't look so impressive, she thought, apart from the freaky eyes, perhaps he had some 'be afraid of me' magic. Spike was standing near Chen, Catherine's sword resting over one shoulder. Catherine, herself was tied to a chair before him. She didn't look too good. She was pale and there was a smudge of blood on her forehead. She was conscious though, and looked up as they approached.

"11" she said.

Buffy wondered if maybe she was concussed. Perhaps she was trying to tell them how many vampires there were, but there were easily more than eleven. She

looked at Angel. He looked back but gave no hint of his thoughts, not even a smile of recognition. Then he turned away looking at Spike and Buffy could see that he smiled. He had stepped forward taking his captors with him.

"Spike," he said.

Spike looked momentarily confused then his expression changed to one Buffy could only describe as amused cunning. He moved to meet Angel, his arms wide. Confused, the vampires holding Angel let go of him and the two embraced. Buffy could see Spike's lips moving by Angel's ear.

"Now wait a minute," began the leader of the group who had captured them.

"Angelus is on our side," said Spike, "I set him to watch the girl."

"You were keeping a bit quiet about it weren't you?" said the leader suspiciously.

"I thought she still might run," said Angel. "Let's face it, you wouldn't have captured her in the first place if she hadn't believed you were about to kill me."

The man shook his head, but clearly had no answer.

"You've brought her?" asked Chen. Buffy saw Angel tense as Chen looked at him. His eyes widened and a small muscle began to beat in his neck.

Spike gestured to Buffy, stepping between Angel and Chen at the same time, "Here she is," he said, "pretty as a pumpkin and twice as tasty. What are you going to do? Kill her or turn her?" He moved back towards her, pulling her head back. His face morphed into the true visage of his kind. Buffy's blood ran cold, just how far did she trust Angel? She could probably free herself from the arm lock and Spike only held her hair, for the moment. 'Cordelia will have a field day,' she though to herself, imagining turning up to school the next day with half her hair torn out. Beyond Spike, there was a snarl.

"She's mine!" said Angel. Spike was roughly pushed aside and now Angel's distorted visage filled her view.

"Mind my hair!" she said, a little crossly, "I'd rather not be dead *and* look like a crow's nest."

Angel's face bent down towards hers. If he'd been human she would have felt his breath on her cheek. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her and the next she felt a flutter of fear that he might actually bite. One hand slipped round her waist and into her back pocket. "We should do this more often," she murmured quietly. Angel glanced up at that and she could have sworn he smiled, but later she wasn't so sure.

Angel straightened and began to move away towards Chen, but Spike stepped between them. "She's a tasty morsel, my friend, but I think our new ally gets first choice." Something changed hands.

"Is the gift acceptable?" asked Spike, stepping towards Chen himself.

"Indeed," the elderly vampire nodded, "you have shown your worth. If you wish to join my special guard there is a place for you."

Spike grinned taking another step towards Chen. One of the two vampires flanking the Chinese emperor, a large black man, took a step towards Spike in a protective fashion.

"I imagine," said Spike, "we're talking a lowly position in the special guard," he took a step forwards again, causing the Black man to square up to him, "under Nathaniel here. And I've never liked being at the bottom of the heap." He took another swift step forward swinging Catherine's sword at the same time, staking Nathaniel before he had time to react.

Spike brushed off the dust as he walked forward "and let's face it, Nat was a prat." Chen rose. His face registered little emotion, but nearly every vampire in the place, with the exception of Spike, fell back a step. Angel glanced round at Buffy and she was startled to see real fear in his eyes. Catherine whimpered. Buffy felt the clutching sensation at her heart again. She realised her breathing was coming in short gasps. The woman holding her let her grip go slack. As unobtrusively as possible Buffy let her arm drop slipping it from the woman's hand, but she resisted the almost overwhealming temptation to flee. Everyone apart from Spike and herself seemed paralysed, hanging onto Chen's next words.

"Such crude techniques will not be effective against me." Every syllable dripped with venom. Spike stepped right up to him, "I rather gathered that," he said and stuck a post it note to Chen's forehead. Chen fell back as if he'd suddenly been transformed into the waxwork he had initially pretended to be. Spike stepped over him. Buffy, possibly the only person in the place who'd been watching Spike and not Chen, saw him unclench his left hand and saw dark stains on his nails. Even Spike, it seemed, had not been as cool in Chen's presence as he was making out.

"Well," said Spike, "that sorts that out. Now," he addressed the assembled vampires, "I hope I won't have to worry about any foolish attempts against my life from the rest of you. Harry," he added. Buffy had failed to notice a lithe, dark haired vampire, who had sidled up to Angel. At Spike's word Harry grabbed at him. But Angel must have been prepared. One hand was already in the inside pocket of his jacket and as Harry grabbed him, Angel turned and plunged in the concealed stake. He then charged at Spike.

Taking her cue from Angel, Buffy swung round to punch the woman behind her so she staggered back, this one was immune to stakes Buffy remembered, cursing inwardly, as she drove the vampire back with a flurry of punches. She sensed people rushing down on her from behind. Praying this would be the 'right'

sort of vampire she bent over and pulled out the two stakes she'd had hidden in her boots. She didn't even bother to look but drove both backwards simultaneously. She felt a weight on each and then nothing. There were days when she could tell the location of vampires with her eyes closed.

She risked a glance at the rest of the scene. Angel and Spike were struggling over Catherine's sword. Catherine had stood up as best she could, still tied to the chair, and was moving out of the way, with luck she'd find somewhere inconspicuous to hide.

"Well help me you fools!" shouted Spike. Several of the vampires began to close in, the woman, Maria, at their head.

There was a clatter at her feet. She looked down to see a stake with a Sunnydale High branded post-it note attached. On it were scrawled several Chinese characters.

"The one in front of you," shouted Giles from somewhere, "but do it quickly, it'll only last a minute or two. I think."

Buffy thumped the woman before her again. Almost without thinking, she picked up the note in the brief time while the woman reeled and stuck it in place. The vampire paused a dazed expression on her face. Buffy hesitated, waiting for the woman to fall over.

Instead her eyes suddenly cleared and she sprang at Buffy again. "Oh dear," she Giles say. Buffy backed away until she felt the wall of a container behind her. At least this way she didn't have to watch her back.

"Aha! I see," Giles was right above her, she realised, juggling a torch, pen, note pad and Chinese dictionary. "Try this," he handed another down. Once again Buffy stuck it to the woman's forehead and was relieved to see her topple over. A ladder was lowered and Xander scrambled down it followed by Willow and Giles. Buffy surveyed the scene. Most of the attention was focused on where Spike and Angel were struggling.

"Willow, Xander, free Catherine," she said.

"OK," Willow's eyes were wide with alarm. But Catherine had not yet been attacked by any vampires, clearly regarded as no threat. Once free, Willow and Xander would be as safe with her as anywhere else.

"Giles, I hope you have these notes sorted."

"Well, umm.., almost, it's more complicated than it seems."

Buffy could no longer see Angel just a scrum of people. She hoped he was still alive under there.

"Follow me," she said and ran at them.

Several she simply picked off and flung to one side. If she saw an opening she staked, about half the time this worked. Giles stayed at her shoulder, handing her more stakes and occasionally post it notes. She quickly found Angel. He was grappling Spike who was still holding Catherine's sword, but in the confusion he had no room to swing it. About three other vampires were hanging onto Angel's back and arms trying to pull him off Spike. One of these was Maria, still clutching a stake, but unable to use it because of the man on Angel's back, although she had clearly tried, Buffy could see the holes in Angel's jacket where Maria must have thrust it in. The rest of the vampires were rather uselessly pressed around the fight, trying to help by swinging blows, but too far from Angel to land anything but the feeblest punches.

"One for her," Buffy said to Giles, nodding towards Maria. He started scribbling.

Buffy staked the vampire on Angel's back and was pleased to see it dissolve. Maria and the other on his arms were immune, but Maria let go of Angel and turned to face her.

Giles was muttering by her ear "... about six foot, so tall, umm... let's see blonde, quite shapely I suppose..."

"Get on with it Giles," she hissed, kicking at Maria to keep her away from Angel.

Giles handed her a note. Maria went down. Giles was already scribbling another. Buffy eyed the field. There were about five vampires left here, not counting Spike and the other one fighting Angel. Beyond the scrum she could see Willow and Xander rushing around with red string. Catherine was marching towards her, a stake tucked under one arm, pen and paper in her hands. Buffy couldn't see anyone else, presumably they had fled or Catherine, Willow and Xander had disposed of them.

Spike had obviously taken all this in as well. As Buffy stuck a note to the last vampire grappling Angel, Spike dropped Catherine's sword. Angel let go of Spike to grab for it. Spike rapidly stepped backwards winked once at Buffy as he caught her eye and then fled.

It was all over pretty quickly after that. With both Giles and Catherine writing notes, three of the last five fell in the next minute. The remaining two tried to flee. Angel grabbed one with a flying tackle whilst Xander tripped up the other, kicking a crate into her path. Buffy, pursuing, sat on her until Giles arrived.

"I need a strong drink," said Catherine. Buffy, looking at her properly for the first time that evening, saw that her whole body was shaking.

"You're in shock," said Giles, "what happened? Did anyone hit you? Were

you knocked out?"

"Yes, Spike," she said. There was a distinct tremor in her voice. "I think I'm going to throw up."

"We're taking you to hospital," said Giles firmly. "We can do a post mortem and compare notes in the morning, but you should be checked for concussion. At any rate, you should be somewhere warm."

Amazed, Buffy watched as Catherine meekly let Giles take her back to his car.

The next morning they met up in the Library, those who could make it through the autumn sunshine, that is. Catherine had bought a new mobile phone on the way over and was attempting to access any messages left on her old one. She looked much better. She was certainly back to her old bossy self. She planned to stay in Sunnydale a few more days and mop up the remains of any of Chen's followers.

"Where did you all come from last night?" she asked, eyeing Giles, Xander and Willow.

"I thought it best to change the plan," said Buffy, grinning. "If it was a trap then someone was going to have to spring it, but that didn't mean everyone had to get caught. It also seemed a good idea to have a few extra stakes concealed about our persons."

Catherine made a gesture, a sort of sketchy salute, and there was a glint of approval in her eye.

"What was that 11 stuff about?" Buffy wanted to know.

"I got the idea when I was young from a girl called Sam. If you often work with someone, you can work out a secret code for situations like that. So Angel and I worked one out, although we didn't actually get to use it much."

"So what's an 11?"

"Pretend you're one of them and get the secret weapon from me."

"But he took the post-it from me," said Buffy.

"Just as well really, since I wasn't carrying any."

"And Angel just worked that out?"

Catherine smiled, "He was always bright that way." She turned back to her messages.

"So, you and Angel?" began Xander, "have you finally umm... consummated your relationship?"

"Mmm?" Catherine was listening intently to her phone.

"I'm sure they have," said Willow sarcastically, sotto voce, "probably while she was throwing up all over the hospital porter last night."

Xander had the good grace to look a little ashamed of himself. Catherine, switched off her phone and was looked around in an agitated fashion.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Willow.

"Yes, umm, Roy, that's my youngest," Catherine looked distracted and paused for a moment waving one hand, "umm, he's six," she said unnecessarily. "He's broken his leg,"

"Youngest?" asked Xander.

"I'd probably be getting back," Catherine began digging through the bag, "does anyone have a phone number of a travel agent. I need tickets as soon as possible. I'd be happier if I was there. Bob, that's my husband, said Roy's OK, but..."

"Husband?" asked Xander.

"Yes," said Willow firmly, "Catherine's husband just rang to say that their youngest son has broken his leg."

Buffy was smiling broadly, "Exactly, and now she wants to go home. It's OK, Giles has pretty much worked out the prayers and... "

"Well, I could use a bit more time to study..." Giles began to protest. Willow hastily trod on his foot and he shut up with a yelp, giving her a sharp look. Willow smiled back sweetly.

"I'll get rid of the last of those vampires," Buffy finished.

"Thanks," Catherine nodded vaguely, hardly seeming to have noticed what was going on. She was already packing things into her handbag. "I'll get back to my hotel and try and book a plane."

She headed out, "thanks for all the help and rescuing me and stuff. You saved my life you know," she paused awkwardly by the library door. "So thanks. Give Angel my love." And she was gone.

"No problem," said Buffy.

Chapter 4

Season 2b

A Primeval Short Story

Helen left the storage facility at a run, uncomfortably aware that the place would be crawling with the military before too long. It had all, she reflected, gone rather fubar. She was working hard not to think too closely about Stephen. Of course, bloody Nick had to stay to bloody watch, which was probably just as well, even if she couldn't see what purpose it served. There was an anomaly that should open in a couple of weeks which would take her to one of the nexus points. She was going to have to lie low somewhere until then.

The anomaly was inside a disused warehouse under a motorway arch. Helen itched to be gone. Piecing together the aftermath of Leek's little failed coup was a frustrating business. Either Lester or that Lewis woman had a stranglehold on the press which appeared to magically extend online. Leek and Stephen had officially died in a minor terrorist incident. Stephen got an official commendation. Leek didn't. There had been funerals. Helen hadn't gone. What, after all, was the point? Helen was ready and waiting when the anomaly opened and she headed straight through but, as she went, she recognised the sensation of being followed. There had been someone else in the warehouse. Whatever, let them take what chances they could.

4.1 The Whirligig of Time

And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges

– Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

Helen stretched as she re-entered the twentieth century. It was an uncontrolled gesture. Humanity made her feel cramped and hemmed in. The way the houses crowded on either side of her where there should be the vistas of a wide plain. She was somewhere in Norfolk, not far from Norwich if her GPS told true. She hoisted her back pack and set off for the long walk.

In the event, it wasn't so long. She hit the A47 after an hour and managed to hitch a lift only about 10 minutes after that. He was a young delivery man, for some company she'd never heard of, with a van full of small mail order items. He was more chatty than she'd have liked, with a persistent belief that they had met somewhere before. After establishing that he'd never been anywhere near CMU, she blandly acquiesced to his assumption it must have been at Glastonbury. She had, in fact, once been to Glastonbury – a muddy and argumentative dirty weekend with Stephen. But that was too long ago for this child to have been there.

She persuaded him to drop her off at a garage on the edge of town. He was keen to take her further in, but instinct told her to keep it ambiguous whether she intended to stay in Norwich or hitch a ride somewhere else. She was about to enter the small shop and purchase a few basic items to tide her over when she was brought up short by a picture of her face in the shop window.

"WANTED," it read. "Helen Cutter for suspected terrorism".

The small print warned that she was dangerous and not to be approached, which was some consolation. However her plans were going to have to change.

The garage backed onto a housing estate. Helen lost herself in its tastefully curving roads all called PRIMROSE DRIVE or TULIP TERRACE. Then she picked a house with no vehicle out the front and no visible alarm and vaulted over the fence. The back door lock was depressingly easy to pick, even given her fairly amateur knowledge of the skill.

Once inside she headed upstairs and to the wardrobes. The lady of the house, it would appear, was slightly larger than she was. On the plus side, baggy clothes

were a lot less conspicuous than tight ones. Helen picked out a bland pair of tracksuit bottoms and a sweatshirt. There was no hair dye but plenty of make up, hats and sunglasses. Helen transferred her own clothes and the contents of her backpack into two brightly coloured squashy bags. She took the opportunity to clean up while she was about it. Satisfied she looked entirely unassuming and not at all like her WANTED poster, she left by the front door. She picked up the newspaper as she went, arrested by the headline "T. REX SIGHTING IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS". The article was frustratingly vague. It was a local paper and Tunbridge Wells too far away to be of much interest. It was only the T. Rex, it would appear, that had prompted the paper to report it at all. She needed to get onto the Internet. She almost went back in and hunted for a computer but it was nearly 4pm and she wanted to be well clear before the owners got back from work.

She hoisted her squashy bags awkwardly over her shoulders, wishing she could have kept the rucksack. The picture on the WANTED poster had her rather obviously holding onto its straps. Wearing a rucksack was too likely to subliminally trip someone's awareness of her identity so she would have to manage without. She set off down the road looking for a car that was old enough to hotwire.

Helen abandoned her stolen vehicle on the outskirts of Birmingham and caught a bus to the house she had once shared with Nick. Trying to contact him was more than a little risky, especially given the way things had ended. But she was reasonably confident she could get in and out before he had time to summon the goons and very confident that she could provoke him into revealing stuff. As she turned down the street though, she was arrested by the sight of a large "For Sale" sign outside the building. Undeterred, she fished out the set of keys she'd had cut last time she was there, and let herself in.

All Nick's furniture was there. In fact most of it was *their* furniture but she doubted she'd be able to get it back now and wanted nothing to do with it even if she could. Slewing of the burden of possessions had been one of the first discovered and most surprising joys of her new lifestyle. At least it meant Nick still lived here. She moved through the house to Nick's study and the computer. It had been emptied. The desk and shelves were still there but the computer and the books and papers had all gone. Helen pursed her lips. She ran her hand over the desk and watched the thin trail of dust it left behind. So he'd left the furniture but taken everything he needed to work.

Swiftly she moved to the kitchen and checked the fridge and cupboards. They were also empty. There was no food in the place. She frowned a moment and then went to the tall cupboard in the living room where Nick kept his whisky. It was still there. Whoever had removed the food from the kitchen either wasn't interested in taking the alcohol or hadn't known it was there. She placed it back. It seemed unlikely Nick would have left it.

Last time she'd been here, she'd found all her old clothes in a cupboard in the spare room. She checked it now. It was empty, though she hadn't really expected Nick to keep them any longer. His clothes were still in the main bedroom. Whoever it was who had cleared this place out, it hadn't been Nick, of that she was pretty sure. There were lots of reasons that might have happened. She refused to consider the obvious one. For good measure she switched her sweatshirt for an old jumper of his and moved her belongings into a wheeled suitcase.

She paused with her hand on the knob, wondering if the jumper was a good idea. She tended to forget how evocative smell could be of memories, and the jumper smelled, indefinably, of Nicholas Cutter. Then she gave a mental shrug and opened the door.

A rifle butt appeared from nowhere and everything went black.

The interrogation room hadn't changed much since she had last been in it. Helen rolled her head experimentally, feeling where the pain was from the blow she had received. She observed the same blank walls, the same table and the same chairs. She stared ahead of her at the darkened far wall. She was fairly sure it was an observation window of some description.

The door clicked open and a woman came in. She was wearing an expensively tailored suit in a warm brown colour, accented by a gold silk blouse. Short, but expensively cut, brown hair framed a squarish face. She looked elegant, rather than beautiful. Everything about her projected calm sophistication. Helen's instincts screamed predator.

"Good afternoon," said the woman, seating herself opposite Helen.

Helen remained silent and stared studiously over the woman's shoulder. She wondered who was in the adjacent room observing them.

The woman made a disapproving noise but carried on. "Let me introduce myself. I am Lucia Wright, Home Office, Minister in charge of this facility."

Helen took a long slow breath. It was a trick she'd learned and practised. It

helped keep your face impassive and conceal any show of surprise. Lucia Wright smiled at her.

"I imagine you were expecting James Lester."

Determined to give nothing away, Helen forced herself to remain to staring over the woman's shoulder.

"Let me enlighten you," continued the woman, as if Helen had been articulating the questions that buzzed around her head. "Lester and I have been working together for many months. I wanted to prioritise the Physics team. Lester very much concentrating on the more operational side of matters. Something of an error of judgement as it turned out."

Lucia was working up to something. Helen made eye contact. It was a concession, but she wanted to hear Lucia out and didn't want to get into a direct conflict just yet. Lucia smiled at her.

"I should thank you really," she said. "By encouraging Mr Hart to go to the Press you rather undermined Lester's position. When that was so closely followed by the little debacle involving Oliver Leek. Well," Lucia shrugged, "it was clear that his judgement was fatally flawed. More direct ministerial oversight was needed. Lester was shown to have had too much autonomy."

Helen's mind was racing. Stephen had never made it as far as a journalist, of that she was sure. But information about anomalies had obviously become public knowledge in her absence and she could see how that would be a problem for Lester and his policy of secrecy. Lucia was watching her closely in the silence.

"What do you want?" asked Helen.

Lucia smiled. "I can see we are going to get along famously. None of this tedious beating about the bush nor any need for lengthy explanations."

Helen cocked her head to one side. She wanted to convey 'get on with it'.

"Now," said Lucia, "I'm aware of your involvement with Oliver Leek but very few people have access to any hard information that links you to him. I hope you are aware, however, that your actions fall under the general heading of treason and that I will be going out on a considerable limb if I arrange for charges to be dropped."

"Why would you do that?" asked Helen. She tried to keep her tone unconcerned but every instinct she had was straining to go into fight or flight mode. Her sense that this woman was a predator was proving accurate. But she was clearly a dangerous political predator and Helen had no illusions that she would come off well in such a fight. Her only defence was to keep as much as possible hidden in order to provide the woman with as little ammunition as she could.

"I need a replacement for your husband," said Lucia bluntly. "Mr Hart does

his best but he doesn't have the authority to command the team and naturally they blame him for being away at a press conference while your husband tried to contain Mr Leek's excesses."

Helen balled her hands into fists where they were handcuffed behind her. She dug her fingernails into her palms and struggled to focus on the immediate pain. She took several deep breaths as inconspicuously as she could, uncomfortably aware of the cold measured gaze upon her from across them room. She silence dragged on.

As soon as she could trust herself to speak steadily she said, "They're hardly going to be more receptive of my involvement."

"Maybe not," agreed Lucia, "but you have unique experience which would make you invaluable to the project. You have the seniority and academic qualifications that Mr. Hart sadly lacks and, from my point of view, you have the advantage of lacking any strong ties to Lester."

Helen considered several responses to the proposition, using the immediacy of the problem to push other thoughts and feelings to the back of her mind. She would have liked to have said "go to hell" to the viperish woman before her. In fact, she would have liked to have screamed and shouted and thrown things. Watching Lucia bloody Wright go down to a right hook would have been, just at this moment, intensely satisfying. But, right now, she was badly lacking in information and without information she was powerless. Moreover, that part of her brain that was good at reading and manipulating people told her that Lucia wanted her to be glad of, or at least indifferent to, Nick's death. She didn't trust herself to talk again just yet so channelled her energies into maintaining the same bland expression. When it became clear she wasn't going to speak Lucia began again.

"As well as dropping the charges against you, we wouldn't object to you taking up an academic post and working for the ARC on a consultancy basis," Lucia smiled once more, friendly and conspiratorial. Helen's distrust deepened. "You left academia nine years ago under, it must be said, something of a cloud. Your theories were widely being described as crackpot. I believe your husband even went so far as to express some embarrassment about them."

Lucia was still watching her closely, but Helen as sure of herself here. She'd spent years training herself not to react to snide remarks about her research or Nick's opinions about it. Keeping her face neutral was a cinch, though that gave her small comfort.

"I imagine," said Lucia, "that now your theories have been proved so spectacularly correct, universities will be falling over themselves to appoint you. Emer-

gency funding for research into palaeontology was voted through parliament only last month. Almost every university is trying to bolster its research in the area and you have a decade's head start on all of them. Think about it Dr Cutter, you can pretty much demand your own terms. If you walk out of here, your name cleared, you'll be offered a chair at the university of your choice within the week. With your experience, the research councils won't be turning down any moderately well-written grant you put in. By the end of the year you can be leading the largest palaeontological research team in the country and the best bit will be that I won't have had to pull a single string on your behalf. It will all fall from the theoretical groundwork you laid down a decade ago and the rather unique fieldwork you've conducted since. Think about it."

Helen was thinking about it. It was a victory. A victory that tasted like ashes in her mouth, but a victory none the less.

"Do you accept?" asked Lucia.

"I accept," said Helen, keeping her voice clear and steady.

"Good!" said Lucia, "I'll set the paperwork in motion."

"There's one more condition," she added as she left the room.

"And that is?" asked Helen.

"Stick to the palaeontology. Leave the physics to the physicists and, more importantly, I don't want any experiments in changing history. I've read all the theories about Miss Lewis and Miss Brown and I don't like the implications. I don't want anyone messing about with time until the physicists have some sort of predictive theory. I hope I'm making myself clear."

"As crystal," said Helen and made a mental note. Someone had changed history since she was last in the twenty-first century. More to the point, someone had followed her through the anomaly in the warehouse. She watched the self-assured woman leave the room.

Helen let herself in to Lester's office without knocking. She didn't want to suggest any sort of subservience and, besides, he was perfectly aware she was there since he could see her through the glass walls. Jenny Lewis was with him. Helen decided to ignore her. She didn't have any practical place in the team anyway. Not now that the whole situation was public.

"Dr Cutter," said Lester wearily. "I imagine you would like to meet your new team."

"I've already met them," Helen pointed out.

Lester closed his eyes. "If you'd rather not be present when I break the news of your appointment to them then so be it. However I would like you to introduce yourself to them properly, as their new leader, *before* the team is needed in the field."

The temptation to needle him further was quite high, however Helen bit her tongue and smiled sweetly. "Let's go meet them then," she said.

Stephen, Connor and Abby were gathered together in the centre of the ARC's main area, next to the anomaly detector. Lester led the way down to them, Helen walking behind him. She noticed that Jenny Lewis did not opt to walk beside them but instead lagged behind, distancing herself from the decision. Helen would be on her own here.

"Mr Hart, Mr Temple, Miss Maitland," said Lester, "we have had a new scientific team leader imposed upon us."

"I don't believe it!" said Stephen, looking at her with undisguised disgust.

Lester feigned surprised. "You have a problem? I suggest you take it up with Miss Wright. I'm sure she'd love to hear your opinion."

"Or the newspapers," Helen heard Abby mutter. What a happy little team she would seem to have inherited.

"Right," said Helen moving forward.

"Bastard," she muttered quietly to Lester as she passed. 'Imposed upon us' indeed, talk about signalling clearly Helen's lack of support. Lester arched his eyebrows but said nothing, merely stepping back.

"None of us are happy with this situation." She looked hard at the three young people in front of her. "But we need to make the best of it. We have a job to do and, in the current circumstances, the four people with the most expertise in handling prehistoric creatures are standing right here. Lives are going to depend on us working together. No one is asking us to socialise."

"Why are you helping us now, all of a sudden?" asked Connor.

It was a good question. Why was she helping them? Because Lucia had threatened her? Because Lucia had bribed her? Because something was up and her best chance of finding out what lay here at the heart of the ARC? Because she was doing what she did best, surviving, observing and awaiting her opportunity?

She needed an answer that was honest, in so far as it went, and would satisfy them. They stared at her expectantly.

"I'm no happier that Nick is dead than any of you are," she said.

Abby gave a small nod. The explanation worked for her at least. Stephen looked away, unwilling to meet her eyes but didn't contradict her. Connor just

looked miserable. Helen itched to see Jenny's face but she was behind her somewhere and it would give too much away to turn around at this point.

Into the silence intruded the wail of the anomaly detector.

Helen let Stephen drive to the anomaly site. He sat in stoney silence in the front of the four by four, his eyes glued to the road, refusing to look at her. She decided to let him sulk for a bit, if only because he was pretty when he pouted. She switched on the radio, already tuned, it seemed, to the military wave lengths.

"Pigs by the look of it..." came a voice. It was vaguely familiar so it must have been one of the soldiers she'd already met.

"Wild boar more like," contradicted a second voice. Helen permitted herself a small smile. That was the one called Kermit. She remembered him.

There was the sound of gunfire. "Make that bad tempered wild boar," returned the first.

"Captain Lyle," broke in Lester's voice, "could we have a coherent report of the situation please?"

"It's a multi-storey car park, sir," returned Lyle's voice. "We seem to have a pack of some sort of wild boar here."

A hand sneaked over her shoulder from the back seat and picked up the handset.

"What do they look like?" asked Connor.

"Big, hairy, bad-tempered pigs with tusks," came Lyle's voice.

Connor rolled his eyes at her. "Anything else? Anything distinctive? How big?"

"About five foot maybe. The tusks grow out sideways, if that's any help."

"Metridiochoerus," guessed Helen.

Connor glanced at her, seemed to remember who she was, and retreated into the back seat in silence.

"If I'm right we'll need peanut butter," said Helen. No one responded. Stubborn bastards.

Captain Lyle and a special forces team were assembled at the entrance to the car park when they arrived. The place was in chaos, with panic stricken members of the public frantically trying to escape and the soldiers trying to scare off the creatures without hurting any civilians.

"Can you organise an evacuation?" Helen asked Jenny.

Jenny nodded and started work. Helen was impressed in spite of herself. Within minutes Jenny had corralled most of the public and cleared a space around the entrance. This allowed the soldiers to take up a position with decent sight lines. From somewhere Jenny produced a megaphone and began relaying information about exit routes to the upper floors.

Helen crouched near one of the soldiers and tried to get a clear view of what they were up against. There was what looked like a tightly knit pack of furry bodies inside the car park. She began to creep forwards but felt a heavy hand on her shoulder keeping her back.

"And where do you think you're going?"

She looked up into the unfriendly face of Captain Lyle.

"I need a closer look for identification."

She saw him hesitate. In some ways he was completely transparent and he was having a little internal battle between his desire to see her gored by a prehistoric pig and his orders to keep her safe. She batted her eyelashes at him and thrust her chest forward, more from habit than anything else.

"You're staying right here," he said. "We have some footage."

The 'footage' was low resolution and poorly lit but there was enough for Helen to confirm her guess of Metridiochoerus.

"Connor! Abby!" she called.

They trailed over, Abby in the lead with a mutinous expression on her face. Connor pulled along in her wake, laptop in hand. Helen had left Stephen in the car. He still wasn't talking to her.

"I need peanut butter," Helen said. "Plenty of it. Find the nearest cash and carry and requisition a few catering jars of the stuff."

"Why?" asked Abby.

Helen gave an exaggerated sigh. "Because they really love the stuff and will chase after the smell." She looked at Abby's suspicious face. "I did find some useful stuff out during the nine years I spent in pre-history," she added, irritated.

Abby snorted but turned to go. "Come on, Connor!" she called.

Helen was surprised when Connor gave her a rueful smile before heading off after Abby. She watched him go in vague exasperation. He was obviously a clever lad, but apparently didn't have the staying power to hold a good grudge. It was probably just as well he had Abby to watch out for him.

Helen headed over to where Jenny was talking to a bunch of people who looked suspiciously like journalists. Helen watched as the cameras switched to focus on her, one by one, as she approached. She eyed them warily. They weren't exactly predators in the way Lucia was, but there was a distinct pack-like body language and it was a pack that hadn't quite decided which way to jump. Once again she revised her opinion of Jenny Lewis. She was going to need her to manage these people. "Can I have a word?" she asked Jenny.

Jenny smiled sweetly at the journalists. "Give me ten minutes and I'll have something for you," she told them.

"Really?" asked Helen as they walked away.

"I assume you know what those things are," said Jenny.

"Yes."

"No harm in telling them then and it'll keep them onside. Don't talk to any of them yourself though. I'm going to hold out an exclusive interview with you to a couple I particularly want to cultivate. It'll let us control the situation better."

Helen eyed her narrowly, but she'd never been one to ignore the advice of someone who clearly knew what they were doing, so she nodded. It was going to be hard to dismiss Jennifer Lewis, she was beginning to think.

"I need a cherry picker."

"What's the name of the creature?"

"Metridiochoerus."

Jenny produced a note book. "How's that spelled? What do they look like? Any salient points?"

"M E T R I D I O C H O E R U S. They look like wild boar with sideways pointing tusks. The soldiers have some footage though it's not very good. They like peanut butter, as do modern wild boar, as it happens."

Jenny nodded. "Good. I'll get you that cherry picker," and she turned back to the press.

"I have a name for you. I'm going to spell it out..." she started saying.

"What am I going to do?" Stephen was suddenly at her elbow. Helen glanced at her watch. It had taken precisely ten minutes for him to get bored of sulking in the car.

"You and I, Stephen, are going to go in there and find the anomaly so we know which floor to get the cherry picker to deliver the peanut butter to."

"We should take Lyle and a team."

Helen looked across at the special forces. They didn't like her or trust her and the feeling was mutual. Stephen probably didn't like her much either but at least she knew him well enough to anticipate his actions. She shook her head.

"We're just scouting. They'll get in the way."

She sauntered up to Captain Lyle who scowled back at her.

"Stephen and I are going in. We'll need comms and tranquilliser rifles."

"No."

"None of your men are hunters or trackers Captain. We're going to go in, keep out of the creatures' way, find the anomaly, and report back. You can send men in with us if you like but you'll only make us more conspicuous and I'm not guaranteeing their safety."

"You're a heartless bitch aren't you?"

"I get things done, if that's what you mean."

"I'll check with Lester," he said. "You'll find what you want in the van. Stephen has clearance to sign it all out."

Helen turned on her heel and headed for the van. "Come on, Stephen," she called.

Lester must have given orders to let her have her own way because Lyle let her through without comment when she returned with guns and headsets. He bowed sardonically as she walked passed though.

She and Stephen hugged the walls as they moved round the edge of the space. Fortunately it was pretty open, apart from a few pillars and two central stairwells. This made it immediately obvious there was no anomaly on the ground floor. In total, the car park had six floors, with exits to the neighbouring shopping centre on the fourth. They'd evacuated most of the civilians out by those exits and there had been no sightings up there. Helen's best guess was that the anomaly was on the second or third floor.

Most of the Metridiochoeruses were milling around near the bottom of one of the ramps. They were keeping a wary distance away from the exit with its soldiers and guns. There was a pedestrian staircase close to where Helen and Stephen stood. Helen nodded at it.

"We go up there and then check the next floor."

Stephen nodded. They made a dash for the staircase. Fortunately the boar paid them little attention. Helen breathed a little easier once the stairwell door shut behind them. It wouldn't hold out against a determined attack but it kept them hidden. The two of them made their way up to the second floor.

"I'll go first," said Stephen when they reached it.

Helen bit back an exasperated retort. After all, if he wanted to take all the risks who was she to stop him? One thing she didn't have, was a death wish. She followed him out of the door. The second floor had some sort of division down the middle. Cautiously, Helen and Stephen headed between the rows of cars so they could work their way round it.

Suddenly Helen caught a movement a her peripheral vision. She glanced sideways and saw a lone boar between the cars beside her. It lowered its head and began to charge.

Helen swore and leaped onto the car next to her. Stephen followed moments later. The boar head butted the car which shook underneath them. The alarm went off. Stephen took aim at it with his tranquilliser rifle but staggered as the creature hit the car again.

"This way," said Helen and leaped to the next car.

Stephen followed her and dropped to one knee sighting on the boar as it came round the car towards them. He let off a shot and then it collided with the car they were on. Helen over-balanced, but managed to convert her fall to yet another jump. Stephen followed her to the third car. They waited there a few seconds but, when the boar didn't appear, Helen cautiously jumped back the way they had come and peered over the edge of the car. The creature was sleeping peacefully on the ground.

"Any more?" asked Stephen.

Helen stood up and closed her eyes, stretching her hearing. She could hear the main pack on the floor below but couldn't detect anything moving up here. She shook her head.

"I don't think so."

They climbed off the cars and headed past the concrete bunker in the centre of the car park. Once around the corner the anomaly was directly ahead of them, bisecting a mini.

"We've found the anomaly." Helen reported into her radio.

Connor and Abby both rode up in the cherry picker. Abby had a large cardboard box containing four catering-sized jars of peanut butter. Connor had a digital camera.

"What's that for?" asked Helen.

"The database. I haven't got a good picture of these yet."

Helen looked at Abby. "Stay here with him. Don't let him wander off into the car park. Are you armed?"

Abby nodded and showed Helen a tranquilliser pistol.

"What if I need to get close to one?" asked Connor.

"You don't," returned Helen. "Stay here."

She took the cardboard box from Abby and headed to the anomaly.

"What's the plan?" asked Stephen.

She handed him two jars of peanut butter.

"Get yourself somewhere safe and then open these. I want the boars up here. I'll go through the anomaly and open the others on the far side. Once the boars are up here, close these jars. They should then go through the anomaly."

"What about you?" asked Stephen.

Helen shrugged. "I'll be fine."

Before he could object she headed through the anomaly. She was in some kind of forest. Late Pliocene would have been her guess. She took a deep breath, mentally contrasting the smell of rotting plant matter with the stink of petrol from the car park. The late Pliocene wouldn't have been her first choice of destination, but she knew there were other anomalies in the era and the things did tend to cluster. She should be able to find her way on and out. But first she needed to put a pack of Metridiochoerus between her and any pursuers. Carefully she put the box of peanut butter down and began unscrewing the jars.

She heard a cry from the other side of the anomaly. It sounded distinctly like Stephen. Helen hesitated a second and then plunged back through to the car park, rifle at the ready. Stephen was underneath a boar, beating at it ineffectually with his rifle butt. Helen aimed at it and shot. Then she strode, as confidently as she could, towards the herd and grabbed Stephen by the scruff of the neck, hauling him up from under the sleeping creature and onto the nearest car. She grabbed the jar of peanut butter he was holding and undid the top. She wafted it in the direction of the herd of creatures. Once she had their attention she tossed it through the anomaly. Several of the herd chased it and, seconds later, the rest followed. Helen looked down at Stephen in irritation.

"Thanks," he said.

The anomaly pulsed once and closed. Helen swore quietly under her breath. She really shouldn't have come back for him. As far as she was concerned he was dead anyway and she'd just lost her opportunity to get out of this reality and start putting things back how they should be.

"Just looking after my team," she said sweetly, jumping down from the car. She used the opportunity to flash a smile in the direction of Connor and Abby as well who, she noted, were already out of the cherry picker. She should really have left them to rescue Stephen. Sometimes, she reflected, she let her instincts get the better of her.

Abby ran up to them and gave Stephen a hug, shooting Helen a look of pure distrust as she did so.

"I thought you'd had it there," she said.

"So did I."

Connor hovered in the background, looking between them all, before letting Abby pull him into the hug with Stephen. The little minx, thought Helen as she walked away. But at least it meant the three of them might start working together again. There was nothing like a common enemy. Possibly that was why Lucia had put her in charge, which meant, of course, that Helen's position was even more precarious than she had at first thought.

"Can you confirm that the anomalies are being used by a terrorist group?"

"You navigated through the anomalies for nine years. Do you seriously expect us to believe you can not say when and where the next anomaly will open?"

"Can you tell us where you purchased your underwear?"

"Thank you, I think that's enough questions for this press conference." Jenny moved in calmly before Helen had to answer the underwear question. "I've given you all packs with a full background on Professor Cutter. I've included her key publication on the anomalous evolution problem from 1998 and," she shot the heavily made-up woman in the audience a hard glance, "a full breakdown of clothing outlets she uses. Thank you all for coming here today. As usual we'll let you know as soon as there are any further developments."

Helen obediently stalked out of the room in front of Jenny.

"How did you know they would ask about clothes?" she asked once they were safely away from prying microphones. She'd had, and embarrassingly lost, a fight with Jenny over clothes which had resulted in a trip down the high street with

Helen nominating clothing items as 'not completely impractical' so Jenny could put them on a list for the Press.

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Do me a favour and take a good look at yourself in the mirror sometime. You've been a hot topic in Cosmopolitan since your Wanted poster first appeared. Believe it or not, you are currently the epitome of Survivor Chic."

"Survivor Chic?"

"Don't blame me. I didn't make up the term."

4.2 Masters of their Fates

> *Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings*
>
> – Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

The anomaly detector was blaring again. Helen glanced at her watch. Tight on time. She hopped from the chair in her ever-so bland office and headed into the drum.

"Where is it?" she asked. There was a technician seated before the screens, a mousy girl from the Physics team. She'd been introduced to her at some point but couldn't remember her name. She looked around. Connor, Abby, her *team*, were conspicuous by their absence. Helen tutted quietly.

"Church, I think." The girl pointed to a pulsing signal not far from their location. She looked up at her. "I thought you were supposed to be starting that Oxford job today?"

That was what she loved about civilisation. All that time spent on trivial gossip and tittle-tattle. Helen shook her head. "Had to be delayed a week."

"Anomaly!" called Stephen from the upper walkway. At least someone else was around. Helen glanced up. Jenny was also in her office.

"Let's check it out before the soldier boys get there," she called up to him. "Bring Jenny too." She needed to talk to them both anyway and didn't think either would prove much of a threat.

Stephen and Helen entered the church carefully. Both of them were armed. The anomaly glittered behind the altar. A minute later, when Stephen gave the all clear, Jenny walked abruptly down the aisle, heels clicking on the stone flags.

"Nothing here," said Stephen.

"So I see," remarked Jenny.

Stephen slumped in the front pew and glared at the anomaly sulkily. Helen was disappointed in him. She would have expected him to have at least taken a peak through it. She caught his gaze. He pulled a face and then stared up at the ceiling.

"Oh come on, Stephen!" Helen couldn't help saying. "There are worse things than sitting in a church with me."

"None spring to mind," he said.

Helen looked across to Jenny and hoped her face said 'help please!'. Helen had never been good at playing the 'Women united against useless men' card but it might just work here.

Jenny sat elegantly behind Stephen. "I'll wait with you." She smiled at Helen, all artificial sweetness.

"Really?" he looked surprised.

Jenny looked across at Helen and the artificial smile dropped from her face. "No hidden microphones here, right?"

Helen was surprised. That was extremely astute of Jenny. In fact the woman was full of surprises. Helen had a nasty suspicion she had been underestimating her. She sat on a pew, across the aisle from Jenny and Stephen, and put her feet up on the bench in front.

"Unlikely," she agreed, nonchalantly.

"So," said Jenny, "what was it you wanted to talk to us about?"

Helen considered her thoughtfully. How dangerous, exactly, was Jenny? "The Press Conference," she started, "the one Stephen was at when Nick died. Who organised it?"

"Mick Harper, the Independent journalist," said Stephen.

"So the story was already out?" asked Helen.

Stephen glanced at her in slight surprise but carried on, "Yes. He'd published an exclusive that morning and followed it up with a Press Conference in the afternoon."

"Where did he get the evidence from?" asked Helen. "Did you steal files from the ARC?"

Stephen shook his head, "I gave him names and places where incidents had occurred and he got a lot of eye-witness accounts, but he also had leaked papers from government briefings and footage of some of the captured beasts."

"How did he get them?" asked Helen.

"I thought it was down to you," said Stephen. "You *said* you were talking to a journalist so when he phoned me up I assumed you had sent him."

"Where would Helen get information like that from?" asked Jenny.

Stephen shrugged. Jenny looked across at Helen and Helen felt a jolt of sympathy for her. Nick and Stephen were both horribly focused. If it didn't involve bones, fossils, animals or walking a long way in wet boots and socks then their attention just slipped over it. Stephen simply wasn't interested in who had stitched him up. He probably hadn't even realised yet that he *had* been stitched up.

"And why on Earth would Helen want the Press involved?" Jenny followed up.

"She said..." began Stephen but stopped when he encountered Jenny's hard gaze. Then he groaned and ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "There was no journalist." He scowled at Helen.

Helen would have laughed had it not been for Jenny's impression of a schoolteacher faced with a particularly slow pupil. Just when she *really needed* his compliance, Stephen was being schooled away from her. Jenny turned to her, an ever-so-slight hint of triumph playing about her mouth and a glint in her eye that warned Helen to keep away from Stephen in future. She was marking her territory and warning Helen to keep out. 'You took Nick,' her attitude seemed to say. 'I'm not letting you have this one.'

"OK," said Helen, "this journalist organises a Press conference. Meanwhile Leek pulls his little coup attempt. Connor's software trashes his systems and the animals get out. What happened next?"

"You were there," said Stephen accusingly.

"No she wasn't," said Jenny. "We wouldn't be having this conversation if she remembered all of that. Something's changed."

Helen narrowed her eyes. She was getting accustomed to Jenny's sharpness. But it was the confidence with which she spoke, betraying no doubt that Helen might be bluffing, that disturbed her now.

"So what happened next?" Helen asked her directly.

Jenny shrugged. "We don't know exactly. We found Leek and Nick's bodies, or what was left of them, in the complex. No sign of you at all. We think Nick barricaded himself in the containment area. The external control panel was damaged and wouldn't work. It could only be operated from inside."

Helen wondered if she had stayed to watch, just as Nick had stayed to watch Stephen's death, or whether she had had the sense to run. She dismissed the thought. Brooding wasn't her style. Taking action, *that* was her style. The journalist was the key. Who had told him to contact Stephen?

"Then I get lynched as a whistleblower," said Stephen sulkily, breaking into her train of thought.

Jenny shook her head. "With your looks, general heroics and coupled with being positioned first and foremost at that Press conference, you should have been a national hero. You would have been if you'd hired a half-way decent publicist." Her tone was waspish and her mouth slammed shut in a thin line.

Helen watched fascinated. Lots of little signs in the past week showed that Connor and Abby had forgiven Stephen, but Jenny clearly hadn't, even though she was much better than they were at concealing her anger. Stephen had probably never worked out that she had held anything against him in the first place and Jenny was too focused on obstructing Helen to lash out at him. Helen always admired people with an appropriate sense of priorities, even when it was inconvenient for her plans.

"I didn't want a publicist."

"I know, but calling Max Clifford an ambulance-chasing stain on modern society, to his face, was not terribly bright."

Helen had read the Press stories covering Stephen's abortive attempts to run the team. It didn't surprise her that there was a personal element to the malicious spin on the reporting. Once she'd read them, she'd also realised how badly Lucia Wright had needed to contain that situation.

"Maybe, I should hire Max Clifford," she mused.

"Go through me," said Jenny.

Helen recognised an order when she heard one. She gazed thoughtfully at Jenny. Jenny clearly considered her more to blame than Stephen for Nick's death. Where Connor, Abby and Stephen restricted themselves to sulky and trivial obstructiveness, Jenny was all outward professionalism. Helen really, really hoped she wasn't planning anything.

She glanced down at her watch. It was almost time. If this went as planned, it didn't matter what Jenny was up to. Helen picked up her gun and rucksack and went to stand in front of the anomaly.

"What is it?" asked Stephen.

"Nothing, just stretching my legs."

She watched for the tell-tale signs that the anomaly was starting to close. The moment was near. She turned back to Jenny and Stephen.

"Thanks for the chat," she said. "I'll see what I can do to fix things."

And then she jumped through the fractured light. There was the faintest of whooshing noises as the anomaly closed behind her.

She pursed her lips at the sight that met her eyes: the numerous anomalies she had expected, the three guns that were pointing at her, she had not. Beyond the soldiers she could see Abby and Connor. Abby smirked. Connor shrugged apologetically.

Captain Lyle sighed. "Trust you not to make your move until the last moment. Looks like we'll be taking the long route back."

Helen raised her eyebrows.

"We have to go through the Permian to the Forest of Dean," said Abby, by way of explanation, tugging a rucksack onto her back. "Thanks to you," she tacked onto the end.

"I wasn't expecting a reception committee to be waiting or I'd have come sooner."

"That would have saved us a load of trouble," said Lyle.

Helen surveyed the three soldiers. Captain Lyle she now recalled from her previous run-ins with Lester's security forces. She also recognised the woman, a Private Lacey, if memory served. The third man was a surprise. He had been one of Leek's men, Lieutenant William Slater. She had thought him lost to the rather unpleasant sand scorpions in the Silurian, yet here he was, alive and well.

Lyle had fished a small handheld computer from his pocket and was consulting it.

"Through this one," he gestured to a nearby anomaly.

"You have the anomalies mapped now?" Helen mentally kicked herself. There was too much surprise in her tone.

"Thanks to you," he said.

Helen's face must have betrayed her even further.

"It wasn't that difficult to break the code in your notebooks," said Connor apologetically, "not given what we already knew about the anomalies. It was mostly a case of identifying the ones we knew and then extrapolating from those."

Oh, that had been foolish of her. She should have realised that Lucia and the ARC had held onto her possessions easily long enough to search through them and copy anything of interest. She struggled to maintain her composure. She had got out of much worse situations than this. She was wrong-footed, but not badly. It was just a matter of working out where the weak link was in this little bunch and then exploiting it.

"Lucia Wright sent us," Connor continued. "We were waiting in the church for the anomaly to open hours ago and then we had to sit around here in case you came through."

Which, of course, explained the mysterious absense of Connor and Abby when the anomaly alarm went off.

"Looks like Miss Wright has you pegged sure enough," said Lyle. There was a grim note of satisfaction in his tone.

This particular area of the Permian was familiar to Helen. In her imagination her footsteps criss-crossed the sands heading backwards and forwards between the many anomalies that opened and shut onto the area. She half-expected to see herself on the horizon. It wouldn't be the first time. Once, she'd even waved.

Lyle set a fast pace. It was a leisurely two day stroll to the anomaly that opened into the Forest of Dean. They'd never make it before nightfall but presumably Lyle wanted time in hand the following day. Lacey took her backpack and they handcuffed her wrists in front of her, making the walk difficult. The soldiers walked in grim silence but Connor chatted away, overwhelmed, it seemed, by anything and everything. Abby asked questions and made observations every so often. Often enough to sustain the chatter. When she tried to join in, however, Abby closed down with a stony glance that shut Connor up in mid-sentence.

It was early afternoon when Helen realised they were being stalked. They were picking their way through a boulder field at the bottom of a river gorge. It was a path Helen knew well. The routes between several anomalies led through this area. But it was a twisting valley, with plenty of cover. She stopped still trying to pinpoint the source of her unease.

"Move it!" said Lyle, jabbing her in the back with his gun.

"There's something here."

"Yeah! Right. I know all about your tricks."

"Watch me if you like, but keep quiet."

Lyle's eyes narrowed.

"Just listen," said Abby suddenly.

Helen looked over her shoulder at the unexpected source of support. Abby scowled at her. Helen listened. There was something a little behind them and to the left. About the same time she realised this, she heard the sound of a safety-catch being disengaged. Private Lacey had her gun trained in the direction Helen believed the predator to be.

"You have sharp ears," she said quietly.

Lacey's eyes flickered in her direction but she made no other acknowledgment of Helen. "I think there's something over there, sir," she reported.

"Slater, Maitland, guard the prisoner," said Lyle. "Come on, Lacey, let's see what's over there."

Helen found herself dragged down behind a boulder by Slater.

"What about me?" bleated Connor.

"Just keep your head down," grunted Slater.

Slater had taken up position behind the rock and was sighting in the direction of the predator. Abby, meanwhile, crouched down opposite her cradling a tranquilliser pistol. Helen eyed it nervously.

"What sort of dose have you got in there?"

"Large enough."

"That's not reassuring if you're intending to shoot me with it."

"You'd rather Slater shot you?"

Helen glanced up at Slater and his rifle then looked back at Abby.

"You don't run, no one gets shot," said Slater.

There was a loud roaring noise and the sound of gunfire.

"What's happening?" asked Helen. It was frustrating not being able to see. Lyle and Lacey could be making all a complete mess of the situation.

Connor peaked over the rock. "Lyle's gone right. Lacey's gone left," he reported. "It's a Gorgonopsid," he added and made a face. "Already seen lots of those."

He sank back down beside Helen.

"You struck me as a bit more than just a stamp collector," she said. "You've seen a Gorgonopsid before and now you're no longer interested? What subspecies is it, for a start."

Connor went red. "It's not like that," he said.

"Leave him alone," said Abby, protectively.

Helen decided to ignore her. "Take another look, Connor. How big is it? What shape is its jaw? How is it behaving? Does it look frightened? Curious?"

Connor stood up and took a second look. "It's several metres long, maybe four. It looks, ummm, kind of pissed."

Abby stood up. "It's cautious," she said. "Hasn't made up its mind whether we're dangerous or not."

Helen gave her a significant glance.

"Lyle!" shouted Abby. "You might be able to scare it off. Try firing over its head."

Abby, it appeared, was quick enough on the uptake when it was necessary.

There was the sound of more gunfire.

"Go on you big lump!" she heard Lyle call. "Get your ugly arse out of here. We're not worth it."

There was another roar.

"Keep shouting!" called Abby. "Act belligerent!"

"That's easy for you to say," returned Lyle. "Oi! Fuck off!" he added.

"Go on! Go on!" she heard Lacey's voice. There was the sound of more gunfire.

"It's working!" said Connor. "It's turning round."

"Shoo!" came Lacey's voice again amid more shouting from Lyle. It sounded distinctly like the words to one of the more rowdy caving songs.

"There he goes," said Abby.

"Seems I've missed all the excitement," murmured Helen, drily.

Slater hauled her to her feet. "Plenty of ground to cover yet," he said.

They set up camp by a rocky outcrop with a couple of stunted trees growing from it. Helen recognised it and wondered if the position had been chosen deliberately. Lyle had marched them hard and they had reached there late afternoon before night began to fall. None of the people with her had been in the Permian before but Nick would have made reports, as would Captain Ryan.

Helen sat grumpily on a rock, her hands still cuffed together. Slater built a fire and started cooking a meal, while Lacey and Lyle erected tents. Connor volunteered to help with both but was waved away. He then fished out his laptop and sat, with Abby at his elbow, typing away.

"What are you doing?" Helen asked.

"Adding details to the database," he said. "Anything and everything really. Abby's better at behaviour though."

Abby smiled and dimples appeared on her cheeks. She nudged him with her shoulder. "You don't do so badly."

"You've never asked me any questions," observed Helen.

Abby looked up at her. "Would you answer them?"

Helen schooled herself not to throw back a reply and watched. Abby was more guarded than Connor but it was clear that both were excited and interested in their surroundings, the fauna and the flora. Abby had gathered up a small collection of plants and leaves in little specimen packets and Helen was sure she'd done that

on her own initiative, not as a result of some ARC program. She'd even gathered seeds where she could, although it wasn't really the season for it. Now, while the laptop battery lasted they were entering information and discussing hypotheses. 'Would you answer them?' Helen pondered Abby's question. The way into the hearts of these two team members was probably by information, but it had to appear to be given freely, without an agenda.

"Grub's up," said Slater.

After they had eaten, Lyle organised them into watches, which didn't include Helen. He gave himself the first watch and Helen observed him moving to slightly higher ground, a little above the camp. She watched him standing on the rocks in the last rays of the setting sun. His head was bowed and she knew he stood at his friend's grave. She kept expecting to see him bend down to brush the earth from the bones, but he didn't. She was sorely tempted to go up there and talk to him but common sense, for once, told her it would only be counter-productive.

Mid morning saw them approaching the anomaly site. Helen was becoming frustrated. She'd been looking for an opportunity to slip away but, between them, Lyle, Lacey and Slater seemed to manage to continuously have at least two pairs of eyes watching her. Lyle was allowing them to take the walk at a fairly relaxed pace now. He obviously knew, as she did, that the anomaly would be open for another twenty-four hours. Connor and Abby took yet more samples of the soil and the flora. Connor even tried to catch a dragonfly, chasing after it with a butterfly net until Lyle shouted at him to keep close to the group.

"What's that?" asked Lacey.

Helen turned to look where she was pointing. Private Lacey must have sharp eyes as well as ears. Helen could see a hazy smudge on the horizon.

"Dust storm?" hazarded Slater.

Lyle looked around them. "We need to find shelter."

Helen could now feel a faint vibration through her feet. "Stampede," she said.

Lyle marched right up to her placing a gun at her head. "No tricks," he said.

"It's not a trick," said Abby. "She's right."

"How do you know?" asked Lyle.

"I spent a summer working in one of the big game parks in Africa. That's a stampede all right."

Helen couldn't help a smirk at Lyle's expression. That was twice now he'd disbelieved her; twice Abby had backed her up; and twice she'd been proved

right.

"Can we outrun them?" asked Connor.

"Not likely," said Slater.

Helen shook her head, catching Abby's eye, who nodded in agreement. Helen looked around them. Every few hundred yards there were sparse trees but none of them looked strong enough to bear much weight and she wouldn't have liked to rely on one in a press of stampeding dinosaurs. In the distance was a rocky outcrop.

"Those rocks," said Helen, "they're the best place. The animals will go round, not over them and they won't be able to knock them over."

Lyle glanced at her and then looked past her to Abby who nodded.

"We need to move fast though," Helen said.

Lyle started them off at a jog, heading up a gentle slope towards the outcrop. Helen cursed the handcuffs as she ran.

"Can we get these off?" she asked.

Lyle snorted. "We reap what we sow."

'No' then.

In spite of herself Helen kept looking back. It was possible to see a brownish smudge on the horizon now. She looked ahead of them. They should be able to reach and climb the outcrop in time. Underfoot the ground had turned to an unpleasant scree that slipped and shifted as they moved. There was a sudden cry and Lyle fell to the ground. The whole party skidded to a halt around him - as if it was going to take five of them to help one man.

"Sir?" asked Lacey.

Lyle didn't move. There was a faint trickle of blood on his forehead where it must have hit a rock.

"Shit!" said Connor. "What do we do now?"

"We'll have to leave him," said Slater.

"No!" said the other three in unison.

"See that tree," said Helen, pointing, unsure exactly why she was doing this. Though there was a certain satisfaction to be had from saving Lyle's life, just because his sense of honour would be affronted. "You and Lacey, take Lyle, get him up the tree, and yourselves. It looks stronger than some of the others and should just about hold the three of you. It's not too far to drag him either." She glanced over her shoulder once more at the stampede. It was probably not too far to drag him.

"What about us?" asked Connor.

"The outcrop. As before."

"But?"

"The tree isn't big enough for all of us. Go! Now!"

Connor and Abby both hesitated a moment looking at her and then they turned to run. Lacey already had an arm under Lyle's shoulder. Slater was looking at Helen suspiciously.

"You too!" said Helen.

"I'm watching you," he said. He grabbed Lyle's other shoulder but walked backwards, gun trained on Helen.

She would dearly have loved to run but the fact remained that the only safe places were the tree and the outcrop. And, to be honest, she was pretty dubious about the tree. She turned and chased after Connor and Abby.

By the time she reached the outcrop, the thundering of feet was loud in her ears. She reached up her hands and cursed. Climbing, even such a small distance, with her hands cuffed was going to be next to impossible. She hooked the chain of the cuffs over a spike of rock and hauled herself up scrabbling for purchase with her feet on the surface below. Then she stopped short, effectively stuck. She was forced to move both hands at once and that would probably cause her to fall backwards. That was the worst of this damn stupid situation. They didn't have the guts to simply kill her but they didn't realise that in this environment handcuffs could so easily be a death sentence.

Selfish, self-centred, arrogant...

Arms reached down and grabbed her. She looked up surprised. Connor was holding one wrist and Abby the other. They both heaved together and Helen found herself lifted onto the top of narrow platform just as the rush of dust and animals swept by below. Connor was peering over the edge at the mass of bodies as soon as she was safe. Helen lay down next to him, fascinated, as always. After a moment she felt Abby on her other side, her shoulders rubbed by those of the two young people.

"Scutosaurus," breathed Connor.

"Herd animals," said Abby. "I've never seen a herd of reptiles before."

Helen gazed at the bony heads and wide backs below her, resisting the temptation to reach down and touch them.

"They must have been attacked by a group of predators."

Connor looked anxiously in the direction the animals had come from. "Something else to worry about," he said.

"Probably not," said Abby. "They'll have picked off the stragglers by now and given up."

"Abby's right," agreed Helen. "I don't think we need to worry."

"They run pretty fast," mused Connor.

"They evolved from the Pareiasaurus," said Helen. "Those had splayed out legs. These are much faster, on their way to the really fast beasts."

When the animals had passed they climbed down from their platform, Helen once again having to rely on help from Connor and Abby. Lacey and Slater were approaching them from the tree. Lyle, conscious now, supported between them.

"Lacey tells me you saved all our hides," he said, when they reached the trio.

Helen shrugged and resisted the temptation to smirk.

Lyle nodded at her. "Thanks."

Helen looked at the faces around her. Slater excepted, there was a look of awkwardness and concern on display. Probably not enough, though, to risk making a run for it. She sighed. "Let's get back to that anomaly shall we."

Same interrogation room, Lucia opposite her once again shuffling a big stack of papers. Helen found she was rather more nervous than she had been last time. A reaction she filed away for later examination. Lucia left her waiting. Helen stared at the ceiling affecting nonchalance. Suddenly Lucia slammed her pile of papers onto the desk with a loud bang.

"I have here," she said, "the thoughts of one of the government's top profilers." A neatly bound book was picked off the top of the file and dumped loudly on the table. "Personnel files from CMU," a large and scruffy manila folder followed it, "bloody school reports!" a box file full of small stapled booklets "and a host of other crap!" the rest of the pile. "All of which tell me that Helen Cutter is not a team player."

Helen found herself shrinking back in spite of herself. So she controlled the impulse, leaned forward to display plenty of cleavage and leered.

Lucia leaned back, sighed and closed her eyes. "I should have you locked up."

Helen eyed her carefully. The press surrounding Stephen's attempts to lead the anomaly team really had been magnificently disastrous. She now had an inkling why. Lucia didn't need her to lead the anomaly team, she needed her to look good in front of reporters. Bloody survivor bloody chic was probably about to save her neck. It gave Helen an idea how to handle the situation, make this look like some form of capitulation to Lucia's terms. Give her some reason why Helen had run and some reason to suppose she wouldn't do so again.

"I'll make you a deal."

"I hardly think you're in any position to make deals."

"If it's my deal, you can trust me to stick to it."

Lucia opened her eyes. "OK, spit it out."

"We co-opt Clifford. Get Jenny to do it. He's had his pound of flesh at Stephen's expense but I really don't want to be watching my back for him. I'm prepared to deal with the Press, within reason, but there's only so many times I'm going to discuss where I shop with women's magazines. Let Jenny draw up a list and a schedule. If it's reasonable, I'll do it, but after that I get a low profile."

"Go on."

Helen was warming to her theme now. What else might she hypothetically have objected to?

"Keep the Special Forces out of things unless absolutely necessary. And the same for Lester. None of them like me or trust me which makes them a liability. My team, that's Hart, Temple, Maitland and, if necessary, Lewis, handle things our way. I imagine Nick stipulated the same terms."

"I'm beginning to think you are more like him than I had previously given you credit for."

"You know what they say about people being too alike."

"Especially when they are arrogant, stubborn and brilliant."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Keep the press, the military and Lester off my back and I'll handle your anomalies for you. I won't try to escape back in time again and I won't try any more time altering experiments so long as I get regularly briefed on current progress by the Physics team, say once a month."

Lucia looked at her thoughtfully and eyed the pile of papers. "They were all wrong about you, weren't they," she said, thoughtfully. "You've got nothing against teams. Your problem is with authority."

"So give me free rein."

Lucia's eyes narrowed. "This is your last chance. I get the merest inkling you're up to something and you'll be up on a charge of treason. And don't forget I have a copy of your notes."

She stalked from the room, leaving the door unlocked behind her. Helen left it a minute, in order not to appear too eager and then sauntered out. She was surprised to find a welcoming reception, her *team*, like it or not.

"You were trying to get Nick back weren't you," said Abby, standing forward.

Helen cast her eye over the little group. Abby in the front with Connor half a step behind her. Stephen leaning against the wall. Jenny hanging back.

"Something like that."

"Won't work," said Connor. "I've been through the equations with Dave, in Physics. Changing history is really complex."

Helen allowed an eyebrow to twitch.

"We appreciate it, though," said Abby. Connor nodded vigourously and even Stephen gave a slight jerk of the head. Only Jenny made no move of recognition. Helen smiled at them and then turned, slipping one arm through Abby's and the other through Connor's.

"Let's get on with things then," she said, leading them down the corridor. Jenny she could deal with in time. Jenny worked with her head far more than her heart which meant Helen just had to find a sufficiently compelling argument why Jenny should trust her. The really hard work, convincing Abby to trust her, she seemed to have achieved by accident. She'd never have listed almost getting trampled by dinosaurs as a useful manipulative trick before. She wasn't sure she was keen to try it again though.

Helen had taken the train from Oxford to Paddington just after the morning rush hour. She had no desire to spend the journey crammed into a carriage with hundreds of commuters. She picked idly at a discarded newspaper as she travelled. The Metro wasn't really interested in politics, so Lucia Wright's promotion to Home Secretary barely warranted a mention. The ARC had been in an uproar of gossip when she had last been there, earlier that week. The place was full of speculation about Lucia's replacement. Personally Helen suspected that Lucia would continue to keep an extremely close eye on the project.

The press coverage in the broadsheets had been more interesting though, and had included a couple of potted biographies which were, indirectly, the reason behind her trip. She had arranged to meet contacts at the Natural History Museum but had left herself time to drop by the British Library and check the newspaper collection. She was particularly interested in references to Lucia's father who had, apparently, disappeared thirty years ago in 1978. If she'd been Lyle, she would have said her thumbs were itching.

Three hours later she had two interesting facts at her disposal. Firstly, Lucia's father had been a professor of Physics at Bristol University. Secondly, he was last seen near the Forest of Dean. She sent a text to a colleague, one Dr. Parry, at Bristol asking if the library held any of the good professor's papers.

4.3 The Seeds of Time

> ”If you can look into the seeds of time,
> and say which grain will grow and which will not,
> speak then unto me.”
>
> – Shakespeare, Macbeth

Helen regarded the anomaly in front of her warily. It was inside a shed on an abandoned piece of wasteland behind a housing estate.

“Do we know where it goes?” she asked.

“Do you mean you don’t?” countered Connor, though he grinned at her as he said it.

“You know I don’t. You’ve seen my notes.”

He nodded and tweaked the controls on his robot. It moved forwards and backwards noisily.

“All set,” he said.

“Of you go then.”

The robot trundled through the anomaly and Helen turned to look at the screens. Brilliant, bright blue sky and sand showed up on the monitor.

“Looks like the Silurian,” said Abby. “That last anomaly to the Silurian was on the estate.”

“Could be,” agreed Connor. “The atmospheric composition is about right.” He tapped at a couple of dials. Helen really needed to learn what they were all measuring.

Suddenly the anomaly pulsed and vanished. Connor cursed.

“Never mind,” said Helen. “You can always build another robot.”

She straightened up. “OK, team. That was all a bit of an anti-climax. Let’s head on home.”

They were halfway back to the ARC when Helen’s phone rang. She frowned into it as an excited technician at the other end told her loudly that the anomaly had re-opened. Stephen was already signalling to pull off at the upcoming motorway exit.

“I take it we’re going back,” he said.

"So it would seem," agreed Helen. She looked into the back where Connor and Abby were sat, hands almost, but not quite, touching.

"Cheer up Connor. Looks like we might get your robot back."

The next morning Helen reached the anomaly site early. The previous day had been frustrating. By the time they'd got back to the estate, following entanglement in rush hour traffic, the anomaly had vanished again. It had been late though, and it had seemed unwise to return to the ARC. A phone call to Jenny had got them rooms in a nearby B&B and a hasty shift system had been arranged for watching the anomaly.

Connor was already there when she arrived at the tail end of his shift. She squatted next to him and peered over his arm at the laptop screen.

"What have you got for me?"

"It opens and closes on a three-hourly cycle. Two hours open. One hour shut."

Helen stared back at it. "Any idea how long it'll do that for?"

"I'm working on it."

Helen stared at him.

"Really! I'll work it out."

Helen straightened up and went to stand before the glittering light, thoughtfully.

"I suppose I'd better call the military in. I've better things to do than stand here watching in case one of those sand scorpions gets out."

"About that...."

"Yes?" Helen turned around with her best encouraging smile. Something in Connor's tone told her he was on to something.

"The girl turned up about an hour ago."

"What girl?"

"The girl from the housing estate." Connor gestured behind them.

"Connor, I don't know what you're talking about."

"When the anomaly opened on the housing estate last year a girl got lost through it, chasing her dog."

"And she's just turned up through this one."

Connor gestured at the robot's monitor screens and Helen walked over to look at them. She cold just make out a small figure perched on some rocks in the distance. "Fascinating."

"That means that Nick and Stephen will be through in a few hours' time," Connor's voice faltered.

Helen squatted back beside Connor once more and pondered how much she actually trusted him. "You said changing history was really complex."

Connor gave her a half-hearted smile. "Got to be worth a chance, though, hasn't it."

Helen looked at the monitor. "There's a lot of sand between us and those rocks."

"Walk like a fremen!"

"What?"

"You know, from Dune?" Connor gazed at her hopefully. "Classic novel? Sand worms and spice in the desert? Paul Atreides? Sting?"

Helen had gazed at him levelly throughout. "I've heard of Sting," she finally conceded.

She was interested to note Connor's eyes had glazed over slightly. He was grappling with how to explain a concept from the geek hive mind to one of the "not-we". "So there are these sand worms, right, who track people by sound, rhythmic thumps on the desert sand."

"Like the scorpions?"

"Right! Like the scorpions. So, the fremen have a special walk. It has no rhythm so the sand worms think it's just random noise, not something moving."

Helen nodded slowly. "Walk like a fremen." It made a weird kind of sense but was she really going to trust her life to an idea Connor had read in a aci-gi novel? She eyed the anomaly speculatively and fished her phone from her pocket.

"Stephen? Can you come to the anomaly site? There's something interesting here."

"Why do you want Stephen?" Connor asked, a little sulkily, as she shut down the phone.

"Lucia has expressly forbidden any attempt to change history so I want this to be as quick and simple as possible. Stephen knows exactly what happened last time. I want to know that too."

"Right," said Helen, after Stephen had finished his tale. "You didn't detect this anomaly after the other one closed, so it must have finished its cycle by then."

She began thinking through the options. Connor sat by his laptop, his retrieved robot next to him. Stephen was lounging up against the wall of the shed. Abby

seemed to have tagged along with him and she was sat in a corner, perched on top of a workbench of some kind.

"I think our best bet is to be waiting as you and Nick come through the other anomaly." Helen said to Stephen, "You talk to them and then we high-tail it back here as fast as possible. We need to time it right, though. I don't want to get involved with Leek's goons."

"And yours," said Abby, a touch of hardness in her voice.

Helen sighed, irritated by the harping over the past. She had always been more interested in fixing things than assigning blame. However, these days Abby was mostly playing nicely, with only the occasional snipe, so Helen decided to be graceful. "Yes, the goons employed by me *and* Leek, happy? We don't want to run into them, so we should wait here, observing, and not head through until after we've seen them get attacked."

"I'll send the robot back through," said Connor. "I doubt it will be visible from the other anomaly and we'll be able to watch."

"Need any help?" said a voice suddenly.

The door to the shed was pulled open and Lieutenant William Slater walked in wearing full military gear. Helen cursed silently. They would have to get him away from the anomaly.

"Lieutenant," she said, smiling winningly. "What an unexpected surprise."

Slater brushed past her to the anomaly.

"You planning to go through there and interfere with history?" he asked.

Helen looked at Connor who shrugged helplessly at her.

"You popped up when I went through that anomaly on the housing estate," Slater said. "Persuaded me to go back. Saved my life."

"You weren't there," said Stephen.

"I wasn't there when you were. I was before you arrived though, on Mr Leek's orders."

"You were working for Leek!" said Stephen and he lunged at Slater.

Slater blocked the blow and then punched back, knocking Stephen to the ground. "Don't mess with me, son," he warned. "I'm the regimental boxing champion."

Abby and Connor helped Stephen to his feet. Helen couldn't help a slight grin. Stephen quite fancied himself as the action man and seeing people's pride get deflated always amused her. She eyed Slater thoughtfully. "Why should we trust you?"

The man drew his sidearm, pointing it at her. "No reason," he said, "so I'm going to come with you. Make sure we do this properly."

He grabbed her arm, pressing the muzzle of the gun to her head, and backed towards the anomaly facing Stephen, Abby and Connor. “I see anyone following us, I kill her. Everyone understand?”

They nodded.

Helen found herself standing on a sandy surface. The anomaly cast a pale light, letting her pick out rolling dunes. Slater was still gripping her arm with the gun pressed to her head. Surreptitiously Helen scraped at the sand with her foot and was relieved to feel rock just below the surface.

“So? What now, Lieutenant?” she asked.

She was pushed forwards. “Walk!”

Carefully, she started to walk along the rocky outcrop. It wasn’t long before her breathing became heavy in the oxygen-starved air. In the dark it was easy to see the second anomaly ahead of her. The night was clear. Helen was accustomed now to moving at night by the light of the moon. It wasn’t something she chose to do, but it was a useful skill that had saved her life on several occasions. It now made her confident as she walked. If there had been anything that approximated cover, she would have made a run for it. The rocky ground continued, but she kept her eyes open for disturbances in the sand. The scorpions could walk on rock after all.

They stopped in front of the second anomaly and Helen was grateful for the slight breeze that wafted through it bringing fresh air to them.

“You wait here to warn my younger self,” said Slater.

He looked around. Helen couldn’t help raising her eyebrows at him. She had already regretted the lack of places to hide; now she felt a twinge of vindictive pleasure. He was going to have to walk back to the other anomaly and trust she would remain here.

“We’ll wait together,” he said.

“That’s not what you said happened,” pointed out Helen.

“I’m changing what happened.”

Helen felt a small chill of fear run down her spine. This was getting out of hand. She pondered how to manipulate him. She’d never noticed him being particularly susceptible to her charms but it had to be worth a try, especially if she offered a little more than a tantalising glimpse of cleavage. She tugged downwards at the bottom of her jacket, aware this emphasised her assets. At that moment, however, the anomaly next to them pulsed and two men stepped through.

“What the fuck!” said Slater’s younger self.

“Look mate!” said Slater. “You want to go right back through that anomaly now. There’s serious trouble this side.”

"Go fuck yourself," said the other. "I don't know who you are but you ain't fooling me."

Helen closed her eyes, anger welling up inside her at the extent to which this situation was out of control. In doing so she became more aware of her other senses and, in particular, of the ground trembling beneath her feet.

"Too late," she shouted and threw herself backwards as a large scorpion erupted from the sand.

There was the sound of automatic gunfire and a scream. The gunfire continued. Then there was a low whump, probably a small explosive of some sort. Helen felt the blast wash over her. She raised herself on her elbows. In the half-light she could see both William Slaters, but not the third man. The Slaters stood back to back, guns at the ready.

"Was that the trouble you were referring to?" asked the younger Slater.

"Possibly," said the older one. "*I* did as I was told and headed back through the anomaly. Robinson didn't, though, and he never came back."

"Looks like he won't be coming back this time either."

"Is one of you two going to help me up?" asked Helen.

She watched them exchange a glance. "No," said the older man.

Irritated, Helen clambered to her feet and brushed her hands.

"Well, now everyone's happy, we should go."

She deliberately turned her back on them and started off towards the other anomaly. Involuntarily she glanced in the direction of the rocky outcrop, where she knew Taylor Crane was waiting.

There was the sound of running feet behind her.

"You wait for me," said Slater and grabbed her arm.

She looked around. Both Slater's were next to her. "Shouldn't you be back through the anomaly?" she asked the younger one.

"I want a good excuse for why I didn't do as told, otherwise I'm buggered. What did you tell Leek?" he asked the older one.

"Not much and he wasn't happy. But he's the one who's buggered. He'll be dino-chow in a matter of weeks. You'll do better to throw your lot in with Lester or, better still, Lucia Wright."

"So I'm up shit creek if I go back. Let's say I bypass the whole business and come back with you."

"Well that will bugger things up right and proper."

Helen sighed. "I'll leave you two to argue. I'm going to go and talk to Taylor."

Both guns were raised. "Why?" they asked in unison.

"Because I have a bit of tweaking I want to do too. I don't see how it interferes with your plans and if you keep schtum about what I'm doing, I'll keep schtum about what you did."

Without asking further, she set off across the sand.

"Walk like a fremen," Connor had said. Helen worked to control her breathing and, at the same time, to keep her footfalls random. It was a bright night, and there were two anomalies, but even so she could only just see the rocks ahead of her. She took a step, and then two in quick succession and then paused. Then she took another step. This was going to take a while.

"Taylor?" she said quietly as she came up to the rocks.

She saw the girl's figure start up suddenly from where she had been sitting. "Who are you?" came a voice.

"I have a message I'd like you to deliver."

"You what?"

"I have a message I want you to deliver."

"And why should I do that?"

Stephen had said the girl was spiky. Helen liked a challenge but now was not the time. "Look, Taylor, two men will be along shortly to rescue you."

"Why don't you rescue me? Why should I deliver any sort of message for you?"

Helen tried to reign in her irritation. Kids! Who needed them? "It's complicated. Just trust me, OK. Nick and Stephen will turn up tomorrow to get you out of here. You have to tell Stephen not to trust Helen. Have you got that? Tell them that Leek is the traitor."

"Why should I trust you? Who are you? Why can't I come with you?"

"You just can't, all right. Nick and Stephen will rescue you. It will all be fine. Just deliver the message, OK!"

"Deliver it yourself. If you're not going to help me I don't see why I should help you."

"Well it can't hurt to tell them when they turn up, can it?" argued Helen in exasperation. "They can do what they like with the information. It'll save their lives and they'll have just saved yours. Fair's fair."

"Go away. I'm not talking to you."

Helen resisted the temptation to slap the child. She wished she could see the girl's face in the dark. Her figure was hunched up with her arms held tight around her knees. Helen scrambled down off the rocks and started back across the sands.

"I hope the monsters get you," Taylor shouted after her but there was a wobble in the child's voice that prevented it sounding like much of a threat.

Helen wasn't naturally the mothering type but she allowed herself a small feeling of guilt over leaving the child here. However, the girl would be fine, and hopefully she would pass on the message. Helen looked across the sand to where the Slaters were waiting. She tutted irritably and continued on her way, leaving Taylor where she was.

The two Slaters were both still there when she returned across the sandy stretch. Both guns were pointed at her.

"What did you do?" asked the elder one.

"None of your business," she snapped back. "Are we going to get on with this or not?" She glanced at the second man.

"Come on then," he said.

The anomaly glittered ahead of them. Helen strode towards it irritably. Hopefully they could show the younger Slater around. He'd be satisfied, and then go back to his own time.

She stepped through briskly. Stephen, Abby and Connor were all waiting anxiously on the other side.

"Did it work?" began Connor and then shut up suddenly as the Slaters emerged.

"Who's this?" asked Stephen, hackles visibly rising.

"They're both Slater," said Helen.

"Who?"

Helen's heart sank. She turned back to the two men and the anomaly behind them. The anomaly pulsed once and then vanished. Helen swore.

"This is going to be complicated," she sighed. "Someone had better contact Lester and Lucia."

This was the first time Helen had had a one-to-one interview with Lucia which had not involved her being locked up first. It was strangely disorientating to be sat together in the wood-panelled office Lucia maintained at the ARC. It was cosy and warm and reeked of political privilege and old money. It was such a contrast to the rest of the ARC that Helen wondered if it were some kind of protest, presumably against the ubiquitous steel and glass.

"What do think?" asked Lucia.

"Is he telling the truth? Yes, I think so," said Helen. "I know he was recruited by Leek. I'm pretty sure that, in one time line, I must have warned him to get the hell out of the Silurian, back through the anomaly and to dissociate himself from Leek. In the time line I remember he just forced me to go through at gunpoint

and then his younger self, being equally suspicious, insisted on coming back this way."

"Why do you think he felt he needed to urge you through at gunpoint?"

"Neither of us has been exactly discreet about the fact you ordered me not to attempt any changes of history. I'm guessing he didn't trust the new status quo."

Lucia nodded absently, shuffling papers. She'd shuffled them every time she wanted to give the impression of consulting something. Helen had noticed that they were, in fact, a mixture of constituency letters and press clippings. She had a warm smug feeling at having detected Lucia in a ruse, however minor.

"I've checked up on Slater's background," said Lucia. "He went AWOL about six months ago. The day that anomaly on the housing estate opened up."

"Now we know why," agreed Helen.

Lucia sighed. "I'm not happy about this. Not happy at all. I want that recurring anomaly of yours watched. I'm going to keep the Slaters detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act until I'm sure they can't go back through it and attempt to meddle again. No one goes through that anomaly. Nothing comes out of that anomaly. There's to be absolutely no more meddling with that bit of history."

Helen liked being able to look someone in the eye and tell them the honest truth. Not only because it happened so rarely but also because she knew her body language would subtly betray her confidence and that disoriented people. "I wouldn't dream of it," she said.

Helen left the room with a bounce in her step. She couldn't help it, could she, if she allowed herself small amounts of pleasure than not everything was going Lucia's way.

Helen's good mood faltered, however, on encountering Connor in the corridor. The poor lamb continued to display pretty much every passing thought on his face.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"One of the sand scorpions got out."

"How?"

He shrugged anxiously. "Lyle just radioed," he said.

Helen cursed. "We'd better get back to the site."

The Special Forces teams were there in large numbers by the time they got back.

"What the hell happened?" she demanded of Lyle as she got out of the four-by-four.

"The anomaly opened earlier than expected. Some of the lads got caught on the hop."

His mouth snapped shut and his face was impassive. Helen could tell that she wasn't going to be getting any names out of him.

"Take Stephen to where you last sighted it," she said. "See what he can do."

Lyle nodded. Stephen had already unpacked his rifle. Helen watched the two men walk away.

"Connor! Abby!" She looked into the back of the truck. "Keep in touch by radio. If you get any bright ideas where it might have gone let us know."

Connor was hunched over his laptop, looking up anything he could find on Silurian life.

"I'm feeling a bit useless here," said Abby.

"You're the behaviour expert," said Helen. "You're going to have to translate whatever Connor finds into something we can actually use."

She looked up and was unsurprised to see Jenny walking toward her.

"Before you ask," she said, holding up a hand, "I have no idea what it is, where it is or what it might do. I've Connor working the database. If you stay here you'll know everything as soon as I do."

Jenny's mouth twitched into what might have almost been an appreciative smile. Without a word she climbed into the passenger seat.

"OK, Connor!" Helen heard her say, "what have you got for me?"

Helen watched Stephen and Lyle from afar. Stephen was looking all around him, mostly at the ground, intent and focused. Lyle hung back, letting him do his job. They walked over to the edge of the wasteground. Helen's curiousity got the better of her and she walked over to see.

The wasteground fell away into a railway siding, a disused one, judging by the weeds and undergrowth that infested the track. Stephen and Lyle were cautiously picking their way down the side of the slope. When they reached the bottom, Stephen looked both ways and then headed for the tunnel entrance.

"Lyle, Stephen," she ordered from her vantage point. "Wait there, let's find out where this tunnel goes."

She headed back to the truck, Connor and his laptop.

"Connor, where does that disused railway tunnel lead?"

Connor looked up. His gaze followed the line of her pointing finger and then he glanced down and started typing. "Give me a minute or two," he said.

"I'll phone the council," said Jenny briskly.

By the time Connor had pulled up several maps and a history of the Great Northeastern Railway, Jenny had navigated her way succinctly and, in some cases, aggressively through the successive hierarchies of the local council, spoken to the planning department and intimidated someone called Mr Jennings who, it seemed, had access to some plans of interest.

"The far end is blocked," she reported. "But there are several access hatches from above."

"Lucia wants the scorpion captured and returned, not killed unless it's absolutely necessary," reported Helen, recalling the extremely brief conversation she'd had with Lucia before she set out. The appearance of the two William Slaters had clearly rattled her. Helen would have been amused how solicitous it had suddenly made her for pre-historic life, were it not for the inconvenience it was going to cause.

"I need a large cage," she said.

"I'm on it." Jenny got out her mobile phone once more.

"What do you know about scorpions?" Helen asked Abby.

"Ummm...., they glow in ultraviolet light?"

"Cute, but not immediately helpful."

"Nocturnal, not generally aggressive to humans."

"That will be because humans are generally several hundred times their size," said Connor. "That's not really the case here, is it?"

"Nocturnal I can work with, though." Helen flashed Abby a smile and raised her eyebrows at Connor. She didn't want the girl to get surly and difficult, so a little bonding at the expense of the men-folk probably wouldn't go amiss.

She picked up the radio from the front of the truck and tuned into the SF frequency.

"Lyle, I want a perimeter to contain the scorpion in the tunnel until the cage arrives. Meanwhile, I want a team to walk the length of the tunnel above ground and check for any place it might manage to get out."

"Then what?" crackled Lyle's voice.

"We wait for the cage."

It was dusk by the time the cage arrived, but Helen suspected that would, in fact, serve her purposes better.

She and Stephen entered the tunnel system by the far entrance, an unpleasant climb down an ancient ladder with the constant risk it might come away from the wall or kill them in some other interesting fashion. They had night vision goggles and ultra-violet light sources. Stephen had put up token resistance when Lyle had silently handed them rifles and amour-piercing rounds, but Helen's irritated snap that he didn't have to get himself killed just to prove that Nick could sometimes be wrong had shut him up. The paranoia Nick had managed to communicate to the team about harming pre-historic life frequently irritated her and she was damned if she was going into the tunnel armed only with a tranquiliser rifle, whatever Lucia had said.

Helen landed lightly on the tunnel floor and flashed the torch both ways. She was reassured that she could see no scorpions. Stephen landed, cat-like, beside her.

"What now?" he asked, quietly.

"We get to the blocked end of the tunnel and then work our way back down to the entrance."

Helen walked quietly in the direction of the blockage, Stephen just behind her. She was glad Connor wasn't there to blunder around. Even Abby, who was careful and well-coordinated, could be heard coming if you were listening. She and Stephen had spent a long, hot summer in Madagascar, back in her old, old life. She had been impressed then at the natural silence of his movements and he had clearly got better at it since. As had she, for that matter. Quietly they paced down the tunnel.

She felt Stephen touch her arm, but it was unnecessary. She had also seen the flash of blue in the ultraviolet light. The scorpion was ahead of them. She stopped still and considered their options, feeling Stephen close behind her.

They had discussed this. It hunted by sound, so the conclusion was that it probably had poor eye-sight. Helen turned to face Stephen and pulled out a flare, so he could see it in her hand. She watched him take a step backwards, fading into the wall of the tunnel, then she slung the rifle over her back so her hands were free, Stephen handed her the aluminium pipe he was carrying. She walked forward a few paces, took a deep breath and then lit the flare.

"Oi!" she shouted, "Oi!" and she banged on the metal rails with the aluminium pipe.

"It's moving," Stephen's voice whispered in her ear on her radio headset.

Helen turned on her heels and ran, dragging the pipe behind her so it clattered against the rails. It made a lot of noise, but if she hefted it up for a second or two, she could hear the sounds of scuttling feet. She glanced behind, but the flare she was carrying was causing night blindness. All she could see was darkness.

She ran into the small circle of light, praying there were no landslips or collapses she would have to scramble over. She trusted Stephen was behind the thing with his gun at the ready. She had to.

There was a shout up ahead of her. It sounded like Lyle, ordering the men. Not much further now. Some instinct made her duck and she heard a snap of chitin above her. There was a sound of gunfire. She swore quietly but, apparently, the creature paused. No claws snapped at her neck or feet. She ran on, up the ramp, into the cage and through the small door at the far end. There was a crash of shell meeting metal. She turned back. The creature was thrashing in the large cage. Already the metal door at the far end was closed. Stephen, now joined by several of the soldiers, was just locking it into place.

She jumped down from the platform to find herself face to face with a cheerily grinning Lyle.

"I suppose it was you ordered them to shoot," she said, furiously.

Lyle shrugged. "Just trying to scare it a bit. I told them to aim high." He eyed her with dislike. "Wouldn't have wanted to hurt the scorpion after all. It's entirely innocent, just obeying its nature."

"Don't be smart!" she sniped back but then mentally kicked herself. Alienating Lyle, however irritating his smug exterior, was not going to help her plans.

The anomaly opened one last time, at dawn, hours after it had last closed. They pushed the cage back through and opened it up, letting the creature out and into the sand. Helen, perched on the back of the cage, squinted across the wasteland towards the rock but, of course, Taylor, Nick and Stephen were no longer there.

"This woman turned up," said Taylor as they walked towards the car Lester had provided to get them back home.

"What woman?" asked Nick.

Taylor shrugged. "Don't know, some woman. She said not to trust Helen."

Nick laughed mirthlessly. “Not much danger of that.”

Taylor nodded as she climbed into the car. “Fair enough, then. She also said not to trust Leek.”

“And you didn’t think about it again?” asked Helen, irritated.

Stephen glared at her over the steering wheel. “’Course I thought about it again. I even tried to discuss it with Nick, but he said it was just you playing mind games and not to pay attention. If anything, I think he was more inclined to trust Leek afterwards than before.”

Oh Nick! Helen sighed inwardly.

“I did pay attention,” insisted Stephen. “I was cautious.”

Helen bit back the urge to say “not cautious enough.” It wasn’t going to help her now.

Stephen dropped her outside the house she had once shared with Nick. She considered inviting him in. She’d teach Jenny to try to warn her off, but she needed Jenny even more than she needed Stephen. She consoled herself with the thought that revenge was best served cold as she flounced up the steps, swinging her hips.

Inside the front door was a package. Ripping it open she was rewarded with photocopies of a dozen or so papers. Half an hour later her suspicions were confirmed. She might not have been a physicist but she knew enough to understand what the papers were telling her. Professor Wright had known all about the anomalies.

Helen was bored. Politics always sent her to sleep but sadly she needed to be keeping track of this. She stared idly at the hotel ceiling while Lester droned on. She was tempted to switch off the computer but Lester had warned her she might be called to give evidence and she wanted to know what had been said. Lucia had also warned her she might be called and had hoped Helen understood the importance of the committee. As a result, UK Parliament live on the web it was.

“So in summary,” Lester finally concluded, “I see no reason to suppose the anomalies are anything other than an entirely natural phenomenon. The proposed extensions to the Prevention of Terrorism Act can not be justified with reference to the anomaly problem.”

Helen rolled her eyes and sighed. Who cared about the Prevention of Terrorism powers? The government was going to extend them anyway - the realities of the anomaly situation didn't make any difference to that.

Suddenly there was an excited babble of voices followed by a scream. Helen looked back at the screen and then sat upright in alarm. The bright shining shape of an anomaly was hanging in the centre of the committee room. As Helen watched, a troodon leaped through. The picture suddenly cut out.

Helen reached for the phone.

4.4 Cry Havoc

Cry Havoc and let slip the dogs of war.

– Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

Helen was standing outside the police cordon when the team pulled up in a four-by-four. A lot of army officers seemed to be present and there was an interesting little jurisdictional dispute going on between a Brigadier and a Chief Inspector. Helen was staying on the sidelines. She intended to bypass them anyway, but wanted her whole team behind her when she did.

She walked over as they started unloading the four-by-four. Two more trucks pulled up. Captain Lyle and his men piled out. Helen really shouldn't have been surprised. He was here to rescue Lester.

"There's more than one anomaly," Connor told her as she approached.

"How many?" she asked.

"I don't know, at least four, we stopped being able to differentiate them at that point. I think there are lots more though, opening and shutting rapidly."

Helen had a very bad feeling about this. She should know about an anomaly confluence that large.

"We working together on this?" Lyle was standing behind her, fully armed.

Helen nodded. "We'll have to get past the Brigadier and the police. Just look like you own the place."

She felt the teams forming up behind her and set off for the police line. At that moment she caught sight of an immaculately tailored suit heading her way. She paused to let Lucia catch her up.

"Stand your team down, Helen," said Lucia.

"What!" It was Lyle's voice.

Lucia's eyes never left Helen's face. "I said stand your team down. This is a matter for the military. It's too big for a small team to handle."

Helen looked across to where the Brigadier and Chief Constable had been arguing. The Chief Constable had a distinctly defeated air about him. There didn't seem to be a lot of soldiers around.

"What's he planning on doing?" asked Lyle, nodding towards the Brigadier.

"I understand that a regiment is on their way."

Lyle made an exasperated noise. "We need to go in now!"

"Two SWAT teams have already gone in and failed to come out again. We wait."

Helen eyed Lucia calmly. "Where's the Defence Secretary?"

"In there," Lucia nodded towards the Houses of Parliament.

"The Prime Minister?"

"Likewise."

"So you're the senior government minister present. You can overrule the military and send in a team."

Lucia smirked ever so slightly. "I'm afraid I agree with the military assessment. It's too dangerous for a small team. We have to wait."

"You just want Lester dead!" said Lyle angrily.

"Lyle," warned Helen.

"Honestly, Captain," snapped Lucia. "Lester is hardly my priority. Half the government is in that building."

She glanced at Helen. Cold shivers went down Helen's spine. A trap was about to be sprung.

"I can't over-rule the military assessment," said Lucia. "Everything we can reasonably do in a rapid response fashion has been tried. However, I have a number of colleagues in there and I'm aware that the people in front of me are those best equipped to deal with the situation. I will not prevent one further team entering the building, but I will not have anyone ordered inside. I hope I make myself clear. You can go in, but it is to be volunteers only."

"I'll go," said Lyle.

"Me too!" It was Stephen.

Helen cursed.

"And me!" from Connor.

"No!" said Helen sharply. "Connor, Abby, you're both staying here. This isn't a scientific situation."

"She said anyone could volunteer," protested Abby.

Helen took a gamble and looked at Lyle.

"She's right," said Lyle. "Sorry, you two, but I need people who are used to shooting."

"Then why take Stephen?" argued Abby.

"He's got more experience than either of you."

"To be honest, I'd prefer it if Stephen didn't go," interrupted Helen. "But I won't actually stop him."

"Well," Lucia smiled tightly, "sort it out between yourselves. But if I hear that any pressure was put on any one to go in there, there will be trouble."

It looked like there was no question that all of Lyle's team were going in. Helen watched them crowd round a schematic of the interior that Lyle had spread out in the back of the truck. Next to Lyle stood Lieutenant Niall Richards, known as Blade. He had a closely shaven head and a disconcertingly direct gaze. It hadn't taken Helen long to figure out his nick name. She'd even watched one of the knife fights that definitely never took place out at the back of the ARC, from a discrete distance of course. He liked his knives and he was good.

Then there was Corporal Darren Cooper or Kermit. Helen was told he had a wife and kids, a fact she studiously didn't think about too much. She'd once kidnapped him into the past and one thing had led to another. He was a nice kid, though, understandably wary of her, of course.

Next to him was Private Robert Finn, one of the youngest of the Special Forces, keen on guns, nice but dim. Helen had never had much time for him.

Second Lieutenant Dave Owen, aka Ditzy, was the medic, known for his sarcasm and his cold hands. Helen had vaguely heard something about a girlfriend and got the impression she was the centre of the wives' circle. Beyond that, she had heard he was good at his job and was grateful she'd never had cause to verify that fact.

Lastly, there was Private Tanya Lacey, the only woman on the special forces team. Helen had worked with her before and respected her sharp senses. Today her nut brown curls were scraped back into a pony tail. Her face was set into an expressionless mask but Helen knew it was often like that. Private Lacey didn't open up easily, but Helen thought she was being even more careful than usual not to show her feelings. Lester or Lyle or the departed Captain Ryan or just a shared interest in caving, had forged a very closely knit group of soldiers. Possibly it was a bit of all three elements shaping the team, but there was no doubt that every one

of them was willing to die in order to get Lester out of there alive. It was just that some were more careful about hiding it than others.

A second ARC team, on the other hand, had opted out. They were comparative newcomers sharing no memory of Captain Ryan and no interest in caving. They were bunched up in discussion with the Brigadier. When the reinforcements arrived, they'd be working with them. Connor was with Lyle's group pointing out the locations of the confirmed anomalies.

"Lyle, a word please," Helen murmured.

"I'm busy."

"This is important and it won't take long."

Lyle stepped back slightly from the group. "Go on!"

"You realise that by insisting this op is volunteers only, Lucia is ensuring that only those most loyal to Lester go in there."

Helen watched Lyle process that information. "Not a lot I can do about that."

"Lyle! Lester is probably dead anyway. But if you take your team in there and get them all killed and by some miracle he survives, you've effectively cut him off from all military support within the Anomaly Research Centre."

"He's lost the political battle anyway, which is the important one," observed Lyle. "I'm just concerned with getting him, and any other survivors, out of there as quickly as possible."

Helen sighed. This was going to end badly. Lyle knew it too. She could see he was rubbing his thumbs.

"You can't even use the armour piercing bullets," she said, "because there may be survivors. You're walking into an anomaly confluence armed only with water pistols."

Lyle flashed her a rogueish grin. "We've survived worse."

"I doubt it," muttered Helen.

"There's another one!" came a shout.

Helen spun round. A large anomaly was opening in Old Palace Yard.

"Squad! Positions!" shouted Lyle, running forwards. He'd only crossed a couple of yards, the rest of the squad fanned out in a loose V shape behind him when a Tyranosaurus rex leaped through the anomaly. Lyle dropped to his knees sighting along his gun.

Helen turned and raced back towards the four-by-four. Connor and Abby were ahead of her, already unloading the rocket launcher. The sound of gunfire echoed behind them.

"Used one of these before?" she asked, as Connor fumbled to set it up.

"I've read the manual," he said.

"Mine I think." Finn had run back to them. A pleased grin crossed his youthful features as he shouldered the gun. "You loaded this?"

"I think so," stammered Connor.

"Stand back."

Finn knelt down and fired the launcher. A grenade sped out and impacted with the T. rex, knocking it messily to the ground.

"One down!" shouted Lyle, triumphantly.

Helen didn't feel like celebrating. The anomaly pulsed once and then closed as quickly as it had opened.

The team entered through St. Stephen's entrance. Lyle took point with Finn and Lacey either side of him. Blade, Kermit and Stephen followed behind, with Ditzy in the rear.

They each wore a radio headset with a small camera mounted on one side. This meant everything they saw was relayed back to the Brigadier, the Chief Constable, the remaining ARC members and fuck knew what other spectators.

Lyle's plan, such as it was, was to check the Lobby, the Commons and the Lords for survivors and then proceed upstairs to the committee rooms. He'd seen a plan of the building. There was no way they could sweep the whole thing, but Connor's best bet was that an anomaly had opened in each of the debating chambers and a third remained open in the central lobby. There was one, also still open, in Victoria Tower (which Lyle intended to ignore) and another had opened and shut on the upper floor. Connor had warned, though, that it was possible that dozens of other anomalies had opened and closed.

St. Stephen's Hall was grandiose, with statuary down the sides and a tall gothic ceiling that rose upwards like the interior of a cathedral. Lyle could imagine tourists rubber-necking open-mouthed at the place. He was more concerned with the three large lizard-like creatures, each nearly two metres long, crawling across the floor.

"What are they?" asked Lacey nervously.

"Diadectes," came Connor's voice over the headsets. "Large herbivores," he added, followed a moment later by, "probably."

Lyle eyed the creatures doubtfully. They were ambling around, not looking obviously dangerous.

"You might be able to herd them," came Abby's voice. "I can look after them if you get them outside, some of the cages have arrived."

Lyle debated inwardly. "Will do." He decided. "This way we clear a route through for survivors to get out. But if they get twitchy or dangerous, I'm having them shot."

Carefully the team edged round the lizards until they were on the far side of them. Lyle glanced at the soldiers and nodded to Stephen. "Let's make some noise."

They started shouting, fanned out across the width of the hallway. The beasts picked up pace and, thankfully, headed away from them, tails swishing. Lyle winced as one of the statues was knocked crashing to the floor.

"So much for Pitt the Younger," came Helen's acerbic voice over the comms.

Lyle watched as the three creatures rushed outside. He could see the other ARC team standing just beyond the entrance. Hopefully that was one problem sorted out.

"OK," Lyle took a deep breath. "From here on it'll probably get harder."

He pushed open the door to the Central Lobby.

There was a flash of snapping teeth and fast movement. Instinctively, Lyle ducked as something bounded over his head. There was a sound of gunfire and a cry. Lyle whirled around to follow the movement. Where Blade had been standing Lyle could see a velociraptor. Without thinking he let off a burst of gunfire and watched it crumple.

"Blade!" Kermit shouted.

Together they pulled the velociraptor's body to one side. Blade was underneath. Lyle could see there was a knife still gripped in one hand. Blade was preternaturally fast, but even so Lyle was amazed he'd managed to switch to the hand weapon for close-quarter work in time.

Hurriedly, Ditzy started on the standard checks. "He's bleeding badly," he reported, "but he should live."

"We need a medical team in here," Lyle shouted. "Man down."

"Negative!" came the Brigadier's clipped voice.

"We've cleared the damn hallway, Sir, and we'll keep the door to the lobby shut. We need a stretcher team at the least."

He looked around. "Stay with him, Ditzy, and help with the evac. We don't have time to wait."

The medic nodded.

Carefully, Lyle opened the lobby door once more and the team slipped through, closing it behind them.

The lobby was no less grandiose than the hallway behind them. Arched windows in four of the octagonal sides filled the place with sunlight that glanced off the tiled floor. Lyle felt the cold eyes of Margaret Thatcher upon him.

"Well, I'll be," muttered Kermit, gazing up at a glittering anomaly that hung in the centre of the octagonal ceiling. Swooping in and out of it and circling above their heads was a pterodactyl.

"Stephen," muttered Lyle. The man was a good sharp shooter.

"Cutter wouldn't want it killed," muttered Stephen.

"If you're going to be a liability you can get out of here now," said Lyle. "There are at least two active anomalies in this building and several dozen MPs. We need to clear the creatures out fast and not faff around."

There was a shot and the pterodactyl fell to the ground in the centre of the chamber.

"I didn't say I would have agreed with him," Stephen said.

"Which way now?" asked Lacey. "Lords or Commons?"

"Commons," decided Lyle. "The PM is still missing and he was supposed to be at a debate."

It was disconcerting to be standing inside a room seen so often on the television. It was empty of humans, standing ones at least. It did contain three large, lightly built, bear like creatures.

"What the fuck are they?" muttered Lacey.

"Hemicyon," came Connor's voice over the radio. "Half bear, half dog."

Lyle sighted down his gun at one and squeezed the trigger. The creature leaped. Lyle cursed as the shot went wide. There was a shout from beside him. He glanced across to where Kermit should have been standing but saw only a blur of fur and gunfire. He couldn't shoot for fear of hitting his man. The two other beasts were already down, caught in the crossfire from Stephen and Lacey.

Finn ran past him into the body of the chamber. "Oi!" he shouted, kneeling and sighting back in the melee. He let off a quick shot, high above the fight.

"Behind you!" Lyle shouted. A fourth Hemicyon appeared from behind one of the benches and powered down the chamber. Lyle let off a burst in its direction. Finn had half-turned when the creature piled into him. Lyle swore. He strode up to the pair and put a shot into the creature's head. There was blood everywhere, but Lyle didn't have to look hard to see that most of it had come from the jagged hole torn in Finn's throat.

"Damn!" It was Lacey's voice.

He looked up. Lacey was kicking the last Hemicyon aside. Underneath it was the remains of Kermit.

"Shit!" swore Lyle. He hurried over. Kermit was still alive, but again there was blood everywhere, spurting in great gushes from his legs. Lacey threw aside her gun and pressed her hands to the wounds, trying to staunch the flow.

"Cara!" groaned Kermit.

"You're going to be fine, lad," said Lyle desperately. He looked at Lacey's stricken face as she fought with the wound.

"Ditzy! We need you here now!" Lyle shouted into the radio. "Two down."

Fuck! What a mess. Lyle swept the rest of the chamber quickly, pausing only to grimace at the PM's sightless eyes as he stepped over the bodies in the front bench.

"It's too late, Private," he heard Ditzy's voice behind him. "He's gone."

Lyle scowled. "Helen, you listening?"

"I'm here," Helen's voice sounded tense.

"We've lost Finn and Kermit."

"Damn! I told you not to go in."

"Thanks. The PM's gone too. You had better notify someone." Not really necessary, they would have seen it on his head cam. No doubt some frantic politicking had just started.

He could hear the sound of banging from behind the speaker's chair. Curious, he walked round. There was a door on either side. He tugged one open. Inside were a couple of dozen people in smart suits. He looked behind him to the carnage in the chamber.

"Good afternoon sirs, madams," Lyle said in his most business like voice. "We'll have you out of here in a jiffy. I've got survivors," he relayed.

"They've sent a team in to secure St. Stephen's entrance and carry Lieutenant Richards out," reported Helen. "If you can get them back to the central lobby, someone will conduct them from there. I'd advise you to return with them."

"If you care to step this way," said Lyle stiffly. "Finn, Lacey check the route back to the central lobby. Ditzy guard the rear."

"Oh God!" said one of the men, confronted by the sight in the debating chamber.

"The immediate threat is eliminated, sir. But if you could all hurry."

Lyle counted the heads as they shuffled passed him. Thirteen men and six women, all in varying degrees of shock, as far as he could tell, which at least made them moderately docile.

They conducted the shaken group back out of the gruesome chamber. Once away from the tangle of bodies they picked up their pace a little and seemed to gather their wits.

"Who gave the order for the army to enter the Palace of Westminster?" demanded a small pudgy man.

"Shut up, Henry. Let them do their job. We can argue about the constitution later." It was a dark-haired woman in a vibrant red suit.

"Thank you, Ma'am," Lyle muttered quietly.

She shook her head and shuddered. "A small military team in the House will be the least of the changes we'll see, I fear."

There was a group of police in what looked like riot gear clustered in St. Stephen's hallway. Lyle watched as the MPs allowed themselves to be conducted out. He turned back to Ditzy, Stephen and Lacey.

"Right," he said. "I'm checking the Lords and then heading up to the committee rooms. No one is expected to come with me."

The two soldiers and scientist facing him exchanged glances. "We're coming, sir," said Ditzy.

Lyle nodded and led the way to the Lords.

"Raptors!" breathed Lacey as they paused in the entrance.

"That last one had to have come from somewhere," said Lyle. "Covering fire. Stay in the doorway. Mow them down."

Stephen and Lacey dropped to their knees with Lyle and Ditzy behind them. There were a dozen raptors. As soon as the small group opened fire the creatures turned towards the noise and then charged. The leaders fell, but not fast enough for Lyle. It was taking a lot of ammunition to hurt these buggers.

"Fuck!" muttered Lacey, reloading a clip.

The remaining six raptors hit them full on, two leaping right over the heads of Lacey and Stephen. Lyle and Ditzy were forced back down the corridor. He couldn't see either of the others under the swarm. They fell back towards the lobby.

"We can't let these get out," muttered Ditzy. "Those plods will be mince meat."

"Not many left," said Lyle.

He fired another burst at a creature. There was answering fire from the corridor behind the raptors and the last one went down.

Lacey stood facing them.

"Stephen?" asked Lyle. She shook her head.

"How about you?" asked Ditzy.

"A few scratches, nothing more. They ran right over me. I was lucky."

"Check the chamber?" asked Ditzy.

The Lords was grim. "They'll have trouble identifying who is who," said Lacey darkly.

Stephen lay in the doorway. Deep slashes raked across his chest. Lyle assumed one had hit an artery. Ditzy closed his eyes. Lyle looked at his remaining two soldiers, wondering whether to ask them again if they were still with him.

"We find Lester then get the fuck out of here, right?" said Lacey. "No more faffing around."

Lyle nodded. "No more faffing around. Let's get upstairs to the committee rooms."

They headed for the stairs as rapidly as they could, checking only that rooms with open doors were clear.

The stairs were in sight when Lyle heard a strange sucking sound behind him. He whirled to see Ditzy's legs dangling from the ceiling. His upper body enveloped in a shapeless mass.

Lyle and Lacey both fired upwards at once, riddling the shape with bullets, keeping clear of wherever Ditzy was. His legs continued kicking which gave Lyle some hope. The gelatinous mass appeared to absorb the bullets.

"What the fuck is it?"

"No idea!" squeaked Connor's voice. "I've never seen anything like it before. Not even remotely."

"Make a guess at weak points."

"Errr... near where it's eating, I'm afraid."

Lyle watched the shape. "Lacey! Grab Ditzy's legs. Let's see if we can pull him out."

They took a leg each and hauled on them. Lyle felt Ditzy's foot kick once but after that, nothing. Slowly the medic's body appeared to be disappearing upwards and into the thing.

"Ditzy!" shouted Lyle. "Give me a sign here!"

The legs remained motionless. Lyle looked across to Lacey. Dark, shocked eyes gazed back at him. How long for suffocation, wondered Lyle. How long should they leave before they gave up on the lieutenant. There was a jerk and the body inched upwards again into the strange maw above them.

"Stand back, Private," said Lyle, with a heavy heart.

Lacey let go and stepped back smartly. Lyle aimed his gun, and sighted up Ditzy's body. Then he opened fire and hoped to God that if the lieutenant were still alive, none of his bullets would hit him.

The shape convulsed. Lyle backed away smartly. Then the thing collapsed inwards and fell off the ceiling. Lieutenant Dave Owen's head rolled free, coming to rest at Lyle's feet.

Without a word, Lyle turned away, loaded in a new clip and headed to the stairs. He was aware of Lacey at his back.

Lyle knew which room Lester had been in. Third on the right. He didn't even pause to check the others.

"Predator," called Lacey and there was the sound of gunfire.

Lyle whirled.

The creature was already upon Lacey as he emptied his clip into it. It paused giving that eerie impression of looking at him, even though he knew it had no eyes. Lyle reloaded and fired again. Put enough bullets in the things and even they went down eventually. It moved, too fast to see, but Lyle was prepared. He dropped to the floor and fired upwards catching a brief blur of movement as the thing sailed over his head. There was a thud. Lyle rolled to his feet. The body of the predator lay slumped against one wall. Private Tanya Lacey lay still, where she had fallen. Lyle set off at a run for the committee room.

The door handle turned but he couldn't gain entrance.

"Lester!" he shouted and shoulder-charged the door, he felt it move slightly.

"Lyle?" came a familiar voice from the other side. "Give me a moment, we'll move the table." Lyle sighted both ways down the corridor but couldn't see anything.

"It's clear," Lyle backed into the room. Lester and another man stood there. There were three dead bodies on the floor. Lyle shut the door and placed his back against it. "What was it?"

"Some kind of small raptor," said Lester. "In the supply cupboard." He nodded to a battered metal cupboard against one wall.

"Right," said Lyle, "let's leave it there."

Any way he evaluated their alternatives they did best to barricade themselves back in the committee room and wait the thing out. He'd lost five men fighting his way in here, he was likely to lose two civilians on the way out.

"Desk back where it was," he said.

He stepped away from the door and heard a horrible splintering sound behind him. He was unsurprised to see a second predator when he turned. He was already firing. As the claws ripped into his chest he saw the sparkle of an anomaly open behind the creature and a vaguely familiar figure stepped through, also firing a gun. Then everything became a haze of blood and pain.

Helen counted the body bags as they came out. The morbid fascination irritated her but she couldn't help it. She gave up at three hundred. The building had been packed with people. There were survivors too. Small groups who had had the presence of mind to lock themselves into offices and remain quiet and inconspicuous, but they were outnumbered by the dead.

She knew when Lyle's body came. Lester was walking behind it. His suit was covered in dried blood. Helen guessed he had held Lyle to the last. Behind him walked some MP Helen vaguely recalled from the committee she had been watching when this all started.

At the end of the small procession walked an armed man. It was another William Slater, only this one had greying hair and the look of middle age about him.

Their third William Slater was escorted from the room by his guards.

"What do you think?" asked Lucia tersely. There was a lot going on, her demeanour said. She didn't have time for this.

Helen shrugged and glanced across at Lester. His face was an impassive mask but, even in so short a space of time, he appeared to have lost weight. "His story sounds plausible enough," she ventured. "You ordered him through an anomaly because you knew he was destined to turn up in the Houses of Parliament at this time. I can see why you might have ordered him to go, just to maintain the established course of history."

"If he is telling the truth," said Lester. "All we have to do is keep him under lock and key with the other two for a couple of months and then send him back. No harm done."

"He says he worked with the team," said Lucia, "and he would certainly appear to have the relevant experience. Do you trust him?"

Helen shook her head. "No," she said emphatically. The man was all wrong. Nothing added up.

Lucia eyed her levelly. "I'm appointing him to Lyle's former position," she said firmly. "There's no one else suitable and I don't want to interfere with any established time lines."

"Clearly she doesn't trust you at all," muttered Lester, after Lucia had left the room. "Did you know she'd ignore your advice?"

Helen opted for a smirk. She was surprised too but she'd rather Lester thought she was planning something. She heard him sigh and he started loading papers into his briefcase. She felt a sudden and inexplicable sympathy for the man.

"In the light of the simultaneous attacks upon the Palace of Westminster and the Anomaly Research Centre we feel there is no other conclusion to draw than that the anomalies are in the control of forces hostile to the United Kingdom and her people. In such desperate times, desperate measures are required. We, the surviving members of parliament, have resolved to form a government of national unity under the aegis of Lucia Wright, the former Home Secretary. Elections will be held at the earliest opportunity to refill representation but, for the forseeable future, the parties have resolved to work together until the threat is removed. In the light of this the following extraordinary powers have been granted..."

Helen switched off the television in disgust. The ARC wasn't quite as much of a mess as Westminster but a lot of lives had been lost. The special forces teams had been spread thinly, caught rushing towards Westminster just as the first anomaly had opened within the ARC. The scientific teams, left behind, had been decimated. She took small comfort from the fact that Abby and Connor had been with her but the Physics research had probably been set back by months, if not years. In fact Helen rather doubted the ARC, as an organisation, would continue to exist. With the anomaly threat now public enemy number one, she expected the whole project would be parcelled off into different institutions controlled by the Ministry of Defence.

It was raining when Lyle and his team went into the ground. Helen lurked awkwardly. She wasn't family and she wasn't, technically, any part of the Special Forces chain of command. Somehow, obscurely, she felt she had been responsible for the five men and one woman who had died. It made her cranky and difficult.

Kermit's wife whose name, it transpired, was Cara, struck Helen as a pale and insipid little thing. Helen pretty much despised her on sight. For some reason the

families of the dead had nominated her to make a eulogy.

"My husband always believed absolutely in his duty to serve his country. How could that be better demonstrated than in saving the lives of the nineteen members of parliament who were found in the Aye chamber. With his friends and colleagues he gave his life for his country, a symbol to us all, of loyalty and bravery in support of our British values of democracy and freedom."

"That old lie," thought Helen, "dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori." The deaths had been pointless and unnecessary. Freedom and democracy lay in tatters.

"Touching eulogy," she said, as she shook the pale girl's hand.

Lester, of course, was not among the official mourners. He stood, alone, on the sidelines. The politicians present ignored him, afraid of his political isolation. Moved by something approaching sympathy, Helen found herself drawn into his orbit.

"I'm sorry about Lyle," she said.

"You hated him. Don't insult me with false sympathy."

"I didn't say I liked him. I said I was sorry," returned Helen, relieved that here, at least, she could be honest.

Lester looked at her in surprise. "I shall need a lot more than your sympathy in the days to come."

Helen met his gaze. "What's in it for me?"

"Quite frankly, I don't know. But I don't think you like Miss Wright any more than I do. Speaking of whom," Lester plastered his falsest smile across his face.

"Lester! Such a relief to us all that you survived!" Lucia was immaculate in her tailored black suit.

"Indeed, Prime Minister," said Lester. "I am very grateful to the men and women who died to ensure my safety."

"Ah yes! Captain Lyle and his team," Lucia's smile was like a knife. "At least they weren't family, eh."

She smiled once more and was gone.

"Was that a threat?" asked Helen.

"Oh yes!" said Lester.

Helen walked next to him to the graves and stood at his side as the last post rang out across the green and pleasant fields.

"It's going to be massive," insisted Abby. "The organisers think at least ten thousand people are going to be marching through London. We have to be there."

"We'll just be three more people, Abby," said Connor. "I'm not saying we shouldn't go, but it's illegal and an anomaly might open."

"But don't you see Connor? We're not just three people. We're the anomaly team. If we're there it will show that we don't believe the anomalies have anything to do with Al-Qaeda or terrorists. That's important."

Helen shook her head. "It's a trap."

"Don't be ridiculous. What do you mean, a trap?"

"Lucia isn't fighting the plans enough. She's expecting something to happen. I don't think anyone should go."

"We can't not go!" Abby's face was a picture of disappointment. "This is important."

Helen turned on her heel to leave the room. "I'm not ordering anyone, one way or another. I'm just saying it's going to end badly."

4.5 Present Fears

Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings

– Shakespeare, Macbeth

"What's the problem?"

Helen looked up, surprised to see Jenny standing in her lab. "No problem."

"Yes there is. You've been popping up and checking the anomaly detector for two weeks."

Helen shrugged. "It's been quiet. That's all."

Jenny sat down elegantly and leaned on the lab bench. "No it's not."

"What's your interest anyway?"

It was Jenny's turn to shrug. "I like to know what you're up to."

Helen eyed her thoughtfully, wondering how far she could trust her. But then Jenny wanted Nick back, right? So that gave her leverage. "There are missing anomalies."

"Missing anomalies?"

"Anomalies that should have opened, but didn't."

Jenny frowned. "I'm supposed to be keeping you away from the physicists."

"A task at which you have excelled." Helen could hear the waspishness in her voice.

Jenny smirked ever so slightly. "Of course, nothing stops me talking to them. Any idea what I should ask?"

Helen was surprised, but she kept forgetting Jenny could focus and prioritise. For now, it seemed, they were on the same side. "I'll think about it and let you know."

The siren sound of the anomaly detector echoed through the building. "Where to now, I wonder?" asked Jenny.

"The Fens, if everything is as it should be."

The anomaly was hanging over a shallow mere. The location appeared deceptively remote but Helen knew from the map that the village of Little Bucknall was only half a mile away. A combination of fog and a mild drizzle made it impossible to see.

"Slater, get some teams searching the area. See if there are any traces of something getting out," Helen ordered. "Connor, any chance of a robot working over this terrain?"

"Not a hope," said Connor dismally. He was standing in front of the anomaly with his hands thrust into his pockets. Helen noticed that his trainers were already covered in mud. Abby, standing next to him, was more practically dressed in a waterproof jacket and wellingtons. Jenny had refused to even get out of the car.

Helen tramped off to where Slater - the oldest Slater - had sent his two younger counterparts off in separate directions leading small teams. Blade was still on sick leave. Helen hardly knew the man, but he had been a member of Lyle's team. That meant Lyle trusted him, which meant Lester trusted him, which in some strange way meant Helen trusted him a lot more than Slater.

Helen watched the soldiers vanishing into the mist. "Staying here to keep an eye on us, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"Actually I was wanting a word with you," said Slater.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I want to get rid of Lucia and I'm fairly sure you do too."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"My son was on a school trip four weeks ago. To the House of Commons."

"I didn't know." Helen kept her voice neutral. She didn't do sympathy and, anyway, this could easily be a trap.

"He doesn't yet either." Slater nodded after his younger self's retreating back. "My bitch of an ex-wife had a restraining order out. Managed not to let me know for six months."

"And what has this got to do with me?" Helen still wasn't sure she believed him.

"You came from a time line where Lucia wasn't in charge of the anomaly project. One where Nick Cutter didn't die. You're trying to put it back."

"I am, am I?"

Slater shrugged. "That's what your confession said, before you were executed."

"Really?" Helen felt a small knot of excitement. She sensed now the kind of weapon she was being handed.

"If you go back and stop Lucia, then the House of Commons anomaly confluence won't open. 'Cos she made that happen."

"Do you know how?"

"Some machine in the physics section. That's the rumour. Handy for her that all the physicists got killed."

"I'm still not sure I believe you." Helen smiled, challenging him to prove his point.

"Get your friend Connor to poke around the casualty lists and restraining order databases. I imagine he can verify that I had a son easily enough."

Helen nodded. "I'll do that."

"Might be worth getting him to wipe some records while he's about it. I don't want Lucia making the connection."

Helen nodded again. The man had clearly been thinking about this a long time. But then, she thought as she turned and headed back to Connor and Abby, people did plot revenge slowly and carefully.

"So," said Abby glancing around gloomily in the drizzle. "We wait."

"Yeah," said Connor.

Abby shivered, suddenly feeling Stephen's absence keenly. "What do we do if something comes out of the anomaly?"

Connor looked over at Helen and Slater. "There's them," he said.

Abby looked at the two figures, deep in conversation and didn't feel reassured.

"And you!" said Connor, unexpectedly.

"What?" she asked vaguely.

"You. You have a gun. You know about tranquilisers. We'll be fine." Connor smiled reassuringly at her. In the gloom it felt like a ray of sunshine.

"Yeah, we will." She mustered a smile.

Connor turned back to the anomaly. "Of course, if it's large, one tranquiliser dart won't be enough." His tone sounded light.

"No," agreed Abby.

Connor grinned. "Lots of running, I expect."

Abby smiled and then, in a spontaneous moment of daring slipped one hand into his. Connor glanced at her with a surprised look and then grinned again.

Abby leaned close and looked out over the muddy pool with the anomaly hanging over it. It was then she became aware of a pair of raised eyes just above the water about a thirty centimetres or so apart. They were less than a metre away from herself and Connor, and heading straight for them.

Instinctively she took a step backwards, pulling Connor with her and drew the tranquiliser gun. A huge triangular head rose out of the water and a large jaw gaped. Abby shot. The jaw snapped shut, two tusk-like teeth at the front poking up through what looked like nostrils.

"Oh boy! Mastodonsaurus!" said Connor.

"How big?" asked Abby, squinting into the water behind the jaws.

"Not sure, couple of metres maybe."

"With a head that large?"

Connor shrugged. "They're mostly head. Amphibians, though, so it can probably get out of the water."

"Probably?"

Abby backed away further, dragging Connor with her. The brief glimpse suggested it had short stubby legs, splayed out on either side. It probably wasn't a fast runner. She began loading a second dart into her gun. If the Mastodonsaurus was only a couple of metres long she thought, running a rough calculation in her head... At that moment the head slumped down on the edge of the pond.

"I got the tranquiliser about right, at least" she said.

Getting the Mastodonsaurus back through the anomaly proved to be a difficult and exceedingly damp exercise. Eventually it took three soldiers, up to their chests in the water. Helen was with them struggling with the beast when she saw a man in a flat cap and Barbour striding up the soggy track. Even as she watched, Jenny emerged from the four-by-four and intercepted him. Her thin heels sank into the muddy track. Helen turned her attention back to the soldiers and the Mastodonsaurus. Jenny would handle the public better than she would.

When she waded out of the pond Jenny was waiting for her on the bank.

"Trouble?" asked Helen.

"'Fraid so. He's some local bigwig. I think chins have been wagging and he volunteered himself to come and check us out."

"What did you tell him?"

"Anomaly, government response team, all under control. He asked if there are more creatures."

"Wouldn't we all like to know."

Jenny nodded. "Turns out there have been a couple of sightings and some excitable talk of crocodiles. There's a waterway flows into this lake. Sounds like we need to check it out. Luckily for us Mr. Browne quite fancies himself as the local upholder of the peace. He's going to arrange to keep people away."

Jenny turned her back, clearly intent on heading back to the car.

"I know what I want you to ask the physics people," Helen said.

Jenny turned to look her in the eye, eyebrows raised. "Oh yes?"

"Yes. There's a machine. I want to know what it is."

William Slater led his team cautiously along a raised causeway next to the mere. He was generally called Junior by the squad since he was the 'youngest' of the three Slaters. It wasn't a name he liked much, though he had more sense than to protest about it.

"Sir!" Lieutenant Greeves pointed ahead of them. Two eyes were just visible above the water.

"Looks like one of them things," said Slater quietly. "Where's the tranquiliser gun?"

"Here, sir!" Private Rushcliffe ran eagerly up to him.

"See if you can get a good shot at that creature."

The private knelt down and sighted along his rifle. Just as he shot, there was a sudden massive disturbance in the water.

"Holy..." began Slater.

Two of the creatures seemed to be fighting each other, letting out harsh cries of challenge.

"Sir?" asked the private.

"Shoot them both, private."

Private Rushcliffe knelt once more, loading a second dart. Slater aimed his gun at the fighting beasts, braced in case one came up the bank towards them.

Rushcliffe grunted as the dart landed. Then he pulled a third from his pouch. Suddenly Slater heard a noise behind him. He turned rapidly to see a third creature powering up the bank. He threw himself to one side, in time to see it barrel into Rushcliffe.

There was a cry and thrashing.

"Jones! Greeves!" Slater was on his feet aiming into the fray, but it was impossible to be sure where Rushcliffe was and where the creatures were. He made a guess and fired a burst into the water.

There were more cries and then silence. A moment later a large wave disturbed the surface of the mere as one of the Mastodonsauruses swam away.

At the waters' edge lay two of the creatures, either asleep or dead, and the battered body of Private Rushcliffe.

"Connor!" Connor looked up from his laptop to see Helen striding across the muddy ground towards him. She had got out of the waders, but she was still wearing wellingtons, loose canvas trousers and a practical jacket. Her short hair whipped in the breeze. She looked very at home.

"What is it?" he asked as she drew close.

"Jenny needs to work up some kind of briefing sheet to hand around local bigwigs. Can you get back to the ARC with her and help?"

"Sure." Connor frowned. Jenny was an old hand at that kind of thing. There were copies of his database on the ARC computers. He couldn't think what Helen wanted him to go for.

She sat down next to him. "While you're about it, have a dig and see if Slater had a son and if the boy died in the attack on parliament. If so, I want any records

connecting Slater to the boy quietly erased. Can you do that?"

"Slater had a son in the House of Commons?"

"So he says. Check it out. If it's true erase the records and let me know."

Connor gulped. "That's pretty illegal."

Helen regarded him levelly. "You believe the attack on was Al-Qaeda?"

"No!"

"Well then, sometimes you have to act. It's a matter of choosing your moment." She wasn't looking at him, just staring out across the landscape.

"Is that what you always do? Choose when to act?" Connor couldn't help asking.

"Something like that."

"OK then. Can I tell Abby?"

Helen looked at him coolly. "If you must, but no one else. This stays small."

Helen and Abby were scouting around the edge of what could loosely be called the lake the anomaly hung over. It was more a series of ponds and puddles with muddy areas in between. The oldest Slater lurked behind them, gun at the ready.

"Don't go on that march," Helen found herself saying suddenly.

"Do you care?"

"The team needs you. If you and Connor are arrested I'll be the only person left with experience handling these creatures."

Abby looked up at her, her eyes standing out, rimmed with dark mascara. "What if only I go?"

"Connor will be frantic."

Abby nodded curtly, then she shrugged and turned away. "Sometimes you have to take a stand."

Helen made a face to her retreating back. "Not like this."

Suddenly Abby held out one arm and gestured for caution. Helen walked slowly up to her, to see what she was looking at. A Mastodonsaurus was crouched in a pile of rushes and leaves on the edge of a pond.

"She's laying eggs," whispered Abby.

"Oh no!" Helen's maternal instincts were non-existent. She wasn't particularly sentimental about animals either, but she just knew Mastodonsaurus larvae in the Fens would mean paperwork. "We'll need to gather them up somehow."

"Here, girl," Abby had picked up a large stick and was approaching the Mastodonsaurus carefully.

"What are you doing?"

"Using tranquilisers is always a bit dangerous. She seems pretty docile."

"The last one wasn't."

"That was a male." Abby turned back to the creature and began walking around it. "You're not going to harm me, girl, are you?"

"Abby!" hissed Helen in exasperation.

"Just getting a look at the spawn."

Abby was on the far side now, crouching down in the mud, clearly fascinated. "It's like frog-spawn. Looks like the eggs stick together."

"Well that's something. I hope there aren't any more spawning around here though," muttered Helen. "We need to tranquilise her and then gather up the eggs."

"I think we can move her without resorting to tranquilisation and she might be useful awake for handling that remaining male."

Government databases weren't really Connor's thing. At least, they weren't his thing when it came to illegal hacking. They definitely weren't his thing when it came to illegal hacking while emergency powers were in effect. And yet, somehow, here he was. He decided to leave poor James Slater's birth certificate untouched and focused on William Slater's personnel file. Lots of that, of course, was an official secret, given there were three of him, but the basic information was accessible to Connor's clearance level and it was simple to change "next of kin" from James Slater to none. Connor hoped that would suffice.

"Ah Connor!" He looked up in alarm to see Lester smiling genially down at him. Jenny was standing a foot or so behind him.

"What? I haven't done anything!" Connor's mind scrambled.

Lester pinched his nose and looked back at Jenny. "Are you sure this is a good idea."

"Do we have any choice?" she asked.

"What choice?" asked Connor.

Lester dropped a data stick on the table in front of him. "You have no idea how many strings I've pulled to get hold of that."

Jenny smiled from behind Connor. "The physics section have some kind of top-secret machine. We don't know much, only that all the people involved in the

development were killed when the ARC was attacked. Schematics were lodged with the MoD when it was developed."

"Those are they," said Lester. "I managed to get someone concerned about the emergency powers to pull them for me. Try not to look too guilty when someone surprises you in future."

"What am I supposed to do with them?" asked Connor.

"Find out what it does and let me know, or Helen if you must," Lester sighed.

"How come you don't know already? I mean it must have been developed when you were still in charge of the whole place, right?"

Lester almost looked a little contrite. "Lucia played me. She l me think she had some bee in her bonnet, a leftover from her days as a physicist. I let her divert some of the ARC resources into a 'personal project' since she was junior minister with responsibility for this place. She managed to keep me completely in the dark. If Helen hadn't somehow rustled up the fact there was some kind of top-secret machine being kept under wraps, I wouldn't even know the research had ever got anywhere."

Connor looked at Jenny who smiled sympathetically. "Just do your best Connor. It may be nothing, but something's going on in physics that Lucia wants to keep a lid on and we'd all like to know what."

Connor eyed them dubiously. It looked like things had just got a lot more dangerous and a lot more complicated than hacking a couple of personnel files.

Helen was up to her chest in muddy water again, this time with a net, scooping up Mastodonsaurus eggs and loading them into buckets. Thankfully they did seem to stick together so she had some hopes they would get them all. As she was doing so her mind ran over options for sealing and draining this area of wetland. She suspected the best they would be able to do was keep an eye on it and pray.

Meanwhile Abby seemed to have performed some kind of small miracle with the creature. She squatted near its head, crooning gently to it. It appeared pretty docile, though Helen noted that Abby still maintained a safe distance and had a stick close to hand.

They'd managed to co-opt a large truck with a cage on the back to drive the thing back to the anomaly and hopefully once there they could shove it, and its eggs back through.

"There they are!"

Helen glanced up to see about half a dozen men approaching. She also saw a couple of shotguns, a pitchfork and a baseball bat. Hurriedly she waded out of the water.

"Can I help you gentlemen?"

She stood square in the pathway between the bunch of men and Abby and the Mastodonsaurus. She smiled sweetly, she hoped, though Nick had once said her smile looked like a panther when it was about to strike. They stopped, which was good. Anything to destroy their momentum.

"Get out of our way!" snarled the leader. Helen realised suddenly that it was Jenny's 'local bigwig'.

"Mr Browne, isn't it? I thought you were going to help coordinate the search."

"We deal with things our way out here."

"We're the experts. We're dealing with it."

"Like you dealt with them dinosaurs in Parliament," shouted a voice from the back somewhere.

"There's only one creature here. We have a reptile expert with it. We know there's at least one other out there and that it's probably male and dangerous. What we'd like to know is if there are any others, particularly if there are any others closer to your village."

The men visibly wavered. Helen decided to hit home while she could. She stepped up close to Mr Browne, invading his personal space.

"Lucia Wright is personally concerned about the consequences of killing these creatures out of time. I have personal orders from her to minimise deaths. Now, Mr Browne, if you want to explain to the Prime Minister why, exactly, you contravened one of her personal orders, I'll be happy to let you past."

He was the leader, but he valued his status and reputation. Helen prayed she'd played the right card there. If he got stripped of whatever small-time local position gave him his perception of power, he would lose far more than the little respect backing down would cause.

"Her personal order?" he asked.

"Indeed. There is some evidence that harming these creatures can have dangerous temporal effects. The PM thinks it imperative to keep that risk at a minimum. Feel free to continue if you think you know better, but, she does have the physics background."

Helen allowed herself another smile and a secretive look and then she stepped off the path.

"Well, if the PM thinks it's right..." muttered Mr Browne.

"Only person with a good grasp on the situation, if you ask me," said someone else.

"Yeah! She knew what to do when them Muslims attacked Parliament."

There was a general murmur of agreement.

"What are you doing exactly?" asked Mr Browne. It was clearly a tactic to reassert some authority.

"We're waiting for a caged truck which will allow us to move the creature back to the anomaly."

He nodded. "That sounds sensible."

"But we really need the area well-searched for any more of them. I understand you are coordinating that."

He nodded again. "All right, lads! Let's get on with our job."

Helen watched them go.

"Thank you," said Abby as she turned back.

"I'm getting sentimental in my old age. I should have let them past," Helen grumbled. But she felt a glow of pleasure at Abby's smile.

They parked up a few hundred metres from the anomaly, which was as close as they dared without risking the truck getting stuck in the mud.

"Now what?" asked the oldest Slater.

Helen looked at Abby. "You're the reptile expert."

Abby nodded and clambered up onto the truck, next to the cage. She was still carrying her stick. "Does someone have the meat?"

One of the Slaters wordlessly handed her a Tesco's bag. He'd been sent away to purchase steak while Abby was coaxing the creature into the cage.

Abby rapped on the side of the cage with her stick. The Mastodonsaurus' head flipped towards her. "Here you are girl." Abby ripped open a packet and tossed the steak at the creature. Its head tipped sideways and it gobbled up the meat. "Good girl."

Abby held out the next bit, but kept it out of reach. She rapped on the side of the cage again with the stick. "Let's hear you ask for it." Then she hit the side of the cage again. The Mastodonsaurus opened its mouth and let out a roar.

Behind her Helen heard one of the Slaters whistle in surprised appreciation.

"Good girl!" Abby tossed the meat at the creature.

"Better start keeping a look-out!" she said.

Connor was driving Abby's mini back to Little Bucknall. Jenny had refused him one of the four by fours on the grounds he wasn't needed. But he wanted to get back to Abby and to Helen to tell them what he'd found out.

As he drove up the track to the edge of the mere, he could see a couple of the four by fours and a large cage on a flat-bed truck. It looked like everyone was around. He stepped out of the car to be greeted by a loud roaring sound. None of the soldiers looked particularly panicked though, so he ambled towards them.

He could see Abby standing on the side of the truck, next to the cage. Inside it was a large Mastodonsaurus. The soldiers were spread along the causeway, guns at the ready.

"Hello!" He waved at them all.

"Connor!" shouted Abby.

"What?"

Helen began running towards him. She was carrying a tranquiliser pistol and paused by one of the soldiers to grab another.

"What?"

"Connor, down!"

"What?"

"Down!" Helen raised the pistol.

Connor gulped and dropped face first into the mud. Helen shot twice. She had already reached him and grabbed his arms, hauling him to his feet.

"Now run!"

As she dragged him back towards the soldiers he risked a glance behind him and then ran faster. Two Mastodonsauruses were powering down the track, each with a small dart visible in its hide.

He could hear safeties clicking off as Helen dragged him through the line of soldiers.

"Wait for it," shouted Abby. "The tranquiliser should take effect any minute."

"Right behind us!" shouted Connor.

"Actually they don't move that fast, luckily for us," muttered Helen.

Connor turned and looked back again. The two Mastodonsauruses were waddling towards them and visibly slowing. Gradually they sank down onto the track.

"I thought you said there was only one male out there," muttered a William Slater in an accusatory tone.

Helen shrugged. "Talk to your younger self. He reported one got away. Talk to your men. None of them reported another sighting. I work on the information

I get given."

They stared at each other a moment and then Slater blinked and turned away. Connor looked across to Abby who grinned at him from the flat bed.

Helen was sitting in the four by four drinking coffee when the anomaly closed. Abby and Connor were sitting in the back, Connor tapping away on his laptop.

"That's that, then," said Abby.

Helen nodded. "No sign of any more of those things. We can leave Jenny and the Slaters to tie up any loose ends."

"You came all the way back here for nothing." Abby nudged Connor.

"Not quite," muttered Connor. "I think I know what that machine does."

Helen twisted around in her seat. "You've analysed the schematics?"

"Yeah, some. But we can all guess. Those anomalies didn't open in the House of Commons by chance. I can't say I'm entirely on top of the theory, but everything I've seen confirms the obvious."

"It redirects anomalies. Makes them open where Lucia wants them to, probably in some specific distance and time frame from where they were supposed to open," said Helen.

"Got it in one!"

"But that's great!" said Abby excitedly. "We go public with this, we can expose her completely."

"I doubt it," said Helen, thoughtfully. "I'll run it past Lester and Jenny, but I doubt we've got enough. We don't have the machine for a start, just some top-secret blueprints."

"But we must do something!" Abby looked at Connor for confirmation.

"Oh yes!" Helen grinned. "We're going to do something. But we're not going to rush in. We're up against an expert here and she has both the press and the government in her pocket right now. We need to be very, very careful."

"Come on Connor! We'll be late!" Abby shouted up the stairs from her position by the door.

"On my way." Connor thumped down the stairs, still pulling on a coat and trailing bits of clothing and electronic devices.

Abby grinned at him nervously. "All set?"

"Yeah! What's the worst that can happen, eh? Bit of tear gas, right?"

"Right."

She opened the door and gasped in surprise. Helen stood on the other side.

"We're going to the protest," said Abby stubbornly.

"I need Connor."

"What?"

"I need Connor. I don't want to manage without you, but I can, but I can't do this without Connor and if he gets arrested then I'm stuck."

Abby narrowed her eyes at Helen. "It's just a march."

"It's a trap. I don't know what kind of trap but Lucia's a predator and I know predators. Connor's too valuable right now. I need him to stay here."

"I'm going with Abby." Abby felt a rush of pleasure as Connor stepped beside her, a look of determination on his face. At the same time her heart sank.

"No, Connor! You'd better stay. If Helen needs you... Well, she's right, there is a risk of arrest."

"Abby!" The look of rejection on his face was heart-breaking.

"Push off, Helen. You've made your point." Abby shut the door in Helen's face and turned back to Connor.

"I'm coming with you."

"Helen's probably right. She's our best bet for doing something about Lucia."

"But the protest, you said..."

"I know what I said and one of us should be there, but it doesn't need to be both of us. If Helen needs your help."

"Abby..."

Abby stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "It'll be fine, Connor. I'll be back by this evening. You'll see."

Lester had invited Helen into his office to watch the course of the protest on television. She wasn't sure why. She wasn't sure he knew why either. A desire to be with someone sympathetic when the thing played out, perhaps.

She perched on the edge of his desk, unwilling to sit down, to suggest they in anyway understood each other, that he in anyway understood her.

They watched in silence as the tear gas was followed by riot shields and batons and then the windowless trucks, appearing one after enough and driving away, each loaded with protesters. The battle raged through the streets as the protesters fought back, suddenly unwilling and scared to risk getting into those dark and sinister vans. The commentators continued to talk of insurrectionists and a process that had been hijacked. After a while Lester turned the sound down.

"I should never have agreed to keep the anomalies secret," he said.

Helen shrugged. Democracy and transparency were over-rated in her opinion. "It would have happened anyway. Even if the public had believed the anomalies to be a natural phenomenon, the attack on Westminster would have convinced them otherwise."

Lester pursed his lips and shook his head. He was unwilling to say more, even here, even in his office.

Helen looked back at the television, unwilling to admit she was searching for a flash of white-blonde hair. Lester followed her gaze.

"I had better get on the phone," he said. "Don't worry. If I can find Miss Maitland, I will. She'll be back here in no time."

Helen was sitting in Lester's office, drinking tea with him. It was a routine they had somehow fallen into. She wasn't quite sure when it had happened but it was one of the few moments of the day when she didn't feel the need need to be constantly on her guard. The faint aroma of tea, never a drink she'd been particularly attracted to with its overtones of propriety and gentility, was strangely relaxing. Lester rarely pushed for anything. They drank tea, sometimes they barely exchanged a word, sometimes they talked trivialities, and sometimes the trivialities masked something more important.

If anything, Lester was more cautious than she was, but he was determined to do something. She had learned to read him, the way he said some things and didn't say others. He fascinated her. They were so totally different and yet cold hard steel ran through Lester and she admired that. Since the game was all politics right now, and he was a political predator, she let him get on with it. She followed his subtle directions and waited patiently for her own moment to arise.

"I've found Abigail." He surprised her by offering the information. She'd asked him to look, more from habit than anything else, and had assumed he was making inquiries, but she hadn't expected him to tell her the outcome. She hadn't expected there to be an outcome.

"Where is she?"

"Paisley, there's a big internment camp up there."

"Anti-terrorism?" asked Helen.

"You have to ask?"

"So what now?" she asked. She'd heard bad things about the camps but if Abby was there at least she wasn't dead, or in some MI5 interrogation room somewhere.

Lester's mouth straightened out into a thin line. "I'm working on it."

He looked tired. Helen deduced he was running out of options. She nodded to show that she understood and placed her empty tea cup down on his desk.

"I'll tell Connor where she is," she said. "It'll be something to know she's alive, even if she is in one of the camps."

4.6 Time is out of Joint

Time is out of joint, oh cursed spite
That ever I was born to put it right.

– Shakespeare, Hamlet

"Are you all right?" Helen hated herself for asking. It wasn't as if she particularly cared about Connor, but she needed him focused and effective. He was sitting beside her in the 4x4, completely silent.

He waggled his head. It was half a neck stretch and half a nod. "I'll manage. At least she's still alive, eh?" He offered up the ghost of a smile.

Helen nodded curtly. "Lester will do what he can. We'll have her back with the team before you know it."

She felt Connor's eyes on her as she drove along. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Helen glanced back in his direction, debated several answers and then turned and looked at the road. She's always prided herself on being brutal with the truth when it was necessary. She couldn't really see the need at the moment, but she didn't want to risk Connor catching her in a lie.

"That's what I thought," he said quietly.

"Where are we heading? Any idea?" Helen decided to change the topic of conversation.

"Grange Road Park. It's a green space. Couple of roads along on the right."

It wasn't a very large park: a playing field, a few trees and a tiny car park. It was dominated by a large playground that seemed much too big for the space. The anomaly glinted clear and bright above the playing field. Helen parked in one of the few spaces. The second 4x4 with the soldiers in it, pulled up next to her.

Helen looked across at the eldest Slater as he got down from the truck. "Someone needs to check the trees."

He nodded, "Slater Two and Three, take Jackson and Hobbes. Check out the treeline. Mitcham, you're with me. Professor Cutter and Mr. Temple here need to check out the anomaly."

Helen eyed up Lieutenant Mitcham. She'd not really met him before; he'd been transferred to the ARC in the past couple of weeks, part of a tranche of new faces bolstering the depleted ranks of the soldiery. He was a small, compact man with jet black hair and blue-grey eyes. She didn't think Slater knew him and wondered why Slater had him with the anomaly party, instead of one of the other Slaters. Bringing him with them was a problem, it prevented her talking to Slater and, just as she had become used to taking tea with Lester, she had become used to small moments of understanding with Slater in the field.

And then, like a screen sliding away in her mind she realised that Lucia must have placed Mitcham with the squad. Any attempt to prevent him watching her was bound to make Lucia suspicious, therefore Slater wasn't making any attempt.

That thought wasn't going to stop her from trying something though.

As they approached the anomaly Helen spotted the trackway. A two-footed animal with an enlarged claw was heading out towards the trees.

"What are you looking at?" asked Slater.

"Something came out of the anomaly."

"What kind of something?" Connor looked down at the tracks.

"Two feet, you can tell by the locomotor pattern and see this indentation here?" Helen realised she was succumbing to the desire to lecture.

"Yes?" Connor was crouched beside her, his laptop already open.

"It's deeper than the others, that suggests a longer claw of some kind."

"Raptors! Raptors have come out of the anomaly!" There was a tone of excitement in Connor's voice. Abby's plight was temporarily forgotten.

Helen straightened up and surveyed the field. In some ways she admired his ability to focus, she'd lost it long ago. If you get too wrapped up in one thing you lose your sense of where the threats may be coming from. She scanned the surroundings more from habit than anything else. She was looking directly at the treeline when the raptor broke cover and headed towards them. It was small, probably about a foot in height, and covered with vivid green, fronded feathers.

Mitcham raised his gun.

"Don't shoot unless absolutely necessary!" ordered Slater. He was already raising the tranquiliser rifle but the creature was moving too fast. Helen grabbed Connor by the arm and headed for the playground at a run.

It was an adventure style playground with large wooden huts suspended up ladders and ropes. Thankfully it was a cold, overcast day and there didn't appear to be anyone around. Helen picked the platform that seemed least accessible to raptors and ran towards it, pausing at the foot of the rope ladder.

"Connor, get up here!" she shouted. "Slater, go with him. Mitcham you're with me."

Then she ran towards the anomaly. It was too far to reach, but hopefully Mitcham wouldn't realise that.

Her feet pounded over bark chippings and then out onto muddy grass.

"We're not going to make it!" shouted Mitcham behind her.

"Have you got a tranquiliser gun?" she returned. She knew he hadn't.

"No! Should I shoot it?"

"No! Only as a last resort. Lucia's orders. OK! Split!" she shouted. "You head for that zip wire. Get out of reach. Attract its attention. I'll double-back to Slater."

Mitcham obediently ran towards the zip wire, shouting and flapping his arms as he went. Helen was impressed. The man was obviously a natural decoy.

She jogged back towards the tree house containing Connor and Slater. Once she was close enough to make it safely at a run. She began shouting in turn.

"Oi! Over here!"

Mitcham was already perched precariously on top of the zip wire frame. He immediately shut up and Helen jumped and shouted again, attracting the raptor's attention. Once it was running towards her she grabbed hold of the rope ladder and began to climb.

She scrambled up onto the platform, alone with Slater and Connor. She was rather pleased with herself.

"So what is it?" asked the Slater, pointing at the raptor.

"Bambiraptor, one of the smaller raptors and it's on its own," said Helen.

"Bambiraptor? You're not serious! It's called a *Bambi*raptor?"

"It's true!" said Connor. "Named after the Disney character."

Slater snorted. It sounded dismissive. Helen wasn't too keen on cute names herself.

"Tranquilise the raptor," said Helen. "Then we'll wait for it to go to sleep. To be honest, it's small enough that you could probably rugby tackle it, but I don't

want to risk those claws."

Slater grunted and peered down through the slats of the climbing frame as the creature ran around the base. It was obviously a tricky shot. She watched him take his time as the thing rushed about. When he finally took the shot, Slater hit the bambiraptor in the muscled part of the haunch.

Then he sat back and stared thoughtfully at Helen. "So, do you have a plan yet?"

Helen was disconcerted by the direct question. She narrowed her eyes at Slater, but she didn't have a lot of choice. She was going to need him.

"Lucia changed everything when she got Stephen to go public with the anomalies. That was about six months ago. I want to change history; take Lucia out of the picture. That means going back at least six months, preferably a little longer and then finding a way to interfere."

"You've got an anomaly map," said Connor. "Shouldn't be too hard to find your way there, especially if Slater leads the team to bring you back."

"He has a point," said Slater.

"No anomalies are going to open for a while that link up in the right way. We're going to have to sit it out for a few more months."

"I'm not sure we have months," said Connor. "Lucia doesn't trust you. As soon as she thinks she's got a more reliable team trained up, you'll get removed."

"We'll be fine if we don't get over-excited. We just have to keep calm and sit it out."

"Lucia must have a second map," said Connor. "She must know when to activate that attractor of hers. We should get hold of it."

"I agree with him," said Slater suddenly. "You can't afford to wait. I've lived through this once already. She'll be moving against you by the end of the year if it plays out the same way."

Helen took a deep breath and looked at her unlikely co-conspirators. "OK, so how do we get hold of this map of hers?"

Connor grinned and wiggled his fingers at her.

"How did you know about this place?" whispered Connor. They were in the echoing chambers of a new build office building. Small open plan offices with five or six desks each opened off a long corridor. The office workers weren't due in until

the next day, but the computer system was all linked up and there were several generic test accounts on the system.

They'd picked an office at random, one of the ones on the top floor to minimize the risk of their torches being seen from the street.

"Don't ask because I'm not telling you. You sure you can hack into that ARC lab? I thought it was all off Internet."

"Don't ask because I'm not telling you either. Well not any names. I got someone to plug in one of those mobile phone dongles. Chances are it'll get found in the morning. This is our one shot."

Helen nodded curtly. She'd got the security pass, the username and password to one of the test accounts through a university friend who now worked for the company. It hadn't been too difficult. He'd been a little blinded by the celebrity and her suggestions of an old infatuation. Of course, she hadn't told him what it would be for, and things would probably go badly for him once it was all uncovered. She hoped he would be scared enough not to let on that he had given out the information. By then, with luck, it would be too late to stop her changing things.

Without thinking she placed a hand on Connor's shoulder, just as he was about to sit down.

"What?" he asked.

"Have you thought this through?" She hated herself for asking. Why should she care whether Connor understood what he was doing or not. But she had to admit she was curious. She knew how paranoid Nick had been about changing history and how much Connor had hero-worshipped him. Something in her just had to know.

"What? You mean hacking into a highly secret government database? Bit late to ask, don't you think? Yeah, I realise the consequences."

"It won't rescue Abby, not as such, even if I succeed. You realise that?"

Connor looked up at her. It was too dark to read his expression clearly but she thought it was one of slight surprise.

"Yeah, I understand how this works. Well I understand how it doesn't. I'm not sure what will happen to this time line if you go back. But it seems clear to me that Lucia deliberately tampered with things. Putting that back, well, I think it's what... I think it's the right thing."

He'd been going to say it was what Nick would have done. Helen found herself irritated. "Will you come with me?" she asked. It was mostly out of curiosity. It wasn't really a bid to steal his loyalty.

"Nah! I'll stay here. If whatever you do doesn't actually fix this, well, there's no one else to fight Abby's corner."

"What if I ordered you to come with me?"

He looked at her again and then turned back to the screen. "Well, we'd have a problem, but you're not going to."

"What makes you say that?"

"Do you have a good reason to make me leave Abby behind?"

"No."

"Well then, you're not going to order to do it, are you?"

Helen stared at the back of Connor's head in surprise. His confidence unnerved her. It was like seeing herself reflected in a distorting mirror. She didn't recognise the leader Connor thought he saw. She dismissed the thought.

"Let's make this quick," she whispered.

Connor snorted. He was already logging into the systems. "I can't type properly in these latex gloves," he complained.

"Yes you can, now get on with it."

Helen didn't really think a lack of fingerprints would protect Connor. They'd trace the security pass back to her friend eventually. Sooner or later he would admit to handing it out and not long after that he would mention her name. Lucia would then know who did the hacking. However, Helen saw no reason to give Lucia the clues before she had worked for them.

"I'm in," said Connor.

"That was fast."

"The machines aren't supposed to be on the Internet, so the security is more focused on making sure the people who can access them physically have the right clearance."

"Well they obviously slipped up there. I'm not going to ask how you suborned one of them."

In the light from the computer screen Connor flushed a startling shade of red which make Helen rapidly re-evaluate the methods available to him, and quite how ruthless he might be prepared to be in order to protect Abby.

Instinctively she reached out and squeezed his arm. "You're doing the right thing."

"I hope so. She was nice. I don't like to think of her getting into trouble."

Helen turned to look back at the screen. Connor appeared to be searching folders for keywords.

"Got it!" he announced. "Anomaly projection data. I'm downloading it now."

At that moment the office was suddenly flooded with light.

"Attention! Attention! Lay down your weapons!" A loud voice chimed through the speakers. It sounded like Slater.

Connor quickly glanced at the screen and then pulled out the data stick he'd plugged into the computer and handed it to Helen. Then he swapped in another and started copying the file across again.

"Go!" he whispered. "I'll stay here and pretend it was just me."

Helen took the data stick and ran. As she emerged into the corridor strong hands grabbed her and she found herself shoved into some form of cupboard. It was Slater.

"Stay here," he hissed.

"What?"

"Stay here. I'll cover for you. Your bloody contact tipped Lucia the wink."

The door slammed and she heard footsteps in the corridor. "Looks like they're still in the office," she heard Slater say. "Altogether, guys!"

She heard shouting and then the sound of shots.

When Slater came for her two hours later, Helen very carefully didn't ask what had happened to Connor.

He looked her in the eye. "Can't have anyone who knows I'm talking to you falling into Lucia's hands."

Helen shrugged. It wasn't as if she had cared anyway. Connor had served his purpose. She had the data she needed.

"I'm going to disappear," she said. "How do I contact you?"

Wordlessly he handed over a mobile phone. Then he glanced at his watch. "I'm going to talk to the guard out the back for five minutes. Use your time well."

Then he was gone.

Helen took a deep breath. She could see the logic of his reasoning. She schooled her thoughts back to the old detachment. She was starting to show the kind of weakness Nick had so easily succumbed to. She had the data, she repeated to herself. She didn't need Connor any more.

She checked her watch and then took the emergency stairs back to the ground floor. The whole place felt empty and quiet. Much more so than it had been when she entered. Of course then she had had Connor babbling away in her ear in a whisper. Now she was alone, which was good. Connor attracted too much attention.

She had a small crowbar in her backpack and used it to lever up the bottom of the window. They'd been fitted on the cheap and it popped out of the frame with

ease. Helen slipped out and into one of the generic shrubs that were newly planted in the grounds. She froze as footsteps approached. Two special forces soldiers, invisible in their black uniforms, but fortunately not making the effort to be quiet.

"Was that window levered open before?" she heard one ask.

Helen dropped her face into the ground, unwilling to risk the paleness of her skin or the light reflecting from her eyes. She willed her breathing and heart rate to be long and slow.

"Not sure. I'll radio the boss."

Helen listened to a burst of static. "You there, Boss?"

"What is it?" It was Slater's voice.

"We've got an open window here. Someone's levered it out of the frame."

"That'll explain how Helen got out. Go back the way you came and try not to disturb anything. I'll see if any of the trackers can make something of it."

"Got you, Boss."

Helen listened as the soldiers withdrew and then she slithered on through the bushes and down into the small piece of national forestry that sat at the back of the office building.

Helen spent three weeks in a bedsit in Burton-on-Trent. It did not improve her temper. She didn't dare use credit cards so was reduced to one of the small supplies of cash she still compulsively hid around the country and the tiny netbook that she'd had in her pack on the raid. Its processing power was zero and it didn't have any of the fancy mapping software the ARC used. She had to figure out a route the old-fashioned way, by hand.

The mental discipline was comforting. Long practice let her work from her notes, and the data on the small stick Connor had thrust into her hands. She worked as she always had, hard and rigorous and careful, enforcing long hours on herself. After three weeks of plotting, watching for patterns to emerge from the tangle of data points, it paid off. A thin skein of opportunity that would take her through the Permian and to the anomaly junction and from there a short hop across the Cretaceous and back five years. It was a dangerous journey and the timing would be tight, but it was all she had.

She opened up the phone Slater had given her and dialled the one number programmed into its memory.

"I'm here." Slater's tone was gruff. It warned her to be quick and anonymous.

"I need to get into the basement of an office block, in the Docklands. 10pm, two weeks tomorrow."

"I'll arrange it. Text me the address. I'll meet you there 9.55pm."

Then he hung up. Helen scowled at the phone and texted the address.

Slater was altogether too confident and was acting way too much like he was in charge. Thoughtfully Helen dialled a second number, one that she had apparently memorised, almost by accident, in six months of summoning a PR guru to handle the public.

Helen watched the office block from a rooftop across the street. It had been done discreetly, but the place had been locked tight all day. The tiny sound of light footsteps her caused her to turn round, reaching for a nonexistent weapon. It was all three Slaters, anonymous in black combat fatigues. They were grim-faced and armed. They looked like an army, ugly and ruthless.

"Thinking I'd betrayed you?" asked the eldest.

"The thought had crossed my mind? What's going on down there?"

"I'm guessing you're not the only person who can plot a map with that anomaly data. Lucia has had the place locked up tight."

Helen considered her options. She had no more information than Lucia did. Any route she could find, Lucia could find as well. "There won't be any better opportunities. Is Lester still in charge of the armed response to anomalies?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't count on the loyalty of the soldiers down there."

"But he can send in a team, once the anomaly opens. A team consisting of the three of you and someone from the science team."

"I don't trust Lester."

"I do." Helen turned to look down at the building, pleased to have the upper hand in this conversation, "Besides, it is already done."

"You didn't have to come in person." Helen complained when she met up with Lester.

His mouth was drawn in a small tight line. "Sometimes you have to throw all your resources into one last ditch attempt."

Wordlessly Jenny held out a bag. “Disguise,” she said shortly. “Wig, glasses and some mouth pads. They’ve got facial recognition. You need to distort your features.”

“Keep in the middle of the group,” advised Slater.

“Anomaly’s been open half an hour,” said Helen. “Shall we go?”

They moved as a unit towards the entrance to the office block. Lester and Jenny walked in front, Helen was in the middle, the three Slaters surrounded her. Jenny was on the phone. Helen realised she was going through the motions of organising an anomaly response.

They marched up to the doorway. “Anomaly response team!” Jenny flashed a dangerous smile. “You’re to let us in to check the anomaly. I’ve got the Home Secretary on the phone.” She handed the mobile over to the guard on the door.

Moments later they were in. “We don’t have long,” said Jenny quietly. “Lucia will find out sooner or later that I’ve been by-passing her. Probably sooner.”

“Sooner,” said Slater. “The search and destroy has just come over the military channel.”

“Careless of them to broadcast the fact,” muttered Lester.

“We’re not going anywhere.”

Helen shrugged. “Let’s get to the basement. Once we’re through the anomaly things change.”

“Only if Lucia hasn’t got a reception party waiting for you,” observed Lester.

“Unlikely, I’m working from the same map she is. No real way for her to get people there, unless she had this planned from six months back.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

Helen had no answer to that. She had always maintained that faith was a psychological prop for the weak-willed. She wondered, briefly, if Lester knew that, but couldn’t tell from the back of his head.

The narrow staircase they were descending opened out into a cramped corridor.

“Where from here?” asked Slater.

Helen switched on her anomaly detector. “No signal,” she reported anxiously.

“It’s a trap!” said Slater.

Helen took a deep breath. “Unlikely, Lucia would have had to have been psychic to plant that particular information at just the right time. Chances are the information from her father is inaccurate. We give it a little longer.”

“No wonder they put out the search and destroy so quickly,” muttered Jenny. “I just bluffed our way into a nonexistent anomaly.”

"Lucia was flushing out her enemies," said Lester drily. "How resourceful of her."

"So she did have this planned," said Slater. "We should fight our way out."

"No, Helen's right. She's good, but not that good." Lester's tone of authority was absolute. "She's just capitalising on the miss-step. We can still do this. We need to delay the soldiers. I want a plan. Slater?"

"Two staircases," said Slater. "If we're sure we're not going anywhere except through the anomaly, I can bring them down."

Lester's eyebrows shot up. "You're carrying explosives?"

"I like to be prepared."

Helen nodded. "Do it! Let's buy ourselves as much time as we can."

The Slaters proved to be remarkably well prepared. In less than five minutes both staircases were piles of so much rubble, one of which conveniently blocked the entrance to the corridor. Even once the special forces abseiled down that hole they wouldn't be able to get in.

"What happens now?" asked Jenny.

"Standard protocol would be to sit tight upstairs and wait for us to try to negotiate our way out," observed Lester.

"Lucia doesn't have time to wait on standard protocol," said Helen.

"I'm aware of that, yes. I anticipate it will be messy. Captain Slater, I would appreciate it if I could borrow some of your extensive armoury. I notice you are carrying *two* M4s which seems a little excessive."

Slater frowned and then handed over the gun. "Do you know how to use this thing."

"You'd be surprised."

"I've had some training too," said Jenny suddenly. "Clay pigeon shooting and I've been practicing small arms."

This time Slater just nodded and produced a small Glock from his belt. Jenny checked it over with an alarming degree of professionalism. Helen admired her calm and efficiency. She really should have made more use of Jenny.

Slater looked upwards. Helen followed his gaze and then realised he was listening. The sounds of booted feet up above them and shouted orders had changed. Slater glanced at one of his younger selves and nodded. The man nipped into the

remaining stairwell. There was a burst of automatic weapons' fire and then he returned.

"They're going to abseil down. I can't get a clear shot."

Helen looked at her detector, the dials were beginning to swing. "An anomaly is opening. I think Lucia's father was an hour out."

"Where is it?" asked Lester.

Helen swung the detector in an arc around her and watched as the dials juddered and jerked. "In there, I think." She gestured to a small room.

"The anomaly's not open yet though?" asked Jenny.

"No, there's obviously some additional activity before one opens that these detectors can pick up."

"Connor would have been fascinated," observed Lester.

Helen glanced at him sharply. Lester was staring hard at the eldest Slater who just shrugged and said, "I couldn't afford to have him shooting his mouth off."

Looking at the expression on Jenny's face, Helen concluded she was going to have a tough time preventing her team from killing each other on their way back through history.

"Right," said Slater. "Everyone into the room. We'll barricade ourselves in. That'll buy us more time."

"Not enough," said Lester. "I think I'll stay out here."

"What?" Helen was brought up short.

"Two layer defence. First they have to get down the corridor and then into the room." Lester kicked over one of the filing cabinets propped against the walls. "I'll use this for cover."

"The anomaly will open any minute. There's no point in needless heroics." Helen had thought better of Lester than this.

"The anomaly is no good to you if Lucia's forces come through it seconds after you do. Unless you think you can order Slater here to stay behind, you're out of options, Helen."

Helen looked at the eldest Slater.

"You've got a volunteer," he said. "You don't need me. But he's right. Someone needs to lay covering fire down the corridor. Preferably two someones."

There was a sharp silence. Helen realised that the Slaters were looking at Jenny. The battle of wills was palpable. She had two prehistoric periods to walk through, at high speed. Jenny was in heels and the Slaters were armed soldiers.

"Jenny, can you stay too?"

Jenny turned and glared at her.

"Please," Helen found herself saying and realised, with a shock, that the request was genuine.

"You'd better take this," Slater handed Jenny a second M4.

Jenny took it and the stalked right up to Helen, staring her hard in the eye. "Don't fail," was all she said.

"I promise."

"Anomaly's open!" shouted the youngest Slater.

"Time to go!" the eldest grabbed Helen's arm and began to steer her into the room. She shrugged off the touch. She was in control of this situation. It was all going according to plan. She didn't need Jenny, or Lester.

The anomaly hung glittering before them. Helen didn't look back as she went through, the three Slaters on her heels.

"Why are you staying?" Jenny couldn't help asking as she crouched uncomfortably beside Lester.

"Running away never suited me. Some of this mess is my responsibility."

Jenny considered that. "How much good are we really going to do here?"

"We buy time. That's really all we can do. Do you mind if I ask why you're helping? It surprises me that you're assisting in an attempt to change history, given your background."

"What if Helen changes history and brings Claudia back? Someone how I doubt she'll try that."

Lester's chuckle was dry. "She isn't as sure of what she's doing as she let's on."

There was a sound of shouting and booted feet coming from the stairwell. Jenny aimed the M4 at the entrance and sighted along it.

"If Helen finds either a Claudia Brown or a Jenny Lewis back there then I hope whichever of them she meets will give her a run for her money."

Lester smiled thinly. "I have no doubt they will."

Then there was a crash and the door at the end of the corridor fell off its hinges, in a cloud of smoke and dust.

"Let's buy some time then," said Jenny. As the first dim shape emerged through the haze, she placed a finger on the trigger and opened fire.

2006

The sniper rifle was a sleek and dangerous looking piece of equipment. Helen had been practicing with it for weeks and it still sent strange shivers through her. It was something about the distance and the impersonality of it. She was used to fighting up close and personal, ruthless but direct, where you could see the pain and the blood. She'd examined her reactions to the gun with anthropological interest and had now them filed away for later consideration. They wouldn't be allowed to affect her actions.

"Here she is, right on time," said Slater. He stood at her elbow, disapproving rather obviously of her decision to take the shot herself.

Helen sighted down the gun at Lucia Wright as she crossed the road from the tube station. She was on her way to be briefed by Sir James Lester, Home Office, on the ramifications of events in the Forest of Dean. This was where it had all started.

Lucia paused outside a newsagents', waiting in a line. Maybe she was buying a paper or perhaps she had a secret smoking vice. It was the perfect shot. Helen lined up carefully. She placed her finger on the trigger. If she took this shot everything would turn out right... probably. Nick would survive. Stephen wouldn't have to take over the team. They would never become her team. Abby would never show those small moments of gratitude and understanding. Connor would never look at her with those irritating puppy dog eyes, wanting direction. Jenny would never treat her with that calm respect that masked steadfast enmity. She'd never won Jenny over, now she wouldn't get the chance. There would be no mornings in James Lester's office drinking tea in unspoken understanding of their position.

"You going to take the shot or not?" asked Slater.

Helen pulled the trigger. She hadn't wanted a team anyway. It wasn't as if she had *liked* them. She watched Lucia fall and the crowd begin to panic, but she was already moving rapidly away. They had an anomaly to reach before the police caught up with them.

2010

When Lucia Wright, following angrily and swiftly behind her men stepped over the bodies and into the small storage space, it was just in time to see the anomaly stutter and wink out of existence.

Then time twisted and folded.

Feet came running.

"Aww! It's gone. I almost had the signal."

"Not to worry, lad. It's almost bound to have been down in the lower levels somewhere. Lieutenant Lyle, I'm going to check down there. I imagine you'll

insist on coming with me."

The voices echoed down the stair wells. Sightless eyes stared up at the ceiling, deaths already ravelling away into nothing.

"You bet, Professor."

"And remember..."

"You don't have to remind me. Don't harm anything, unless I have too. Ditzy, take the second team and check the other staircase."

The sounds bounced off the walls. There were no signs of a struggle or a fight. No footprints in the dust. The filing cabinet was back in it's place against the wall.

"Abby, Connor, go with them and be careful."

When the two teams swept through the basement there was nothing of interest to be seen.

Chapter 5

Dr Who Drabbles

Written for the "dw100" drabble challenges.

5.1 Remember the Children (Challenge 216: Crossover)

Sailing the time winds through the fractures of the Time War is hard. Compassion gifted me her wisest daughter. I sing and let Hope steer.

"I've had to tweak things a little," she says. Unlike the time lords she isn't afraid of Paradox. It is her play thing.

I step out into a dry desert. There is a warrior here, well-trained, with deep blue eyes. Not so pretty as my Andred, dying a hundred times in the first assault, but close.

"He will care for your child," Hope says.

I look into his eyes and I know that he will.

5.2 TARDIS Catalogue (Challenge 215: Red/Blue)

TARDIS Catalogue

Category: Clothing

Sub-Category: Coat

Colour: Blue

> Absolutely gorgeous!!! with fur-lined hood. This one is so not vanishing back into the wardrobe, I've never got the same thing twice out of that place (not that that's a bad thing) - DN. Cupboard 3, Room 2934 (Donna Noble's Bedroom).

Note: Obsolete entry. Item returned to wardrobe.

Category: Organic Material

Sub-Category: Hair

Species: Human

Colour: Red

Individual: Donna Noble.

> Strands removed from a coat hood while clearing out Donna's Room. How could one woman store so much stuff in so little time? - The Doctor. Box 1493, Shelf 64, Room 1823

5.3 The Randomness of Free Will (Challenge 216: Free)

"I'm bored."

They were having a picnic. There was grassy heathland all around them. They'd explored a little but the Doctor's interest had waned rapidly when monsters failed to appear and no one tried to arrest them.

"Why can't we go somewhere interesting," he complained.

"It'll be the randomiser," Romana explained for what felt like the umpteenth time. "Most of the universe isn't filled with adventure. It's just, well, empty." She shrugged.

The Doctor humphed. "I'm going to have to tweak that randomiser. It can select from locations picked by the TARDIS. All this free will won't do at all."

5.4 The Kraken Wakes (Challenge 217: Wake)

In the depths of the swamp it had slept, dreaming in a sluggish way of shining rivers of light, little knowing how its body was changing and growing under the

impulse of those energies of which it dreamed. But now its slumber was disturbed. Deep below the water and the silt of centuries, hard into the rock came the vibrations and the vast creature began to stir, slowly at first and then rising towards consciousness. It rose shedding the silt that had covered it, the waters muddied in its wake. It rose towards the sound, fully alert now and hungry.

5.5 Tales Retold in a Hundred Years (Challenge 218: Legend)

Once upon a time there was an alien girl named Susan. She lived in a blue box in a junkyard with her grandfather. This wasn't any old blue box. It was called the TARDIS and it could travel in time and space. It was larger on the inside than on the outside so there was plenty of room to live there.

This story starts when two schoolteachers followed Susan home. Her grandfather was afraid that more people would discover the TARDIS. He took off, taking Susan and her teachers with him into time and space where they had many adventures.

Chapter 6

Head, Hand and Heart

A Primeval Short Story

Note This story presumes fredbassett's Primeval stories as background. In particular it assumes that Stephen Hart and Captain Ryan were a couple and that everyone was aware of this fact.

6.1 Head

"Drive a bit faster, can't you?"

"That was a blind summit. You may choose to ignore concepts like stopping distance Cutter, but I make a point of paying attention to that sort of fiddling detail."

"At this rate we'll still be on this damn road come dark. I dread to think what speed you'll go then."

Lester sighed. "I'm doing 45. If anything that's on the fast side for this road. We'll arrive in plenty of time. I'm beginning to regret offering you a lift from the airport."

"Why *did* you offer me a lift, by the way?"

"Saves the expense of a second hire car. It certainly wasn't for the joy of your company. All you've done is sleep and complain about my driving for the past 100 miles."

"Aye well, you weren't up all night hunting a Gorgonopsid."

"Ah yes! Another good reason not to let you drive yourself."

"Why are you here, Lester? You don't do fieldwork. And why did we leave the others behind?"

"They had other engagements. We can always call them if there turns out to be something in these reports."

"And you are here because?"

"Maybe I have a soft spot for the Highlands and Islands?"

Cutter snorted. "Pigs might fly."

Lester glanced in his direction, approximated a shrug, and then turned his attention back to the single-track road.

"Come on, Lester, something's going on. Tell me what it is."

"It took you a while to notice."

"I was only half awake, but now I'm *properly* awake I can tell that you're up to something."

"Yes, I am 'up to something' as you put it. Unfortunately I'm not at liberty to tell you what. You are just going to have to live with the suspense."

"I'm not going to be much use if I don't know what's going on."

"I believe part of the point of the exercise is to see if you can work out what's going on. I have supreme confidence that you'll excel yourself."

"I don't like being kept in the dark, Lester."

"Believe me, I am no happier about this than you are."

Cutter reached into the side pocket of the car and extracted a file. He flicked through the papers and photographs it contained.

"I take it that all this is a cover then?"

"No, those reports are entirely genuine." Lester glanced sideways. "Don't look at me like that, Cutter. The wind might change, if nothing else."

The sun was just setting when they pulled into the car park of the Kilchoan House Hotel.

After checking in, Nick found himself waiting for Lester in the bar. He'd simply dumped his bags on the bed in his room. He suspected Lester was attending to fiddling details, like unpacking.

As he sipped his beer he recalled another hotel lounge in another world. Suddenly he had the most overwhelming sense of her perfume.

"Excuse me."

Her hand on his shoulder. The taste of cheap wine on his lips.

"Excuse me!"

He blinked suddenly at Lester's voice. The scent was gone. He could taste nothing except 80/-. Lester was staring at him, looking puzzled.

"What's the plan?" he asked, trying to cover for his sudden disorientation.

Lester blinked. "You're the creature expert, Cutter. I was rather hoping you would have one."

Nick picked up his drink and carried it to a side table, slightly more private than the bar. "Well, I doubt that whatever the locals have been seeing is really a Nuckelavee."

"Fairy tale monsters would certainly be a first." Lester didn't sit but returned to the bar, buying a beer of his own. Nick leaned back in the corner seat, still shaken by the intensity of the memory he'd just had. Lester returned to the table and sat across from him, carrying menus.

"I've told them we want dinner. We can order here and they'll call us through when it's ready."

Nick glanced over the menu. "I'll have the soup, followed by scampi." Lester shrugged then headed back to the bar. Nick could hear him ordering scallops and Scottish salmon. He finished his drink and then waggled the empty glass at Lester, who rather visibly sighed but ordered another.

"So, what do you think we have?" Lester asked, returning to the table.

Nick shrugged. "Could be anything. Anything large anyway. The reports make it sound like a large herbivore."

"Only with teeth."

"No one's been hurt. People could be imagining the teeth."

"We can live in hope."

"Still, large herbivores can be dangerous. More dangerous than carnivores in many ways."

"Ever cheerful and optimistic, Cutter." Lester deadpanned.

"We still don't know it's anything. Connor's detector hasn't registered a signal."

"It didn't pick up the Smilodon."

"Yes but that had been found as a cub and raised by someone."

Lester looked across at him eloquently.

Nick started. "You think someone's keeping the thing?"

Lester shrugged. "That's what we're here to find out."

Nick looked up to see a waiter signalling to them from the doorway. He stood up, nodding in the man's direction. Lester followed him to the dining room. They sat in silence over the starters. It wasn't necessarily an awkward silence, they simply didn't have a lot to say to each other outside work.

"Someone needs to talk to the people in the reports," Nick said at last. Lester looked up from his scallops, eyebrows raised. "You can canvas them, find out what they really saw. I'll go along the beach, see if I can pick up a trail."

"With all due respect, Cutter, I'd be happier if you weren't gallivanting around on your own."

Nick found himself smiling. Clearly Lester wasn't any keener to talk to people than he was. Where was Jenny when they needed her? "Me? Gallivanting?"

"We'll check the cliff path tomorrow. Together. We can canvas the locals later on."

"I thought you said I was making the plan."

"And an excellent one it is too." Lester spared a weak smile for the waiter as he took away the dishes while Nick took the opportunity to order another drink.

"I'd go easy on that if I were you, Cutter."

"This is only my third."

Lester gave him a hard look.

"What?"

"I don't recall you being much of a drinker."

"Leave off, Lester. You never come out with us. How would you know?"

Lester looked hard at him again but dropped the subject.

Beyond Kilchoan the single-track road stopped at a turning circle, the rolling hillsides of Ardnamurchan on one side and the breakers of the Atlantic on the other. Beyond the road was a slight rise and a ruined croft. Standing at the turning circle you could see across the Sound to Mull.

Lester parked to one side of the circle. The boot of the car contained a tranquiliser gun which he gave to Nick, and two backpacks. Nick's was hefty and contained basic camping equipment, on Lester's insistence. Lester's own was rather smaller. Nick decided not to comment.

There was a clifftop path from that point, marked on the maps, which would take them round the headland all the way to Ardnamurchan lighthouse. All the sightings had been on the rocky beaches either near the lighthouse or near Kilchoan. Of course there weren't that many people to see anything in between the two.

As they set out, there was a light salty breeze blowing off the sea. Nick would have preferred to have been walking with Stephen, and not just because Stephen

was far more likely to pick up and follow a "Nuckelavee" trail than either him or Lester.

Your right hand man.

The words were so vivid that Nick glanced round in surprise. He half expected to find Stephen there, just behind them, the tone was so familiar.

"See something, Cutter?"

"No." No, he couldn't see anything. "Nothing."

It was too early in the year for the heather to be in bloom, but large clumps of it grew either side of the sheep trail they followed, brushing against their ankles. The day remained clear and Nick found he was enjoying the walk, if not his taciturn companion.

After about half an hour, a woman appeared over the brow of an outcrop walking towards them. An oak tree grew on the ridge, a lone sentinel in the sheep cropped wilderness. She paused beneath it, one hand resting against the trunk; a young woman in combat fatigues wearing a backpack.

"Looks like we're going to have company," Cutter commented.

"No doubt as a result of your magnetic personality."

They walked up to the tree, meeting the woman beneath its boughs. She was about Cutter's height, strongly built with dark brown hair pulled up into a pony tail, a small heart-shaped tattoo visible on her neck. Nick noticed that she had a knife rather prominently strapped to one leg. Her face looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't place it. She leaned against the tree waiting for them.

"Hiya, Dad!"

Instinctively they both looked behind them. Then Nick found himself embraced in a hug.

"I think you may have got the wrong person," he began.

"Nope," she said confidently, "I just came through an anomaly. I'm from the future."

"The future?" Nick looked helplessly across at Lester. At that moment a mobile rang. Lester began looking in his pockets, a small smile on his face, no doubt enjoying Nick's discomfort.

"Connor," he said, glancing at the display. "Hello? Yes, yes we know. Well I'm sorry I've deflated your moment of triumph. Yes, we're investigating. We've no evidence anything dangerous has come through yet. No I don't think there is any need for you to come up. Connor!"

"Here, give it me," said Nick, disentangling himself from the girl. Lester glanced at him and clearly hesitated, his eyes on her. Then he handed Nick the phone, but with the tiniest shake of his head. Nick turned his back on him.

"Connor?"

Cutter?

"Yes, it's me."

What's come through the anomaly? Lester said nothing dangerous. Can we come and see?

Nick looked back at Lester who stood with his hands in his pockets, wearing his best poker face. The girl was standing inside Nick's personal space, close enough to hear Connor's words. She mouthed something at him which looked distinctly like "He's cute, but no."

Nick frowned. "I'm not sure if we've got anything yet but it might be a good idea if you bring the rest of the team up here."

Cool!

"If you're doing that," said Lester from where he stood, "you'd better tell them to bring the landrover and a large trailer."

Nick nodded. "Connor?"

Still here

"Tell Abby it could be something large. Probably a large herbivore and we may need to move it over rough ground. Come prepared."

A large herbivore?

"Yes"

That's a bit dull isn't it?

"You were the one who wanted to come."

It'll take us ages to drive up with a trailer. Tell you what! Maybe we can commission a jet!

"No." Nick winced at the thought of Lester's regular budget speech if he let Connor start chartering planes. "Just tell Abby, OK, and drive up if you have to. And tell Jenny there have been local sightings. She may need a cover story."

Got it. See you soon.

"See you."

Nick hung up. He looked around. "Where are we getting a phone signal from?" He'd left his own phone at the hotel, assuming it would be useless.

"Mull," said Lester, pointing. "Reception's good until we get out of sight of that hill. I suppose it would be too much to ask that we could wrap this all up before that happens?"

Wordlessly Nick passed him back the phone. Then, almost as one, they turned to the young woman in front of them.

"Now, who exactly are you?" asked Lester.

"Yamin Cutter," she said. "Which I'd like to point out is a crap name."

Nick blinked. “I can’t imagine it’s my fault.”

“Probably not,” she conceded.

“So, Miss Cutter,” said Lester, “assuming we believe your story, what exactly are you doing here?”

“You said I’d be needed,” she said brightly, smiling at him. “And you just sat there and glowered,” she added to Nick.

Nick looked across at Lester. “You sent my daughter back through an anomaly!”

“Apparently she is needed. I don’t suppose I gave any helpful hints about why?”

“No, you just said ’don’t talk about the future’ and ’don’t tell anyone who your mother is’ oh, and ’don’t pass comment on who’s around and who’s not’ ”

“And what was I doing all this time?” Nick interrupted.

“Sulking mostly, far as I could tell.”

“Sounds like you,” said Lester, drily.

“Oh thanks. Why should we believe any of this?”

“You prefer the alternative?” asked Lester. “Some random person has found out about our activities, more pertinently worked out where you and I would be today, and furthermore thinks it’s a good idea to pretend to be your daughter?”

“He’s got a point,” said Yamin.

“Well you would say that wouldn’t you?” Nick retorted.

“Frankly,” added Lester, a tight smile on his face, “I was expecting Helen. I’m pretty pleased with how things are working out.”

“You were *expecting* Helen, and you didn’t think to tell me?”

“I did think to tell you. I just thought the better of it moments later. Your temper is bad enough as it is.”

Yamin opened her mouth as if to speak, caught Lester’s eye and shut it again. Nick wondered if she’d been about to say “Who’s Helen?” which would have been comforting in a way or “Don’t take that tone about my mother,” which would have been distinctly unsettling.

“So,” he said slowly, “you’re proposing we go along with this?”

“Yes,” said Lester. He gestured almost chivalrously up the path inviting Yamin to take the lead.

With a cheeky grin that bought her face out in dimples, definitely nothing like Helen’s at all, Yamin set off along the path. As he fell in beside Lester Nick said, “Let’s just hope she’s not taking advantage of your pleasure that she isn’t Helen.”

“As if anyone could take advantage of me.”

“Point.”

Suddenly Yamin stopped dead and rounded to face them.

"You still haven't told me what's going on."

"We're hunting mythical beasties," said Nick.

"Cool! Which ones?"

Lester sighed. "I take it you get on with Connor."

"I'm not supposed..."

"Then you shouldn't have been mouthing comments about him when Nick was on the phone."

"Connor's cool, if old."

Lester closed his eyes briefly. Nick saw he was taking a deep breath. "I'll fill you in as we go," he said.

An hour or so later, they were still following the cliff top. It had long ceased to be anything approximating a man made path and had become a series of sheep trails. All the sightings had been close to the sea; mostly by walkers but some by locals either in Kilchoan or at the lighthouse to which they were walking, so they kept as close to the cliff edge as possible. It came as something of a surprise, though, when they crested a rise to see before them a copse of slender ash trees unravaged by the sheep. They were closely planted but there was a small clearing visible in the centre. Even through the trees it was possible to see the rough hewn stone at their heart. Puzzled they entered the trees and came to a stop in the grove, the large standing stones stark and tall before them. Nick pulled out the Ordnance Survey map.

"These aren't marked on here," he commented.

"Let me look," said Yamin, peering over his shoulder.

They studied the map with the aid of a compass for several minutes until both Nick and Yamin agreed with their location, but the map showed no ancient monuments.

"Well, it's unusual," said Nick at last, "but it's not unknown for these maps to be inaccurate."

Lester was studying his mobile phone. "I think this is where I turn back," he said.

"What!" spluttered Nick in surprise.

"I'm out of range of that phone mast and I may need to co-ordinate with Mr. Temple or, preferably, Miss Lewis."

"What if we need back-up?"

"You have your daughter with you now Professor, which you didn't when you set out." His eyes wandered to the knife at her hip. "She may well be of more use to you, should things get dangerous, than I would."

"And what if she's not my daughter?"

"In the past hour she's completed three of your reminiscences for you; displayed a wide-ranging knowledge of paleontology; refused point blank to accept there is ever a justification for getting the army involved with anomalies and, obliquely, complained at length about some situation when I refused to let her chase through an anomaly on some damn fool errand to rescue a mammoth that had accidentally wandered into the Permian. She's your daughter all right."

"I have *not* mentioned anything about the future."

"You and your father are many things. Subtle about grudges is not one of them."

"That mammoth was injured, and imperilled the time lines"

"I refuse to have an argument about something I've not done yet."

"OK, OK," said Nick, "I'll take her with me, but if it turns out she's working for the Press on your head be it."

"Very good!" said Lester, tucking the phone back in his pocket and heading back the way they had come.

"Oh, by the way," he paused looking back at them. "I believe I'm allowed to give each of you a piece of advice at this point."

"Really?" said Nick.

"Yes, really. Yamin, once you've passed those stones don't eat anything you haven't brought with you, and see if you can stop your father doing the same. Irritating as he is, I'd quite like him back at the end of this. Professor, I can't pretend to understand the details of what is about to happen but I am given to believe that help should come from those you call for in need."

With that he turned.

"Lester!" Nick shouted after him, "Lester, come back now. You can't just leave it at that! What's going on? It's not just me you're putting in danger now, it's my daughter as well. Come back here!"

Lester studiously ignored him, walking away. Nick snorted and started to run after him, determined to bring him back. To his surprise Yamin quickly caught up with him.

"Leave it, Dad! He's not going to tell you any more."

"We'll see about that."

"Believe me, I spent the past week trying to weasel the details out of the both of you. It's no use. We'll just have to go between those stones and see what's

going on."

Nick scowled. "Is Lester passing himself notes through time?"

Yamin shrugged. "Obviously you're not, so let's assume he isn't either. Come on."

Unwillingly, Nick turned back and uneasily followed Yamin between the standing stones. Once through he paused to look around him. All looked the same. Why had he supposed otherwise? It wasn't as if he has expected to fall into another world. The same over-cast Scottish coastline met his gaze as before. The ash trees on this side crowded together more closely but the way before them was still clear and easy. Heather scraped against their boots once more as they came out of the grove.

After lunch, a fog began to come down and visibility dropped to a few metres. It wrapped itself around them dulling their senses and stifling their voices. Atop another rise they saw a shallow slope which, probably, ran all the way down to the beach. A small burn cut down its centre. Hawthorn, just come into blossom, crowded about the bank, but on the far side all was blackened and withered. A metre wide track stretched out in both directions with the corpses of trees standing bare on the parched earth.

"The Nuckelavee's breath withers crops," said Yamin.

"It's not a Nuckelavee." Nick walked to the burnside and stared across the water. "I suppose, it could be the source of the legend somehow." He frowned. It was hard to make sense of it, but it was just possible some large creature had survived long enough to encounter humans but had never been documented by naturalists.

"Want to know what I think?" offered Yamin.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"Go ahead then."

"I think it's a Nuckelavee."

"It's *not* a Nuckelavee."

"Just for a moment Dad, assume that the otherworld exists."

"The otherworld?"

"Fairyland."

"Why are we having this conversation?"

"Just for a moment assume that the otherworld exists."

"OK, OK, I'm assuming."

"Good. Now Lester warned us about the food. It's a classic part of fairy tales. You mustn't eat food from the otherworld."

"I'm still assuming."

"We have tales of a Nuckelavee. Lester's talking like he's just stepped out of one of Granny Cutter's tales. And there's my knife, which Lester specifically insisted I bring with me."

"What's the significance of the knife?"

"It's cold iron. You mentioned that fact when you gave it to me."

"I gave you a knife?"

"For my sixteenth birthday. You're quite an eccentric Dad you know."

"I think you've been listening to too many of Granny Cutter's tales."

"You were always very insistent that I mind what Granny Cutter told me."

"Fatherhood clearly sent me soft in the head."

"Either Lester's gone mad or he thinks this is the otherworld."

"Nope. I've stopped assuming. It makes no sense. Come on, let's cross this burn and look at that trackway."

"Nazneen's father is the chairman of a multi-national company."

Nick, ignoring her, began carefully to cross a set of stepping stones.

"Last year he green-lit a project based on one of her ideas," Yamin persisted.

"Did he now?"

"I'm just pointing out that some Dad's pay attention to their children's ideas."

"I'm assuming Nazneen's idea didn't require her father to believe in fairies first."

"I'm making more sense than you are at the moment."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Well, irrespective of whether you're my daughter or not. You are a lot younger than me and I've been studying zoology a lot longer than you have. There is no such thing as a Nuckelavee."

A sound washed up from the beach towards them, as though the crash of the waves became temporarily amplified. They both stopped and turned.

"The Nuckelavee makes a sound like the roaring of the sea," said Yamin, helpfully.

Nick looked at her. "Are we crossing this to examine the trackway or not?"

"Just saying."

Nick knelt down on the other side. The grass looked like it had been burnt. Yamin knelt beside him.

"Acid perhaps," she said.

"Maybe," he conceded.

He looked up and down the track. "The beach or inland?"

Once again the magnified sound of crashing waves echoed up to them.

"The beach I think," said Yamin.

They followed the trackway until the grass and trees gave way to a rocky shoreline. Nick felt the spray against his skin as the waves crashed on the shore. The slight wind seemed to pick up strength. Yamin's pony tail whipped around her face. Looking up the beach Nick could see what looked like a horse and rider in the fog. He started towards it. Yamin caught his arm.

"What if that's the Nuckelavee?"

"Then we'll see what it is."

"It's coming towards us. Let's wait here by the burn, or better still on the other side of the burn."

"A Nuckelavee won't cross running water right? You're still taking this very literally."

"Humour me."

The burn widened out as it reached the beach and they waded across without much difficulty. Yamin drew her knife.

As the figure resolved itself out of the fog Nick could make out the horse's body but it seemed bereft of a head. Like a centaur a man's torso rose from its back. He began to make out details of its webbed hands and a vast misshapen head with a wide mouth. Cautiously he unslung the tranquiliser rifle.

"See," said Yamin.

"I see it," Nick shook his head, "but I don't believe it."

The Nuckelavee, or whatever it was, opened its mouth and roared, a sound like the waves on the shore washed over them. Nick could see a smoky haze drift from its mouth and a faint acrid smell tinted the air.

"OK," he said, "let's back away cautiously." He slipped off the safety.

They moved away from the burn. Nick hoped that it really wouldn't cross running water. He raised the gun, sighting on the creature. It roared again. This time Nick choked as burning fumes filled his lungs. Eyes watering he sighted down the rifle and shot the creature. It was a good shot into its hind quarters, but the dart just bounced off onto the shore.

"Cold iron," said Yamin, but her voice sounded far off, lost in a low singing that rang in his ears.

If from the sea it comes, dank fog and spray
About its form. If beast both fierce and fell,
O'er turns your plans and all your efforts fail,
Call from your heart, for elf-shot stills the limbs

And binds the foe. Her hand may loose the spell
if so your heart desires and make all well.

Nick blinked. "Oh very useful," he said to no one in particular. He slipped the safety back on and slung the rifle over his shoulder. "I suggest we get out of here."

"It won't cross running water."

"A) You don't know that and B) even if it doesn't, Nuckelavees have no problem with the sea, as I recall."

Yamin glanced at the Atlantic only a handful of metres from where they stood.

"Point taken."

They began to head inland. Glancing back, Nick saw the creature veer into the sea. Not good at all. They scrambled back up the side of the burn, pushing between the hawthorn bushes, scattering white flowers in a trail behind them.

Before long they heard galloping hooves.

"Keep it distracted," said Yamin, and ducked behind a rock brandishing her knife.

"Dear Lord", thought Nick, but there was no opportunity to argue. He looked back once more, he could just make out its shape in the fog, getting closer rapidly. He carried on for several hundred yards then turned, anxious to see what happened. As the Nuckelavee passed her rock, Yamin leapt out. She was obviously attempting to get up on its back behind its torso. Nick winced, not as easy as it looked in the movies, especially with a knife in one hand. The Nuckelavee reared and turned. Yamin got knocked sideways into the burn. Nick began running towards them again, no clear idea in his head of what he could accomplish but there had to be something he could do. Grab the knife perhaps that had fallen clear? But he was going to be too late. He was too far away.

6.2 Hand

He was going to be too late. He was too far away. If he had been there he could have reached out his hands. If he had had back up support, Stephen, his right hand man, Ryan, anyone, placed among the other boulders by the burn.

His gaze was fixated on the knife so he hardly saw anything else. But there was a flash of denim; a hand on the knife; and a figure was up behind the Nuckelavee as Yamin had intended. Meanwhile a second figure, in black, was hip deep in the burn dragging Yamin out to the safety of the other side.

The Nuckelavee bucked and roared, fumes billowing over the figures in the water. The man in black choked while the other man clung on to the creature's back. Nick was still running towards them hardly believing what he was seeing. The man in black straightened up, still coughing and unslung an automatic weapon from his back. He let it off into the air. The denim clad man lost his grip, falling off the back of the Nuckelavee, but Nick could see it was bleeding from its shoulder. The moment he had a clear shot the other stopped firing into the air and trained his gun on the creature. The bullets seemed to have little effect but, dismayed perhaps by the opposition, the creature turned and fled back towards the sea.

Nick ran up to the group. The figure in denim turned round. He had recognised him already, had recognised the way he and the man in black worked together. He just hadn't believed it.

"Stephen!"

"Hello, Nick."

He glanced over at the other, who was professionally checking over Yamin's unconscious figure.

"Ryan?" Ryan looked up and nodded. "But how?"

"Search me," Stephen shrugged eloquently. "Last thing I remember was being eaten."

Nick winced. Stephen turned his back on him and leapt across the burn to join the others.

"She's breathing normally," Ryan reported. "Hopefully it's just a concussion." He didn't get a chance to say anything further because Stephen had grabbed him and was kissing him.

"Whoa there, lover," Ryan grinned as he pushed him away. "What's the big occasion?"

Stephen said something incoherent. Nick, following Stephen across the burn, could just about make out the words "missed you" and "dead". Ryan was looking confused. Nick knelt down beside Yamin and pushed her hair away from her face. She seemed terribly pale, but there was no visible bleeding.

"Who is she?" asked Ryan, watching his movements.

"Her name is Yamin. My daughter, so she says."

"Your daughter?" queried Stephen. "You sly devil!"

"So she *says*," Nick repeated with emphasis. "She says she came through an anomaly and was sent by myself and Lester."

"Any idea why?" asked Ryan.

Nick shook his head. He sat back on his haunches, surveying the two dead men in front of him.

"She thinks we're in the otherworld."

Stephen snorted and tossed his head.

Nick began to repeat Yamin's theories but Ryan cut him off.

"Later," he said, "she's wet and I want to get her dry and warm as quickly as possible."

They rooted through her pack, thankful to find spare clothing.

"I can't undress my own daughter," objected Nick.

"I can," said Ryan, as practical as ever, as he worked to pull off her trousers. "It'll keep her alive."

"He's got a point," said Stephen.

In the end Nick held her up against his body, while Stephen and Ryan changed her soaking trousers. They'd just finished and were laying her down again when she was violently sick all over Nick.

"Sorry Dad," she whispered.

"Doesn't matter, at least you're conscious," Nick took off his ruined jacket. "I've a spare waterproof."

"Wash the jacket and keep it," said Ryan. "We may be able to dry it out and we may need all the spare clothing we can get."

At that point Yamin was sick again. Nick found himself, in his shirt selves, his ruined jacket discarded, holding her as she retched into the burn.

"I've got a splitting headache," she whimpered when the heaving had died down a bit.

"Right, we have to move," said Ryan. "We've stayed here too long already. That thing may come back and I want to be somewhere easier to defend."

Yamin straightened up, and then doubled over, retching again.

"At least there's nothing left to come out," pointed out Stephen, although he looked worried. Yamin was clearly going to be difficult to move.

"Try not to move too fast," advised Nick. Slowly, Yamin stood up. There was no retching but she staggered as she took a step towards them. Nick caught hold of her to keep her upright, glancing anxiously at Ryan and Stephen.

"We move," said Ryan. "Best we can."

They set off following him away from the burn and back inland. Nick had his arm round Yamin, holding her up. She leaned into him and said very little. When he spoke to her, he had to work to gain her attention which seemed to be wandering.

"I'm going to kill Lester for this when I get my hands on him," growled Nick.

"I thought you weren't convinced she was your daughter," said Stephen.

Nick glared at him.

They walked in angry silence for a minute.

"Tell me about this otherworld hypothesis then," said Stephen, eventually.

"I wouldn't mind an explanation either," said Ryan. He glanced back at them. "Last thing I remember is camping in the Permian. From what's already been said, I take it I didn't survive."

Nick swallowed. "No. There was a second predator that followed us back through the anomaly."

Ryan nodded and then turned to face forwards once more. Nick figured he was listening attentively though, as he outlined what had happened and Yamin's theories.

"So Lester knows more than he is letting on, as usual," said Stephen at last.

"Lester wasn't behind the conspiracy." Nick answered a different question. "It was Leek and Helen."

"I'd rather grasped Helen was involved." Stephen's tone was clipped and his face stony. He didn't look at Cutter.

"Stephen, I'm sorry."

"About what?"

"I should have told you Leek was behind the conspiracy as soon as I found out. I'm sorry I didn't."

Stephen nodded, but the lines of tension and anger, so unusual in Stephen but so common in his last weeks, remained.

"So," said Ryan into the silence, "what are we? Fairies?"

Stephen sniggered. There was a broad grin on Ryan's face. Nick noticed that he and Stephen were studiously avoiding each other's eyes.

"I don't know. I'm sorry," replied Nick, ignoring the suppressed laughter. "All I know is Lester said help would come."

Ryan nodded. "I wonder what happens to us when this is all over?" he said bleakly.

It was impossible to answer.

"Here will do," said Ryan. They were at the base of a rocky outcrop, maybe three metres in height. A narrow sheep trail led up it. Nick saw his reasoning. The Nuckelavee could only approach from one direction and they could escape up the outcrop on a track it probably couldn't handle.

"We rest here, at least for a bit," said Ryan.

Nick lowered Yamin to the ground and she sat down, smiling weakly at him.

"I don't suppose," said Ryan, "either of you checked up on my daughter?"

Nick was taken aback, an apology forming on his lips.

"We kept an eye on her," said Stephen, to his surprise. "She's managing."

Ryan nodded.

"Nuckelavee's are attracted by burning kelp," said Yamin suddenly. She was leaning back against a rock, eyes closed.

"That another piece of wisdom from Granny Cutter?"

"It drives them into a frenzy."

"So?"

"So, we dig a pit trap, burn some kelp and trap the Nuckelavee."

"Is this a Cutter hunch?" asked Stephen.

"Cutters have good hunches." Yamin had opened her eyes to slits but there was an expression on her face that Cutter had seen before around Stephen. He was going to have to have a word with her.

"Not always."

Yamin waved a hand dismissively. "Sometimes we make minor mistakes."

"Big of you to acknowledge the fact."

Cutter glanced at Stephen. "I said sorry, didn't I?"

"For keeping me in the dark about Leek? Yes, you did."

"Pit trap." said Ryan, "Anyone got any better ideas?"

He looked around.

Yamin opened her eyes fully. "And so far today I have actually been right about everything."

"Except taking on a Nuckelavee single-handed armed only with a knife," said Nick, drily.

"Except for that, yes."

"We'll need spades," said Ryan.

Nick fished out the map. "The lighthouse."

"Will it be there," asked Stephen, "if we're in the otherworld?"

Nick was about to assert it would be, but changed his mind. "So far the geography's mostly been the same." He spread out the map.

"Geography's the same," said Stephen, "no guarantee buildings will be, if this is the otherworld."

"It is," said Yamin, her eyes closed again.

Stephen glanced at her, a look of irritation on his face. "Like father like daughter. So you also think the lighthouse will still be there."

"Yes," she said.

Ryan sighed. "We go to the lighthouse." He looked at Yamin, "Can you walk?"

Yamin struggled to her feet. Nick noticed that her colour was coming back.

"I'm fine," she grinned.

Stephen walked ahead with Ryan while Cutter and Yamin followed behind but he found himself unsure how to start a conversation now his initial euphoria at having Ryan back had receded. His mind kept running over the events since Ryan had died. Stephen couldn't think of any good way to explain about Helen.

Ryan nodded his head back at them. "You and Cutter weren't getting along so well at the end?"

"No."

"You want to tell me about it? Or better still, sort it out. I don't like situations where my team are bitching at each other."

Stephen looked back at Cutter and Yamin. As far as he could tell from snatches of conversation they were arguing about the validity of behavioural simulation techniques in Paleontology.

"I just wish he wasn't so bloody right all the time."

Ryan grinned. "Well I can't help you there. He's bloody annoying in all sorts of ways but I find his tendency to be right reassuring." He paused, his expression darkened and his tone became dangerous. "He get you killed?"

Stephen shook his head, "No, I did that all by myself."

Ryan smiled suddenly, with simple affection. "You're a fool, you know that?"

"Yes, I know that."

They walked in silence for a bit. Cutter and Yamin had moved on to a complex debate about Religion and Science. It was difficult to work out who was on which side.

"Did the rest of my team get out of the Permian?"

Stephen shook his head. "No, I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am. They were good men. Cutter survived though. What about his wife?"

"Her too."

Ryan shook his head. "Damn! Two good men dead and she walks away."

Stephen opened his mouth to object and then thought better of it. "Yeah, it was a bad day."

"Did you blame Cutter?" asked Ryan. "Is that why the two of you fell out?"

Stephen shook his head. "No. Well, mostly no. You'd made it clear enough that you had a job to do and it had risks."

Ryan nodded.

They topped another rise and stopped, gaping in amazement. Rising from Ardnamurchan point was a Gothic tower. It was slender and dark with carvings

twining up its sides and crenellations round its top. From its spire an ethereal pale light shone, sweeping round in a slow circle, dusting the countryside with a faint frosting as it passed.

"Is that the lighthouse?" asked Stephen.

"It's not the one on the postcards," said Cutter. "No tea room for a start."

"Told you I was right," said Yamin.

"The other thing about Cutters," Stephen observed to Ryan, sotto voce, "is that they don't know when to stop."

Opening the door to the tower they found themselves in an echoing chamber. There was a fire burning in the hearth and a small pile of wood set by it. A staircase wound round the outer wall leading up the tower.

"Let's check upstairs," said Cutter.

Slowly they climbed the tower, passing empty room after empty room until they stood in the lamp chamber. A cold pale flame burned eerily in the centre of the floor, with a mirror rotating around it, casting its beam out to sea through thick glass windows. They paused, all silenced by the strange sight. Beyond the window, waters crashed on the rocks and the Atlantic surrounded them on three sides. In the west the sun was setting, painting a vivid stripe of red and pink across the sky, reflected in the sea below. Stephen leaned on the rail and stared out to sea. Cutter watched the red and pink reflected on his face with the pale blue sweeping across it. There was a strange yearning look in his eyes, almost fey. Nick suddenly wondered if those words, spoken in jest, were true, that this was not Stephen at all. He glanced behind him to where Ryan stood, also looking out to sea, but if there was any yearning in his face, Cutter couldn't tell. The four of them stood in silence while the sun set. There was a click and a beam of light came on. Ryan, it appeared, had a torch.

"We'd better camp for the night," he said. "We'll hunt the Nuckelavee in the morning."

They trooped downstairs to where the fire still burned in the hearth.

"Is there some fairy tradition about hearths and hospitality?" wondered Nick, out loud.

Yamin shrugged. "Respect the hospitality. Replenish the hearth."

"We can cut more firewood tomorrow," said Ryan and began to load logs onto the fire.

Yamin began to unload her backpack. "I have soup and flapjacks."

Cutter looked through his backpack and produced more soup, noodles and chocolate. It wasn't a sumptuous meal but there was enough to go round.

After supper, Yamin wanted to tell campfire stories. Nick agreed because it avoided the need to actually talk to Stephen. Then Ryan announced he was going outside for a cigarette.

"I'll join you," volunteered Yamin.

"Excuse me!" said Nick. "No you won't!"

Yamin scowled at him, "I'm not a child anymore, Dad."

"I don't care. You're not smoking while I'm around and that's final!"

"We've already had this discussion, Dad."

"No we haven't and I'm not going to change my mind even when I'm in my fifties so you are staying in here."

Nick clambered to his feet to enforce his point. To his surprise he felt Stephen's restraining hand on his arm. "Let her go," Stephen said. "Save the argument for when you *are* in your fifties."

Yamin smiled, all dimples, and blew Stephen a kiss before nipping out after Ryan.

"And you," Nick added in frustration, "can keep your hands off my daughter."

Stephen backed off several steps. "I'm dead, in case you hadn't forgotten. You've got nothing to worry about. Besides which, she's your daughter, so I wouldn't. End of story."

"Shame you didn't feel the same way about my wife."

Stephen made an angry gesture. "I hardly knew you at the time."

"Oh, and that makes it all right does it?" Cutter raised his voice.

"No, it doesn't. But I'm not going to feel guilty specifically because Helen was married to you on top of all the other things I have to be guilty about," Stephen snapped back.

"So when, exactly, were you planning to tell me about your affair with Helen?"

"I wasn't planning on telling you. That much, at least, should have been obvious."

Cutter shook his head. "Always so honest," he allowed the sarcasm to drip heavily in his tone.

Stephen stepped forward angrily. "When would you have had me tell you? When I interviewed for that first job? When we went down the pub to celebrate the first grant we got together? At Helen's memorial service? Your thirtieth birthday? When exactly would you have had me tell you?" They stood eye-to-eye for a minute. Then Stephen turned away. "I'm dead. And you're still... you're still..." Stephen stopped and shook his head. Then he headed out of the door banging it shut behind him.

Stephen paused on the threshold, taking a shuddering breath in the night air. He was dead. He'd thought... well to be honest he hadn't thought anything terribly coherent when he'd made that fatal decision to enter the chamber and shut the door behind him. But as he'd backed away watching Nick through the port hole, he'd thought of it as atonement of a sort and then he'd found himself in this strange place and nothing had changed. His death had not changed Nick's attitude at all. Suddenly he felt as though he had lived and died in vain.

Yamin pushed passed him suddenly, giving him a murderous look. Beyond her Ryan stubbed out his cigarette and gave him a wry smile.

"What's her problem?" asked Stephen.

"Should have kept your voices down a bit. She didn't take kindly to the idea you cuckolded her father."

Stephen sighed in exasperation running his hands through his hair. "She is *so* like her father. They are so damned unforgiving and bloody minded. I *died* for him."

"Really? I died doing my job, trying to protect people." Ryan looked at him long and hard.

"That too," he conceded. Ryan smiled and Stephen found himself grinning back.

"He tried apologising earlier, you know," Ryan pointed out. "You were just being too proud then to back down."

"I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have ever," Stephen found himself faltering at Ryan's expectant expression. How to tell Ryan that Stephen had joined forces with Helen who had got both him and his men killed in her pursuit of a trip to the future.

"Go on," said Ryan in a level voice.

"I let Helen talk me round."

Ryan raised an eyebrow but the expression on his face did not bode well.

"There was something funny going on," Stephen explained desperately. "I thought it was Lester. Nick didn't. I thought we should go to the press. Nick didn't." He felt himself blushing under Ryan's steady gaze. "I was lonely," he finished lamely.

"And Nick was right?" asked Ryan.

"He could at least have given reasons!"

"But he was right?" pressed Ryan.

"But he was right," Stephen conceded.

"I think you have some more apologising to do," said Ryan, patting him on the shoulder as he headed back into the tower.

"Oh and by the way," he said just before he opened the door. "If you weren't dead already I'd wring your neck for going back to Helen. You're a fucking idiot, Stephen Hart." Ryan smiled slightly to take the sting out of his words, but his eyes weren't friendly and Stephen had no doubt, had they both been alive, that Ryan would have been a lot less forgiving.

He stood alone in the dark for a while, pondering on wasted second chances.

"Were those here last night?" asked Stephen, in the morning. Next to the door of the tower was stacked a neat pile of spades, axes and wooden shoring.

Cutter shrugged. "I don't remember seeing them, but they must have been, right?"

Three sceptical faces stared back him. "Oh, all right, it was the fairies. Are you all happy?"

Three hours later, they were about four feet down in an ever widening hole. Yamin and Ryan were back at the "lighthouse" trying to rustle up some lunch from the remaining supplies. Cutter and Stephen were left alone in silence.

"I missed you," said Cutter, suddenly.

Stephen looked at him in surprise. "I was missing you for months."

"Months?"

"Nothing was the same again, not after Helen's revelation."

Cutter paused and heaved himself out of the pit to sit on the edge, "I knew we had problems. I just never realised..." he trailed off shaking his head. "I guess it took me a while to adjust to the idea."

Stephen nodded, sitting opposite him. "Then Helen starts sending messages and texts, turning up at my flat. I couldn't just call up Lester and his goons."

"I would have."

"You were a lot angrier with her than I was." Stephen held his hands up at Cutter's glance. "Sure, not without reason. But even you didn't want to hand her over at the start."

"That's before I knew what she was capable of. She doesn't care about us at all, you realise that?"

Stephen gave him a long hard look. "She's pretty mixed up," he conceded in the end. "We're not as important as her agenda."

They stared at each other across the chasm that separated them.

"I shut you out," said Cutter, in the end.

"Helen drove us apart," agreed Stephen.

They continued to stare at each other in silence, neither knowing how to heal the divide.

Stephen took a deep breath. “Helen started to explain her reasoning.” He held his hands up. “Yes, I know now she lied, but you weren’t telling me anything. You just expected me to take everything you said on trust. Ryan was dead. Everyone else was busy.” He shook his head. “And suddenly Helen is confiding in me. It was like one door shut and another opened. I was a fool, though, and look where it got me.”

“You know I’d have gone back in to that room, if you hadn’t,” said Cutter suddenly, changing the subject.

Stephen nodded. “Yes I know.”

“You saved my life. I didn’t even realise you were being shut out. I didn’t really even pause to think how you were coping with Ryan’s death. I was too bound up in my own losses. So I’m sorry. I’d do anything for things to have worked out differently.”

“So would I.”

Cutter smiled and jumped back down into the pit.

“More work to do,” he said.

Stephen followed him back down. Cutter looked up and Stephen grinned at him. Cutter smiled. Together they continued digging.

The fog began to close in again. As it did so, a horn sounded out from the lighthouse startling them. It was the deep bellow of a fog horn but had a higher pitched ancient sound that made Nick think of hunting horns. By this time Ryan was digging with him while Stephen chopped replacement firewood for the hearth and they paused to look up at the tower.

“No one up there,” said Ryan.

“That we can see at any rate.”

Half an hour later Nick called a halt to the digging. Even with the shoring, he no longer thought it safe for people to stand in the pit and he’d been on a fair few digs in his time. Stephen put up a half-hearted argument pointing out he was dead already, but being buried, alive or dead, clearly didn’t really appeal, even to him.

“It’s not deep enough,” said Ryan. “That thing is big.”

“We put spikes in the bottom,” suggested Stephen. “Injure it as it falls.”

Nick and Stephen’s eyes met and he knew they shared the same thought, as they had in the past. It was not a humane way to trap an animal, but they had little choice. Some of the shoring was left over and they fashioned it into stakes and planted them in the pit, then covered it over with a ground sheet and covered that with grass. Those not digging had already amassed a pile of kelp near the pit.

It was a bugger to light but in the end they got a fire started and threw the kelp on top. An unpleasant smell wafted into the air forcing them back away from the pit. And then they all heard the roar, like the crashing of waves, and the sound of hoof-beats echoing through the mist.

Stephen had the tranquiliser rifle. It was a slim hope but Nick could have been unlucky with his first shot that bounced. Ryan had his automatic but they had little faith in that either. They were left with Yamin's knife and close quarters were needed for that. Nick had managed to persuade Yamin to remain in the tower and give the knife to him. It had almost been another argument but this time Stephen and Ryan backed him up so she had agreed, albeit with bad grace.

The creature emerged out of the fog, bigger than Nick remembered, breathing acrid fumes that withered the grassy land around it. Roaring as it came, it crashed towards them and leaped over the pit trap as if it hadn't been concealed at all.

6.3 Heart

If from the sea it comes, dank fog and spray
About its form. If beast both fierce and fell,
O'er turns your plans and all your efforts fail,
Call from your heart for elf-shot stills the limbs
And binds the foe. Her hand may loose the spell
if so your heart desires and make all well.

It charged towards them. Stephen shot his gun and then rolled to one side. Ryan was already backing away to one side firing, for all the difference it made. Nick drew the knife but knew it was pointless even as he did so. There was no way he could take on this beast armed with just a hunting knife. As it charged towards them the words echoed through his head. *A call from your heart*. Claudia was lost, even though, in his mind's eye, he now saw her clearly before him. A self-deprecating smile, the wind blowing her hair. An arrow thrummed past his ear and embedded itself in the animal which stopped its advance as if turned to stone.

They all turned. Standing behind and above them under an oak tree, her hair tumbling lose around her shoulders, was Claudia, unmistakably Claudia. A quiver hung at her hips and a long bow was in her hands. She was clothed all in white except for a single black glove in the hand that had pulled the string. Light seemed to radiate from her like the fractured patterns of an anomaly. She smiled.

Nick headed up the slope towards her.

"Jenny?" questioned Stephen behind him.

"Miss Brown?" said Ryan at almost the same moment.

Nick already had her in his arms, hardly able to believe his eyes. She smiled at him.

"You're not real are you?" he said.

"I am and I am not. I am something that never was," and she kissed him.

"Oh yuck!" Yamin could be heard saying.

They stopped kissing when Nick sensed Stephen at his elbow.

"Not Jenny?" Stephen said, with raised eyebrows.

"Who's Jenny?" asked Ryan. "Is Miss Brown dead too?"

Nick closed his eyes and leant his forehead against Claudia's. She smiled again at those around her. "This is going to take some explaining," she said.

From somewhere Claudia produced a cloth and spread it on the ground. They sat beneath the oak tree. Daffodils and crocuses sprang around its roots so they sat amidst drifts of flowers, an island in the foggy landscape.

"I am a messenger from the Faery Queen," she began.

"I thought you were a Civil Servant," said Ryan.

"PR guru!" said Stephen, putting up his hand.

"Strumpet!" said Yamin, looking grumpy.

"Behave yourself, Yamin!" admonished Nick.

"Behave myself? I'm not the person kissing random fairies!"

"Hush, child!"

Yamin stuck her tongue out at him.

"I am a messenger from the Faery Queen," re-iterated Claudia, firmly. "I never existed, except in Nick's memories of when I did exist. This places me in a particularly powerful state and lets me act as a messenger."

"Are you Claudia?" asked Nick his arm round her, "or are you a fairy like Yamin said?"

Her forehead wrinkled in a frown. "As far as I am concerned I am Claudia. I have no memory of ever being anything else, if that is what you are asking. I remember you entering the anomaly into the Permian and then," she shrugged, "a voice from the Faery Queen, and here I was." She nestled into the circle of Nick's arms.

"So what's the message from the Faery Queen?" asked Yamin.

Claudia nodded at the frozen Nuckelavee. "She would like the Nuckelavee returned. At the moment we are on the borders of her realm, a soft point where the mundane world and the faery kingdom overlap. Do you have a map?"

Ryan opened the map and placed it in front of Claudia. Claudia's finger traced the road from the hotel in Kilchoan towards the turning circle. "She will meet us in Orm Saig Beg where the Lord of the Isles was assassinated. That is a particularly weak point."

Nick looked over the map and then at the Nuckelavee. "How on earth are we going to transport it all that distance?"

"Connor, Abby and Jenny were going to bring a landrover and trailer," remembered Yamin.

"Can we get to them?" wondered Nick, glancing up at the lighthouse above them.

"Stephen and Ryan can pass between the two worlds," said Claudia. "They are close enough bound to both. If they return to the hotel seeking the landrover they will find it."

"That will also take some explaining," said Nick.

Stephen and Ryan set off along the paved road that led inland from the Lighthouse towards Kilchoan. For a while they compared notes on Jenny and Claudia.

"This is all extremely strange," Stephen said, at last.

"You're telling me."

"Do you think we really are Stephen and Ryan?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"What do you think will happen to us after this is all over?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't know, but I can't see anything to be gained by worrying about it."

"It's not quite what I had in mind as an after-life. Running around after Cutter whenever he gets in trouble."

"If it's any consolation I imagine this is a one off."

They walked in silence for a bit. Stephen hadn't asked the question that was really troubling him.

"You're replacement wasn't as good with Cutter," he said, after a bit, still avoiding the central problem.

"How do you mean?"

"Cutter kept managing to slip off without back-up. Got us into a lot of dangerous situations."

Ryan smiled. "He was always difficult to keep up with. We had to be ready to go at a moment's notice."

"We missed you."

"*You* did. I imagine Cutter was glad to be rid of my interference."

Stephen took a deep breath. He really had to ask.

"In your version of reality. The one where Claudia Brown is Lester's right hand, not Leek..."

"Yes?" Ryan said. Stephen had reviewed all their conversations over the past day in his head. They all made sense, but still. Hell, he'd kissed Ryan and hadn't been decked.

"In your version of reality," he repeated. "Were we?" He wasn't even sure how to complete the question but Ryan's broad and slightly mocking grin reassured him.

"You bet," he said.

"Right. Good," said Stephen, and eyed him covertly. "But," he persisted, "your Stephen and my Ryan, right. That's not you and me, is it?"

Ryan stopped short and turned to face Stephen, standing eye to eye right inside his personal space.

"Some days," he said, "I'm glad I'm just a simple soldier. And I can't believe that you, Stephen Hart," and he poked him in the chest, "are having scruples about whether kissing me counts as infidelity when you were off with Nick Cutter's bitch of a wife before I was even cold in my grave."

At which point, Stephen gave into temptation and kissed him again.

"You know," added Ryan airily, "we probably don't want to get to Kilchoan until dark."

Stephen glanced at his watch. "We'll be there long before that at this rate."

Ryan's answering smile was full of mischief. "Any suggestions for how to pass the time while we wait? Bearing in mind you owe me one hell of an apology."

Towards dusk, they began to be passed, intermittently, by traffic.

"Out of the otherworld then," commented Ryan, as the first car passed them. Half an hour later they managed to hitch a lift to the hotel.

"What do we do now?" asked Stephen, as they stood in the driveway.

"Well, they're not going to disbelieve our story once they see us," said Ryan. "So I guess we just march in."

"Landrover and trailer are here," said Stephen walking over to the vehicles. "We could just take them. It would save a lot of explanation."

"You know how to hot-wire a landrover?"

"No, but I bet you do."

"There'll be no need for that, I hope," said a voice.

They both turned round in surprise to find Lester walking from the hotel.

"I saw you from my room," he said. "I'm taking your presence to mean that Cutter's successfully captured the beast."

"You don't seem particularly surprised to see us," challenged Stephen.

"No, I don't, do I? Do you want to drive?" He held out the key.

Scowling, Stephen took it from him, and the three of them climbed into the cabin.

"You're coming with us then?" Stephen said.

"Yes. You have a problem with that?"

"Just curious that's all."

"All in good time, Mr Hart, all in good time."

Lester glanced at Ryan. "I don't suppose you are armed are you?" he asked.

"I left an automatic back at the lighthouse, sir. I've a hand gun with me."

"Pass it over."

Ryan frowned and exchanged a glance with Stephen who shrugged. Ryan handed over the gun.

On the white cloth she had spread on the ground, Claudia had laid out food. Cold meats and fruit with loaves of bread. Nick looked up to find Yamin staring at him intently.

"What happens to me if I eat this?" he asked Claudia.

"You remain in the otherworld. Eating fairy food makes you part fae yourself."

"I remain with you?"

Claudia looked at him. "Yes". Her face was blank. For the first time since she had arrived she wasn't smiling into his eyes.

Nick picked up an apple and contemplated it.

"What happens to me?" asked Yamin, in a small voice.

Claudia looked across at her. "I think you would unhappen like I did."

Nick turned the piece of fruit over in his hand and then placed it back on the cloth. His head bowed. He felt Claudia's hand on his hair and her lips pressed against his forehead. They stayed like that for some time.

"As if I'd have let *you* choose," Yamin eventually said, huffily.

Nick couldn't help smiling, "No, I don't suppose you would have done." Yamin, he suspected, was quite capable of knocking him out then tying him up. Claudia, he guessed, was in some way disallowed from interfering with the outcome.

"It is better this way," Claudia said. "Everyone is supposed to make their own choice." She tossed an apple to Yamin. "How about you?" and her eyes danced with laughter.

"She's not..." began Nick.

"Everyone gets their own choice remember," said Yamin and made to bite the apple as Nick started to his feet.

"Naah!" she said, laughing at him. "What would I want to stay here for? Sometimes, Dad, you are a right prat."

"Any you?" asked Nick, looking at Claudia. "Do you get a say in this?"

She shook her head. "I'm part fae already. That can't be changed." She touched his hand. "For the record though, I think you made the right choice. The price was too high and even *I'm* not sure I'm really Claudia."

"Would that have made a difference?" asked Yamin.

"Who knows, but I don't want a life founded on sacrifice and wishful thinking."

An hour after dark Lester, Stephen and Ryan turned up with the landrover and trailer. Lester looked appraisingly at Claudia.

"You must be Miss Brown."

"Yes."

He nodded. "Jolly good!"

"Don't tell me you were expecting her as well!" said Stephen.

"I considered it a distinct possibility. Would that be your bow by any chance?" He nodded to where her weapons lay discarded on the picnic cloth amidst the uneaten food.

Claudia nodded, "Yes, sir."

"I couldn't appropriate them could I?"

"Of course."

Lester looked distinctly satisfied.

He glanced at the uneaten food and then up at Nick. "I've brought sandwiches," he said, fishing two rather limp-looking packets out of his pockets.

It took all six of them to load the still frozen Nuckelavee onto the trailer and strap it down. They then crammed into the landrover with Ryan driving, and headed for Orm Saig Beg.

As they travelled, Nick became aware of forms and figures emerging from the darkness to surround them: riders on horse-back, pale figures of knights in armour riding alongside the landrover. The sounds of children's laughter echoed in the darkness and the smell of roses drifted on the cold air. At last they halted and the six of them got out of the vehicle. Lester was still holding Claudia's bow arrow. He now looked at Yamin.

"I couldn't trouble you for your knife, could I?" he asked.

She raised her eyebrows but handed it over without comment.

Before them stood an anomaly, sparkling in the night. Around it and over it had been built an arch, carvings of Celtic knotwork showing through climbing clematis and honeysuckle.

Before the gateway stood a tall woman, taller Stephen, and thin as a willow. She wore a heavy brocade gown in blues and greens depicting mythical beasts that pranced and danced as she moved. On her head was a golden circlet. Her skin was dark as midnight and smooth as silk. Her face was full of regal beauty, yet its lines were sharp and pointed. Her eyes were large, dark and expressionless. Black hair, glinting with silver like starlight, fell in a heavy braid over one shoulder. About her and about the landrover was arrayed a delegation of knights, interspersed with deer and unicorns. Children in bare feet, with garlands of flowers in their hair played between the legs of the host.

"Your majesty," Lester stepped forward and bowed.

"You are the representative of the Court of Albion?" she asked.

"I am."

"And the Champion of Albion?"

"Professor Cutter." He gestured at Nick to step forward also.

She moved forward, erect and formal until she stood before Nick, gazing at him thoughtfully. She then looked beyond him to the others.

"And these are the champions who came to your aid?"

"Yes, your majesty," said Nick.

"Some of them must return with me, I see."

Nick looked round then to see that Claudia, Stephen and Ryan all glowed palely in the darkness like the court of the faery queen. She smiled at him. "And

you have successfully trapped the Nuckelavee." She looked at Lester. "They have done well. It seems we shall have a lean decade."

Several of her court moved forward and began unloading the Nuckelavee from the flat-bed.

"More than that," said Lester. He took out Ryan's hand gun and handed it to one of the retainers. "From someone who no longer is." He handed Yamin's knife to another. "From someone who is yet to be." Finally he gave Claudia's bow to a third. "From someone who has never been." He turned to face the Queen.

Her expression clouded with fury. "The deal is complete!"

"The deal is complete," said Lester. "Albion is freed."

The Queen rounded on Nick. "And you were not warned of this? You were not told who to summon to your aid?"

Nick shook his head. "I haven't been told anything. I still don't know what's going on."

She laughed, mirthless like shards of ice.

"The deal is complete," she said. "I will not forget who defeated us."

Her gaze turned back to Claudia, Stephen and Ryan. "However, I will not return entirely empty-handed."

"Must we return with you?" asked Ryan.

Her head tilted to one side almost coquettishly. "You can not remain in the human world. You may return to the void, if you so wish, and there are other realms that might have you. However, our two worlds are linked. I have need of knights who are experienced in fighting the creatures that come through time's gateways. They open ever more often in my realm as they do in yours. Will you become a knight of Queen Mab?"

Ryan glanced over at Stephen, who shrugged then nodded. The Faery Queen turned her gaze on Claudia, "And you? Will you join my court?"

"I'm no hunter," said Claudia.

"No, but you are part fae, more so than they are. You will find you understand our thoughts and ways and you can guide them."

Claudia's mouth twitched in a smile, "I become the line manager of Queen Mab?"

The Queen laughed again, this time a merry childish laugh like small bells ringing.

"I name you Dara among our kind for your wisdom and compassion. The oak is your symbol."

Claudia curtseyed and the Queen laid a hand on her head. Mab smiled, then turned and walked back through the anomaly. Where her skirts brushed the ground,

jasmine and moon flower blossomed filling the night with their scent. Six knights followed her leading the Nuckelavee. Horses were brought forward to Stephen, Ryan and Claudia.

Stephen paused before mounting, holding out his hand to Nick. "Farewell Cutter," he said.

Nick grasped his hand, "Farewell," he said and then pulled Stephen forward into an embrace. "I wish you hadn't died."

"You me both," said Stephen with a smile, "but I'll be all right with Ryan and this Claudia-Dara, I think."

"It's not the same though."

Stephen shook his head. "Everything changes. First thing you taught me."

He stepped aside and Nick found himself shaking hands with Ryan, uncertain how to treat this man he hardly knew and who he had managed to get killed.

"Look after them," he said, awkwardly.

"Don't worry, I will," said Ryan and Nick believed him.

Nick kissed Claudia once more before helping her onto her horse. She rested one hand against his face. "Don't obsess over me too much," she whispered with a smile. "I never existed you know."

"I know," he whispered back.

Then they too were gone through the gateway. The anomaly pulsed once and then winked out, collapsing in on itself. The glowing light that had surrounded them vanished as if it had been switched off and they stood on the dark road, the houses of Kilchoan just visible in the moonlight.

Lester glanced at Yamin. "Time to get you home, young lady."

"So are you going to tell me what that was all about?" asked Nick as they drove to the turning circle.

"An old bargain. A tribute of ten children a year to the court of the fae in decades where the Nuckelavee is captured and twenty in decades when it is not."

Nick looked at Lester in the gloom. "How old a bargain?"

Lester shook his head. "Before records began. We only had the legend. If the champion was aided by a companion who was yet to be, a companion who no longer was and a companion who had never been and tokens of this were presented to the Queen then the tribute ceased. We knew the dead could be summoned, that happened several times before. But until now we never had a chance at someone who never was."

"You knew about Claudia!"

"You've not been entirely discreet about it, Cutter, and there was the little matter of the conversation Helen had with Miss Lewis."

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

"By the terms of the contract the champion must not be told the nature of his mission nor its import. It might have been safe to tell you once the thing was caught but I couldn't see it would hurt to wait until everything was safely resolved, especially since the precise terms were not necessarily clear."

"Damn you, Lester, you had no right to use me nor Yamin in this way."

"Ten children a year, Cutter, for more than a thousand years. Frankly I can live with your disapproval."

"He's right Dad," said Yamin, suddenly. She'd been silent throughout the encounter with Queen Mab, but now she bounced in her seat, self-confidence apparently returned. "We done good!"

Lester brought the landrover to an abrupt halt where he had parked his car the previous morning. It took them a half hour to walk to the anomaly, using torches from the landrover, while Yamin chattered away, wanting to discuss everything that had happened.

"Go on, admit it, I was right," said Lester once she was gone and silence had fallen.

"You have your moments."

Nick found himself smiling in the darkness as they walked, together, back towards the ruined croft, the road, and the welcoming comfort of the hotel.

6.4 Follow Up Drabble: Creepy Crawlies

Written for a primeval100 challenge

As her horse crested the rise, Claudia could see the anomaly. She spurred it to a gallop, Stephen and Ryan close behind her. Dark smoke billowed up, enveloping them. Claudia clutched Mab's charm at her throat.

"Clouds of Hecate! yield!"

The darkness parted, allowing them a pathway.

Words floated out from beyond the gate.

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,

Claudia reigned up sharply.

"What is it?" asked Ryan.

"I think this is one intervention we should allow to run its course."

6.5 Follow Up Drabble 2: Food of the Faires

A response to episode 3.03

Nick coughed as smoke caught in his lungs and winced at the sight of blood in his palm. That couldn't be good. He struggled to sit. He wouldn't be going any further.

Amid the acrid smells there was a faint hint of Jasmine and Honeysuckle. He must be getting delirious. The sound of distant music hung in the air. The corridor shimmered and glowed as if an anomaly lay beyond the smoke.

Something rolled along the floor, stopping just by his hand. It was an apple. When he lifted it close, it smelled of oak moss, wisdom, compassion and Claudia.

Chapter 7

Three Things Ziya David does when told she has a Day to Live

A NCIS ficlet

The first thing Ziya David did was break out of the hospital. The Doctor was muttering about infection risks but it was pretty clear in her mind that Carter had never managed to make the virus infectious, you pretty much had to be injected with the thing.

Then she went to find Carter. They all knew he'd done it but it was clear to her that it was her word against his which wouldn't be worth much once she was dead. If she didn't do something now more people would die before anything could be pinned on him. By the time she'd tracked him down and placed a bullet in his head she didn't have much time left.

She sat cross-legged on the floor of his apartment and phoned her father. He could multi-task pretty well so even as they spoke she was sure the Doctors and Gibbs and, because her father was a realist, Ducky were on their way.

Since there wasn't much time she said "Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad," to him, sat in his office, thousands of miles away, talking to her thanks to a satellite.

When they found her body he was still saying "Ani Adonai Eloheikhem" with his little girl who could no longer say the words herself.

Chapter 8

Rain and Blessing

A Primeval Drabble followed by a Fixit

8.1 Rain

Connor stood outside Ryan's flat in the rain and cursed. This was the third time it had happened this week. He'd be thinking of something interesting and his stupid feet would walk about automatically until he was stopped short by the For Sale sign, like a slap in the face. He turned round and set off back to the flat he shared with Abby.

He got home, half an hour later, soaking wet and miserable. She was waiting.

"You went the wrong way again, didn't you?" she asked and he nodded mutely while she held him close in her arms.

8.2 Blessing

Abby took to walking him home, just until his feet learned the new route. With a bit of prodding, and a lot of grumbling about Connor's exes managing her life, she made enthusiastic friends with Captain Becker and then allowed nature to run its course.

Then one day, while she was doing the dishes, Becker turned up in the door of the kitchen.

"I'll always be second best, won't I?" he said.

"It's not like that," she began but he was already gone, his boots clattering down the stairs.

She listened to the front door slam and then turned back to the sink, unsurprised to find Ryan sitting on the draining board.

"You'll have to talk to Connor," he said.

Abby grunted and dumped a dish somewhere in the region of his thigh holster. He might be incorporeal but she wished he wouldn't actually sit on top of what she was doing. It was like owning a large, insubstantial cat.

"You talk to him," she said. "I've talked to him lots and he won't listen to me."

Ryan looked down at his own ghostly form, "I think I might confuse the issue."

Abby dumped the scrubbing brush in the sink and pointed firmly at the door. "*You* talk to him. He's your bloody ex-boyfriend."

Meekly Ryan got down and walked for the door. "This is not a good idea," he said.

"Out!"

He went through the door without opening it. Abby sighed and returned to the washing up. A strangled shriek from upstairs told her that Ryan was doing as he was told. She allowed herself a small smile, all Connor really needed was Ryan's blessing to get on with his life.

Chapter 9

I Looted Caiger Mall and All I Got was this Lousy T-Shirt

An Urband Dead Short Story

This week I took a walk to the mall.

Most of the cars in Malton went up in smoke during the rioting. I've never been sure why, maybe people felt the flames would somehow keep the undead at bay. It must be said, I wasn't really paying attention at the time. There are rumours of working vehicles here and there and it's not like the supply drops don't keep us in fuel, but I didn't have access to one, so I had to get to the mall on foot.

Most people keep off the streets but I prefer to move at ground level. Zombies aren't really so dangerous as long as you keep out in the open and are reasonably quick on your feet. Most of the time they're not that alert and hardly notice you. At any rate, a good runner, and believe me, these days I'm a *good* runner, can keep ahead of even the fastest of them. The buildings, on the other hand, have been barricaded and broken into and ransacked so many times that they are veritable death traps. At least on the street I don't have to continually watch my footing for loose planks.

Even at ground level, though, walking to the mall took the better part of a day.

My instructions were simple. Go to the mall. Check its status. Report back.

From the outside it looked in pretty good shape. Caiger mall is one of those horrendous concrete structures they built in the late fifties and sixties. If it had been built recently it would have been wall to wall glass and steel and about as much use as a fortress as a chocolate fireguard. As it was, its only vulnerable place was the dozen or so glass doors across the four entrances. The glass was long gone, of course, but the doorways had been boarded up and the barricades

were constantly manned. Lights blazed from the office windows high up in the mall's concrete sides. That meant it was currently held by humans.

The problem with the barricades, of course, is that they are pretty much an impossibility to get past. The easiest way into Caiger - if you are quick and nimble on your feet - is through the rooftop door.

The Hearne building is a big office block next to Caiger. Its doors hung loose on their hinges and it was dark inside. It was late afternoon when I got there. So there was some light to see by as I made my way up the stairs, enough to spot any zombies lurking in the empty rooms. I got out onto the roof with light to spare for the jump across to Caiger. I'm not keen on free running, but it's a skill that keeps you alive in Malton better than almost anything else. I checked the straps on my backpack to make sure it wouldn't bounce around too much as I ran, and then went for it. The gap between the two buildings is a metre or so wide, across a narrow alleyway. You wouldn't have had me even contemplating a jump like that four years ago. However, the worst that can happen is that you fall to the street below.

As usual the roof door was open. One day the zombies will learn to jump and then we'll be in trouble. I checked my knife before I went down. Caiger is pretty safe. It's too well known, a constant way point for survivors, for it to become too insular. You hear of malls down in the south of the city that have become completely closed communities, populated by petty dictators and cults of various descriptions. Even so, it never hurts to be careful. Most people carry guns but I gave up on them a few months ago. They're too bulky for the kind of work I do and carrying ammunition is a pain. At least a knife always works.

The ground and first floor plazas of the mall are where the action takes place at Caiger. There are hundreds of make-shift stalls, mostly selling stuff from the supply crates the authorities regularly drop on Malton. You can also find crazies who think there's a market for luxury items - jewellery made out of shot-gun shells, that kind of thing - and, of course, vendors of food.

The smell of freshly cooked meat wafted up the stairs as I came down and made my stomach rumble. The supply crates usually contain tinned food but the zombie virus never seemed to affect the animals of the city so there is hunting to be had, if you have the time. I've even heard that in some of the posh leafy suburbs there are small garden communities growing vegetables and keeping chickens, though I've no idea how you could defend them long-term against the zombies and the gangs. However it works, there is always fresh food in Caiger and after three months on tinned baked beans, heated if I was lucky, I was looking forward to blowing some scavenged supplies on the good stuff.

I'd got a lot of bandages and anti-virus in my backpack and, more importantly, several batches of the revivification serum Dixie squad had been cooking up for the past week in a lab down in Owsleybank. Caiger is built right next to its own Necrotech lab but that doesn't stop the stuff being valuable.

Half an hour later I was stuffed full of roast pigeon and chips.

Technically my job was now done. The place looked to be in good shape. There were plenty of people here and the barricades were well-manned. If the DHPD wanted to stop by for a few days to resupply and get some R&R, now would be as good a time as any. However, since it was late, my plan was to stay the night, sleeping in one of the abandoned offices on the upper floors and then head back the next day. That meant I had the evening free for some window shopping and any entertainment that was going.

That was when one of the little boutique shops caught my eye. Once upon a time it had been a Tie Rack or a Sock Shop, now a large supply crate had been pulled across the entrance and a pile of plain but functional clothing piled on top. They do drop clothes into Malton from time to time but it's not as common as the basic supplies: food, medicine, the chemicals needed for the serum, guns and ammunition. My own clothing was a mess and I knew it. Nearly every item was blood-stained and most of it had been worn for too long.

This was a good drop. Most of the stuff was new, end of factory line, I'd guess: warm winter coats, plain jeans and shirts, cheap trainers. I was considering bargaining for a swap: a complete new outfit for maybe some first aid supplies when I spotted a whole wealth of bizarreness in the middle of all the sensible work clothes.

"What's this?" I asked, picking up a flimsy spangly top. It was black with a starburst sewn into it in silver thread.

The guy with the crate shrugged. His name was Karl or Kramer or something. "Women's Institute," he said. "They sent letters too." He gestured to a pile of paper on the side of the crate.

I had a look through one of the letters. It was pretty sappy stuff. "We're all terribly concerned, blah, blah, blah, the scientists are working on a cure, blah, blah, blah, the quarantine should be lifted soon, blah, blah, blah, here's some little things to cheer you up."

"You want to try that top on?" asked the man.

He was a weaselly scrap of a guy who had that look of a peeping tom about him, so it was a bit of a toss-up. After all what did I need a spangly top for? Not exactly my first priority in a zombie apocalypse. On the other hand, every once in a while, I get tired of being just another one of the guys, you know?

"There's a back room," says Karl or Kramer. "You can change in there."

That more or less decided me. I grabbed the top, a T-shirt, pair of jeans and a decent looking jacket and took them into the back room. Once there I rammed one of my socks into the keyhole and jammed a chair under the door handle. I figured that would prevent weasel guy "accidentally" walking in on me while I changed.

I tried the normal clothing on first, eyeing up the ridiculous spangly top and thinking of all the good reasons not to swap hard-won supplies for it. Then I tried it on. It fitted like a dream. It was a bit worn in places, obviously the WI had done a charity collection, but I wasn't complaining. It was stretchy and figure-hugging. There was no mirror but I'd slewed off a lot of excess weight in the last few years. My guess was that it was showing off my figure to its best advantage. So I was decided. I'd take the lot. I sorted through my old clothes, dumped anything salvageable into my back pack and left the rest on the floor of the back room. Then I went out to haggle with Karl, or Kramer, or whatever his name was.

"It suits you," he said and ogled at me. I zipped up the jacket to hide the top. The point was to look good, not available.

"What do you want for the clothes?" I asked.

"Have them as a gift," he said. "A pretty lady like you should have pretty clothes."

God give me strength!

"Nope," I said. "I'm happier to pay. I've got medical supplies."

"Have dinner with me," he persisted. "Everyone is so inhospitable these days and you shouldn't be alone around here."

Big warning signs were flashing by this point. "I'll give you two rolls of bandages, 500 ibuprofen, two shots of morphine and a dose of anti-virus," I offered, pulling the supplies out and dumping them on the crate.

It was then that the call "Cades" went up from the ground floor.

You don't hesitate when you hear a call like that, especially somewhere like Caiger which always has more than its fair share of the undead outside. So I'd caught up my pack and was halfway out of the door when Karl or Kramer or whoever he was caught my arm.

"This way!" he said, pulling me back into the shop.

"You've got your fucking payment," I shouted, gesturing at the medical supplies. "They need people on the barricades."

He shook his head. "Safer back here," and he continued to drag me backwards.

Outside the mall rats were swarming to the defences. We didn't have time for this!

I'm stronger than I look. Three years in a quarantined Malton, and two or so working with what's left of its police force teaches you a thing or two. I twisted free from his grasp, elbowed him in the ribs for good measure, pulled my rucksack on and turned my back on him.

That was when something hit me from behind.

Never underestimate even small, cowardly, weaselly guys. Thank god Forky, who trained me, wasn't there to see it. Mind you Forky has been missing for most of a year and counting.

I woke up to the nausea and sickness that accompanies a head injury. It didn't take me long to work out I'd been tied up. It seemed like Karl, or Kramer, or whoever, had rigged up his own private little prison somewhere. He had knives and guns everywhere, mind you everyone has knives and guns everywhere in Malton, so that's hardly news. Most people clean them, though, and are less interested in the chains and meathooks. At least I only had rope around my wrists. I wasn't going to be getting them off in my current state but it gave me options.

"Come round, I see." Karl, or Kramer, was perched on a chair facing me, cradling a shotgun. "What a pretty little bird I've caught this time," and he stroked my face.

"Help!" I shouted. I'm not keen on being a damsel in distress but this was Caiger mall, for crying out loud. The place positively swarms with people. "Help!"

I earned a sound slap for my pains. "We're in the basements," he said. "No one can hear you."

I eyed my surroundings. It was a small enclosed space but the walls looked solid and made of concrete. There were no sounds of running feet.

I'd got too used to working with a squad. When you move in a group, you don't get attacked by lone weirdos. Or at least, if you do, they just want to kill you and be done with it. They don't tie you up in basements and call you a pretty little bird. It's easy to forget that, at five foot nothing, I look like something of an easy target.

"Get lost," I said. I tried to snarl, but frankly I was too sick and giddy.

He tutted at me. "Play nice, and I might give you a reward." His hand trailed down my face and neck to the top of the zip on my jacket. Slowly he pulled it open. "But if you're a bad little girl," and he hit me again, "then you'll have to be punished."

"I'm a member of the DHPD," I tried. "You just assaulted an officer. You let me go and I won't file charges."

He laughed outright at that. "You're going to have to do better than that, little girl. What would the DHPD want with a slip of a thing like you? Besides the

DHPD are all washed up these days. The Dead whupped them good and proper, so I hear tell."

I wouldn't have said the Dead whupped us exactly, but it's difficult to disguise the fact that these days the Dunell Hills Police Department can operate out of almost any Malton suburb *except* Dunell Hills itself.

He was standing very close now. One hand had slipped under the open jacket and was fumbling around in an amateurish fashion.

I decided to change tack. He hadn't tied my feet so I kneed him in the groin.

That bought me a good ten minutes to assess the situation while he lay on the ground and cursed me. Bottom line? In Malton there really are fates worse than death.

"So what's all this," I asked when I judged he was capable of paying attention. "Can't get a date with a girl without tying her up first?"

The shotgun twitched in his hands. His breathing was still ragged and his eyes watering, but he'd hauled himself up into a sitting position and held the shotgun across his lap.

"Bitch!" he hissed.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "All the girls round here know you can't get it up, do they?"

His fingers were twitching around the trigger of the shot-gun. "Be quiet!" he shouted.

So I continued. I'll spare you the details but I had just reached the point where I was describing, with a certain amount of graphic detail, his mother's activities with various DHPD Officers of my aquaintance when he shot me... through the heart... the bloody idiot.

It ruined the spangly top, as well.

It's difficult to describe what being a zombie feels like. Mostly reason gets dialled right down and want gets dialled right up. It's worse if you don't have any brains to speak of. It takes the brain a while to regenerate. If you've been shot through the head, awareness returns only slowly and for a while you are just trapped in a sea of dull sensation: pale lights and muted sounds. That's why you should always shoot someone through the head in Malton. It was the first thing Forky drummed into me. Shooting them through the heart just means they'll be up again sooner and probably thinking about as clearly as they're going to be.

Not only had the idiot shot me through the heart but he was also still there when I came round and hadn't even had the sense to dump my body out of the nearest window.

I reckon I must have just broken the ropes he'd tied me up with. I don't recall. Ropes and restraints aren't the sort of thing you really notice much as a zombie. At any rate, I got up and went for him, at which point he shot me through the heart, again, the daft twat and then I beat him about the head with his shotgun until he stopped moving.

The thing about eating someone's brains is it's not about taste or not one that's on your tongue or in your throat. It's a taste that's in your mind somewhere. It's as if you steal a bit of their soul and a flash of them, their personality, their pleasures and their pains, runs through you. When you're functionally dead, your heart no longer pumping, your brain operating at the speed of a snail then that experience is something else entirely. It's like a splash of light in the darkness, the most intense set of feelings you ever had dropped into a nightmare of dulled perceptions. It's a sensation you never quite lose the taste for.

All that said. Psycho weasel brains? Yeurch!

Describing my thought processes at the time is hard but they went something like:

Nasty Man! Stop! Stop! Mmmm.... Brains! Bad! Bad Man! Bad Man Brains! Bad! Bad Man Brains Bad! Bad Brains!

Believe me that's high functioning cognition for a zombie. So, I resisted the temptation to eat psycho weasel brains and headed out for the mall concourse.

Nice Smell! Nice Brains! Mmmmm.... Yummy!

I grabbed my backpack on the way out. The urge to hang onto your stuff is pretty primal.

Of course, I got spotted straight away. Someone sensibly put a bullet through my head and the next thing I knew I was lying in the middle of the road outside. I'd been shot through the head so for a while I just lay on my back and stared at the pretty lights in the sky while my brain got what passed for its zombie act together. Once I got up my thought processes just cycled for a fair while.

Outside! No Brains! Not Fair! Outside! No Brains! Not Fair!

But eventually I got over the disappointment and headed for Salopia Row. Salopia's the street that runs in front of Caiger mall's Necrotech laboratory. If you hang around there long enough someone will step out and revive you. That fact is so universally known that even zombie thought processes can work out where to go. After that it's just a matter of resisting the smell of all the nice brains inside Caiger next door and trying not to eat anyone who's carrying a syringe.

I think I must have dozed off. Zombies tend to do that if they stand around doing nothing long enough.

I woke up face down on the tarmac once more. Sunlight was filtering over the

horizon so I'd obviously dozed away the night. Someone must have filled me full of revivification serum while I was dozing for my cognitive functions were back up to speed. Technically, therefore, I was alive once more. Some days I think being alive in Malton is just another form of undeath. We're all infected. That's why they've quarantined us in and left us to fight it out amongst ourselves.

So, I was alive. Of course, I was lying face-down in the street in the middle of a crowd of zombies, which is one of the reasons why it's handy to be fleet of foot in this town.

Mostly, in fact, zombies will ignore anything that looks dead. Brains that have been dead for even a short space of time taste really, really bad, though I don't suppose you really want to know how I came to find that out. The zombies who lurk around Salopia are generally pretty harmless. They're mostly waiting for a revive. But occasionally you get rotters in their midst. Zombies who have no desire to ever live again but know Salopia's a good place to stand around and lure out the living. Even well-intentioned zombies occasionally crack and take a bite out of someone. So I lay on the ground, eyes just barely open, and took a good look around, trying to move as little as possible.

There were only a couple of zeds in the street and they had the look of dozing zombies if ever I saw them. Not that I hung around once I made my move. I got to my feet and sprinted off down the street, away from the mall and back towards Owsleybank.

Halfway there I stopped off in a ruined home and replaced the remains of my spangly top with the new T-Shirt. I made an attempt to clean up the new jacket too. Some of weasel guy's brains had ended up on it during all the excitement with the shotgun.

Dr Snow, my squad leader, looked up as I climbed in through the window of our Necrotech lab.

"How was Caiger?" he asked.

"Up and running," I reported, "with the lights on. Not too many zombies waiting at Salopia."

His eyes drifted over my new blood-stained jacket and trousers.

"Trouble?" he asked.

Technically Karl or Kramer or whatever his name was had assaulted an officer. That's grounds for swearing out a warrant. I could have sent Delta Squad after him to collect. It sounds laughable but the remnants of due process are pretty much all we have left. On the other hand I had already killed him once, even if I hadn't read him his rights first. Then there was the small matter of admitting that I'd let a civilian get the drop on me and ended up tied to a chair.

So I settled for shaking my head and saying, “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

Chapter 10

Merry Go Round

A Primeval Short Story

Betrayal of Trust

I remember watching him die; my beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed research assistant. So ridiculously, selflessly heroic. Some days I wonder if he dashed back into that chamber to rescue Nick because he loved him, or if he dashed in there to save Nick for me.

Sometimes I think I should have been less open, mentioned Nick less often. I remember riding him languidly in the shadow of Nick's desk one hot summer's evening, sweat glistening on our bodies. I was consumed by his eyes, by his smell, by the feel of him within me. Was he consumed by the photo of Nick and I, together, that must have gazed disapprovingly over the scene?

No matter; some things are easily changed. I just take a different turn around the loop. I remembered him telling me how he'd nearly joined the army. I gave a few nudges here and there, making sure that the brainy girlfriend he'd followed to Oxford in the first iteration dumped him just as the entrance application arrived in the second. He joined the army and there was a different research assistant to screw under Nick's desk. He was prettier but he didn't consume me and I didn't mourn when he died in Hilary's place.

The next time I saw him die it was in jaws of a beast from the future. Some portent of things to come, winding its way back through the anomalies to the Permian era. That was careless of me. I'd trusted to his instincts and quick thinking, but the creature was swifter still, with instincts honed by the competition in some

far future environment.

That death was harder to change. In the end I could only delay his posting to the anomaly team, not prevent it altogether. But I brought him back. Brought him back, tracked him down, concealed my identity; hot kisses stolen in frantic moments when we were both in the same town and the same century.

I can bring Nick back too. It was a typical Nicholas Cutter move really. Never acknowledge a viewpoint other than your own; never back down; never give anything away; never change your mind; never admit you were wrong. In the next iteration I won't make the same mistakes.

That's not what I shall say to my gallant handsome captain though. Too hard to explain; too likely to raise questions, to call my feelings into doubt. I meant to come here alone, to do what needed to be done. But moments ago I looked west and there he was, unmistakable under the harsh sun. For someone who didn't love him, perhaps he would be an anonymous figure, but I know that walk and the way he turns his head, almost as well as I know the kiss curl, and the small noises he makes as I touch him, and tease him, and bring him to climax.

And yes I did say love. It's foolish to deny an emotion. Until you acknowledge it, you can never master it.

He'll tell me why he's here soon enough, though I have no doubt it is to do with the minx at his side. Sarah Page, I would guess. Maybe Jenny betrayed me. I didn't know she had it in her. I'm busy hunting the predator children, clearing up the mess. I've turned my back on the approaching figures. They'll tell me why they're here soon enough and Captain Becker will protect me from any skullduggery Jenny's dusky mistress has in store for me.

It's then that I hear a shot.

If You Believe in Love at First Sight, You Never Stop Looking

I'm not sure exactly when I first heard the name Claudia. It must have been in those first few days at the ARC, talking to Jenny; the little conversations, back and forth, getting to know each other, checking out that we both liked each other *that* way.

Somewhere in all that cautious, flirtatious feeling of our way she must have mentioned Claudia. The woman who might have been. The woman that Nicholas Cutter loved.

I liked Jenny. I mean I *really* liked Jenny. She was clever and funny and she had a sense of sly mischief underneath all that professionalism and drive that kept me endlessly alert and interested. But, you know, when I first met her all I saw was this bossy woman surrounded by soldiers. My first impression was of someone a bit officious, a civil servant who was going to throw their weight around because they could. I got to know the real Jenny later. It wasn't love at first sight. There was no instant connection.

But Claudia? Sometimes I discussed Claudia with Jenny because Jenny was naturally curious about this strange other self. She had gathered from hints dropped by Nick that Claudia hadn't possessed that off-putting and cold exterior. Once, Nick said that Claudia had kissed him before she ever properly spoke to him, but Jenny had never managed to get him to elaborate that chance remark. I think Claudia made more sense to me than she did to Jenny. All that fun and mischief that was my Jenny, without that icy professional face, without all those barriers erected to keep the world away. I knew, I just knew, that if I'd met Claudia, the moment I saw her, I would have known. I would not have had to learn her the way I learned Jenny.

I liked Jenny, sure, but it wasn't love.

If anything, love stumbled *because* of elusive will 'o the wisp Claudia. Jenny was never really all there for me. She was never really all there for anyone. Even when her head was thrown back, hair streaming across the pillow in the throes of passion, somewhere, deep inside, you knew she was worrying that she wasn't completely real.

Sometimes I dreamed of Claudia; wild and passionate, free from the shackles that bind Jenny.

And we always came back to Nick Cutter. Jenny had thought maybe he was warming to her, just a little, before he died. She said that to me just once, before ever our lips met, but I nursed that thought. If Cutter had lived there would have been no us, but Jenny would have been happier and more complete.

As soon as I saw the map revealed inside the artefact I knew why Helen wanted it and what she would do. Lester had told me, in a short official briefing when I joined the project that everything about Helen was about control. They'd had her profiled apparently. She'd killed Cutter and it hadn't fixed the time lines, so obviously she would change that and try again. I had her notebooks. I had my own sketches of Cutter's map. I had a few notes from the artefact. I had enough.

When the artefact vanished I knew Helen had it, even though I couldn't fathom how she'd got it. I gathered from her notes that Helen had made a few tweaks before, been round a few "iterations" as she termed them. Jenny was Claudia and

Claudia was Jenny again. Becker died and then didn't and then died again. If Becker could be saved then, obviously, Cutter could be, too. It was almost a game for Helen; a fairground ride.

I considered letting her get on with it. Jenny would be happier with Cutter alive; closing my eyes and turning away seemed like a terribly good option. But, of course, in that iteration there would never have been Jenny and me. There would have been no languid mornings drinking tea on my tiny balcony, nor dusky evenings drinking wine in front of her ridiculous fireplace. There would have been no memories of smooth skin, nor gentle kisses down my spine. Although I wasn't *in* love, I didn't want to lose those memories. That meant I had to be through the anomaly with Helen. What was more, if Cutter and Jenny were brought together and happy, my gift to her, then Helen would never allow it, the iteration would get written over. After all, wasn't that why we had Jenny in the first place? No, I had to go through the anomaly with Helen, let her make her change and then stop her.

I even thought I knew where she was going. That was guesswork. I based it mainly on the notes that told me which anomalies would be opening soon and an awareness of her obsession with one particular moment in the Permian era. One of the places where one of the versions of Captain Hilary Becker had died in one of those iterations of hers. And that pretty much told me who I should take with me: Captain Hilary Becker, not so much a stranger to Helen as he often made out. That much was clear as day from the notes in her little book.

I'm not stupid. I knew that I couldn't stop Helen on my own. I was going to need someone to go with me and help me bring her back and the best candidate seemed to be Becker. I couldn't go to Lester and demand troops. I couldn't think of any reason why they should take me through the anomaly with them. So I went to Becker, I spun him a line about how Lester had forbidden me to check the anomaly out, but that I was sure Helen was there and that she was trying to resurrect Cutter. I didn't tell him until the last minute so there was no time for him to think about checking out my story and I said I was going to go anyway and he could either come with me or take responsibility for whatever became of me all alone in the Permian.

Helen would be allowed to bring back Cutter, my gift to Jenny, for good times and no regrets and then she would be stopped. That was the plan. I hadn't counted on the extent of Becker's own hurt and jealously.

And when we returned through the anomaly? Well Cutter was alive and well but Jenny had gone.

Claudia is, indeed, wild and passionate and gentle and soft in ways that Jenny always tried to hide. She tells me it was love at first sight.

I miss Jenny.

There is only one real sin, and that is to persuade oneself that the second-best is anything but the second-best.

Doris Lessing

Since I joined the ARC I've been cursed with second best. I'm second best for Cutter, chasing his elusive Claudia and I'm second best for Sarah, chasing some romantic ideal. It is not a situation I handle well. I was best at school. I was best at university. I'm one of the best PR people around. I dumped my fiancé because I realised he was only second best. Being second best took a bit of getting used to, especially when first place has gone to dreams and phantoms. I thought I had got used to it but in the end second best is the refuge of the second rate.

I've never been one to mope. I decided that if I was cursed to be the second best, I was going to be the best second-best there was. If I was going to be trapped in an ersatz life, I would make the best of it. I would play to the illusions other people held. That's what a PR person does, emphasises one thing, tones down another, builds an impression of the world that pleases someone. It's all an illusion. I was best at that professionally, the only difference was that now every part of my life was an illusion.

I asked myself, who was best? Nicholas Cutter was trapped chasing some phantom woman. He was intelligent and unyielding, no holds barred, no prisoners taken in the quest for truth. He fucked like he lived; intense, confident, focused. But afterwards I could see the distaste in his eyes, the realisation that he had settled for second best. I only fucked him once. I didn't want to see that look again.

Sarah, on the other hand, has his keen intellect and thirst for knowledge, but she lacks that supreme confidence. Her phantoms are less concrete and her distaste non-existent. Dark-eyed, sensuous, beautiful Sarah; lips brushing across my breasts, trailing down my body, hot passion and cool demeanour. I may not have been her perfect woman but, if I was perfectly honest with myself, she wasn't my ideal either.

He was a bastard and I was better off without him. But I withheld and in withholding I let Sarah drift away. That was stupid. I let lust over-ride good sense. I mistook second-best for best.

And then he died. In a way it was my fault. I should have spotted that the duplicate wasn't him. That might have made a difference. Claudia would have spotted it wasn't him.

I'd lost Sarah. Oh we were still together but the end was in sight and approaching with a kind of sick certainty. I wasn't... well I wasn't whatever it was she wanted. She may not have looked at me with angry distaste in her eyes but the endless grind of the second-best was wearing her down.

I was not being the best at being second-best. Being the best isn't about being content with your lot. It isn't about making-do. It's about making a difference. It's about putting things right.

And I am more than second best for Cutter and second best for Sarah. I am the second best. I am the pale imitation of someone who was best, in the correct version of the world. The more I talk to Connor. The more I think about what must have happened. The more my life appears a kind of lie. I have memories of growing up and going to university, applying for jobs, making friends. But those memories aren't real. What really happened was that someone called Claudia grew up, went to university, applied for different jobs and made different friends and then one day I appeared. I popped into existence and wiped all of that away with a fake life.

Once I realised that, my course of action was surprisingly clear.

I met Helen in a grimy little cafe off the M25. I didn't even realise such places still existed. She looked amused to see me there but Helen nearly always looks amused. It's one of the ways she manages to convey that she knows more than we do. She does, of course, but not as much as she'd like us to believe, otherwise she would reveal more and obfuscate less.

I offered her the artefact. I knew what it was for and I took some pleasure from cutting through her bullshit and saying, "It's a map." Sarah has talked of it often enough and I've seen her notes. Of course, there's no such thing as a free lunch, so I put it to Helen that I wanted to bring Nick back and let her draw her own conclusions. I then dropped that small piece of self-recrimination into the conversation, "I'm sure Claudia would have spotted the difference," and watched the idea take hold and bloom.

Helen knew which change had replaced Claudia. I had no doubt she could put that back any time.

I've always got a thrill out of spinning a line, of creating a story where the details all hang together. You could almost see the wheels turning in Helen's head as her brain leaped from my desire to bring Nick back, to sexual jealously, to her plan to both bring him back and thwart my advances at one and the same time.

Sometimes it's the really complex people who are easiest to deceive. You don't have to work so hard to get them to join the dots.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not doing this to win his heart, or make amends or whatever reason she ascribes to me with that secretive smile of hers. I'm through with being second-best. I'm putting right something that was wrong. Setting the world back to best because that's the only thing worth doing.

She'll return Claudia to the time lines and I'm sure the two of us are enough alike that Claudia will prove a match for her.

The Difference Between Love and Lust is that Love is Always Deadly

I know my duty. 'King and country' my grandfather used to say, as his brain slowly rotted away in the tight confines of an old people's home. My duty is clear. Helen has to be apprehended. Helen has to be stopped.

I remember the first time we met. It was almost as if she'd been waiting for me; almost as if she knew I was there. Laura had just dumped me, with a fucking cruel little text message "Gng out wth Simon nao. Stll frnds?" and I was consumed with a dark, angry bitterness. I was working shifts, late night at Tesco's, making some money to tide me through university. I thought "fuck it" as I read that message and I left aisle fucking 5 with 43 fucking tins of fucking chopped tomatoes still to stack, and walked out of the store. It was midnight and the carpark was empty and dark. Helen was there, somewhere, in the shadows. She must have gauged my mood as I approached because her hands were upon me almost before I registered her presence, lips hot and wanting. She rode my anger like a surfer rides a wave; one word "Nick" hanging on her lips as she came in response to my inexperienced and hungry thrusts. She left me confused, strangely comforted and wanting more.

Down the years it's always been the same. In the black moments, when body and soul are exhausted, when my anger is burning brightest, she's been there: sun-tanned body, all muscle and sinew, lean and purposeful, nothing unnecessary and nothing wasted. A mind that can look into your own and tear it apart, see deep into your soul, and put you back together again fresh and new: ruthless, determined, unstoppable. She's never lied about Nick, never dodged a question, never explained why she returned to me time and again. Something about me, perhaps, reminded her of him.

There have been quiet times too, but Helen shrivels in the peace and quiet. She

becomes a shrewish older woman, dissatisfied with her lot, chafing at the bounds of propriety. She is in her element at the heart of the storm, riding events and passions. She is a cruel mistress, but her cruelty is the cruelty of clear sight and the dagger-like sharpness of a mind that questions everything and misses nothing. You can't resent an intellect like that. You can only fight where you can and submit where you must and learn and strive to be her equal.

To arrest her would be true cruelty. It would be like caging a wild animal. I read once that some creatures will gnaw their own legs off to escape from traps. Cutter once told me of a polar bear at a zoo that rubbed its head repetitively at the glass; again and again and again, until it had rubbed a patch bald. Nothing left to do, nothing left to want, in three feet of earth with bars around it. Helen would be like that. She would tear out her heart, kill her soul, die a hundred deaths rather than remain captive. It would be kinder to kill her than to capture her.

I have no idea why Sarah told me where she was. No, that is not quite true, I have some idea. I've seen Sarah and Jenny dancing around each other and around the artefact and it would not surprise me if one or the other of them were responsible for Helen getting hold of it. I don't believe Sarah's story of a forbidden investigation. But I have no choice. Either I go with her after Helen, or Sarah will go to Lester and the whole pack of dogs will be after her.

Helen has seen me approach. I can sense the alertness in the lines of her body. It's like an electric connection, arcing between us. She doesn't just talk with her mouth, but with her hands and her hips, the thrust of her jaw and the incline of her head. She has turned her back. So fucking like her, so fucking dismissive, I have only ever been a bit on the side to her, a quick fuck. I don't consume her the way she consumes me.

And it isn't like I don't know what she's fucking doing. I'm not so fucking stupid that I can't work out why she should return to this particular place and this particular time, where Captain Ryan died. She is going to change history again and I know the exact reason why.

For her it has always been Nick.

I shoot.

Epilogue

The pain is intense. It burns. My mouth is parched and dry under the unforgiving sun. When I look back I can see the trail of blood I am leaving behind me. In an hour I have pulled myself barely ten metres.

I will survive. The sun will burn me. The predators will come and I will devour them. The wound will bleed, then scab, then heal. Only a scar will remain to remind me of the betrayal.

I will not die. This is survival of the fittest and I will survive. I will heal. I will learn. I will grow. I will return and when I do I will have my revenge on Captain Hilary Becker and Dr Sarah Page.

Chapter 11

Snowstorm

A Doctor Who/Torchwood Flashfic

When you go into a cramped tourist shop, it's shelves heaving with key rings and postcards, you'll always find snowstorms. Famous monuments, trapped in plastic domes, waiting for you to shake them and watch the snow fall.

This particular shop doesn't serve the usual kind of tourist nor does it sell the usual kind of memorabilia.

Jack was browsing when a snowstorm caught his eye. He watched two dancing figures emerge from the snow that fell as he shook it: a small blonde girl, face alight and smiling, and a tall, gangly man in a blue suit. They laughed into each other's eyes and whirled against the darkness.

"You buying then?"

Carefully Jack put the artifact, which was definitely not a snowstorm, back on the shelf.

"Not today, no."

He left the shop humming an Edith Piaf tune under his breath. Sometimes he regretted his decisions, but Ianto was waiting.

Chapter 12

Man Trap

A Primeval Short Story

"Nick? What are you doing up there?"

"Ach! Well! I can explain."

Nick went bright red. Jenny wasn't entirely surprised. She gazed up at him, suspended, as he was, about six feet from the ground in a large net.

"I'm waiting," she said, when he failed to elaborate.

"I was trying to catch an archaeopteryx."

Jenny frowned. "Why did you need a net to catch an archaeopteryx?"

"How else was I supposed to bloody well do it?"

"Abby and I just drove down to the local garden centre and stocked up on bird feed."

"It's an insectivore, Cl- Jenny! It's not going to eat seeds!"

Jenny heard the start of the Claudia and sat down firmly on a nearby stump looking up him.

"I can see that you have never been in the habit of feeding birds," she said, allowing her irritation to show. "You can get specialist bird feed for robins and other insectivores."

"Really," Nick looked genuinely surprised. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Abby'd already rounded up about half the flock before I came looking for you. She probably has them all by now."

"I'm impressed," said Nick solemnly. "Will you get me down?"

"OK, so I understand that you were trying to catch an archaeopteryx with that net, but how did you end up *in* it?"

Nick's face, having returned almost to its normal colour, went bright red again. "Well obviously, I managed to set off my own trap."

"I can see that." Jenny waited for further explanation, but none appeared to be forthcoming.

"That's it!" he said.

Jenny grinned at him from where she sat. She had every intention of making him pay for every half-formed *Claudia* that have ever passed his lips..

"You," he said, clearing taking in her expression, "are a cold hearted harridan."

Jenny pondered, quite seriously, going to fetch the rest of the team so they could all have a good laugh together.

"If you must know, I fell over," said Nick, suddenly.

"You fell over?"

"Aye. There's a knife in my kit bag. If you pass it up here, I can cut myself out."

"I think that would count as damaging government property. How did you come to fall over?"

"I was practicing."

"Practicing what?"

"Dancing."

"Dancing!" Jenny took in the large and rather ancient looking tape recorder that sat on the ground. She picked up the empty cassette tape on top of it: *Fifty Famous Waltzes*.

"Why were you practicing waltzing?"

"Annual Medics' Ball. A member of staff has to lead off the dancing."

Jenny felt the beginning of giggles start to stir at the mental image of Nick, in the middle of a national park, practicing ballroom dancing. "Don't you need a partner to waltz?"

"The departmental secretaries go every year. I thought I'd throw myself on their mercies once I was there."

"I see. Why do you have to lead off anyway?"

"The HoD has decided its one of my admin duties and *someone* assured him that, in return for no regular teaching, I would nevertheless take admin very seriously."

Jenny shrugged. "It was either that or sign you off the project and take back that research budget we gave you."

"Couldn't you have told the HoD that?"

"I did. He doesn't like prima donnas."

"I'm *not* a prima donna."

"You certainly don't look much like one at the moment."

"You are the most wonderful and perfect woman in all ways imaginable and I am an oaf and dunce. If I ever call you Claudia again you may phone the HoD and volunteer me for first year tutorials."

"That was almost an apology!" Jenny started looking through his bag for the knife.

"I most abjectly and humbly apolo–"

Nick didn't complete the sentence. Jenny hadn't bothered to hand him the knife but had simply cut the rope herself.

"Oh and yes, by the way."

He gazed up at her in confusion. "Yes, what?"

"Yes I will come to the dance with you. Thank you so much for inviting me."

Chapter 13

Proposal

A Firefly Drabble

"You're drunk," giggled Wash.

"Speak for yourself." Zoe slumped against him.

Just at this very moment, no one was out to get them. They owed no one any money and, according to Kaylee, Serenity was all ship-shape and beautiful.

Zoe had decided she was entitled to relax. She and Wash had seen the sights. He'd bought her a toy dinosaur and she'd bought him a gun. She wasn't sure when they'd ended up in the bar.

She snuggled up. "Drunk is good."

"Zoe?"

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

She was almost as surprised as he was when she said 'yes'.

Chapter 14

Nazis and Dinosaurs and Airships! Oh My!

A Primeval Short Story

Private Tanya Lacey felt as though she'd been on a long distance run. She stood gasping for breath. The air felt strange.

"Back! Back!" Lieutenant Tremayne seemed to be saying. Her voice sounded a long way off though. Everything seemed to be growing dark.

Hands grasped her from somewhere. "Don't just stand there! Move!" It was Taylor Crane, the team Science Advisor.

There was a glitter of light and suddenly she was breathing in deep, welcome breaths, full of sweet oxygen. Lacey realised she was lying on her back in the snow.

"What the hell happened there?" demanded Tremayne.

"Really early time period, I'd guess," said Crane. "Pre-Cambrian probably. Very little life, not much oxygen."

"Bugger! Why the hell doesn't someone think of these things? We should take oxygen through as standard. Don't you think so, Ma'am?" Lacey growled. It had been a bad day so far, full of frozen pipes, broken household appliances, snotty letters from the bank, whinging phone calls from an ex-boyfriend about how he had nowhere to stay for Christmas, the most horrendous drive on ungritted roads to an anomaly and now nearly getting suffocated in some godforsaken pre-historic era.

There was a pause.

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

"Fuck," said Crane. "Something's changed."

Lacey sat up. They appeared to be alone in the field. Captain Becker and the other Special Forces soldiers were conspicuous by their absence. "They could have been called off somewhere," she hazarded.

"We weren't on the other side for more than a minute," muttered Tremayne. "Shit! What could we have bloody changed in under a minute?"

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" said Crane.

Lacey and Tremayne both looked at her. Research Assistant Crane was an anomaly in her own right. She and two others had turned up out of nowhere to rescue Stephen Hart with some tale of a future 'anomaly mapping team'. Crane claimed to have met the ARC forces as a child but no trace of a Taylor Crane or her family had ever been found. However, in so far as they had one, Crane was their expert on shifting time lines.

"Tell me what you're thinking," said Tremayne.

"Butterfly effect, pre-Cambrian, oxygen is probably mixing into the air back then as we speak. All sorts of odd chemical reactions will be happening out of sequence."

"And that implies?" asked Tremayne.

Crane shrugged. "Fuck knows, but I'll bet you anything you like it isn't good."

Lacey stood up and took a good look around them. There had been pylons on the distant hills, no more, and sounds of the busy M6 had echoed from beyond the tree-line. She realised she was listening to bird song. But the field was surrounded by a neat hedge and she could see some kind of buildings in the distance. So at least there were humans. She felt a wave of reassurance.

Then a massive airship loomed over the hills. "Holy fucking shit!" she said and pointed.

"Fight or flight?" asked Crane as the monstrosity gradually descended towards them.

"Neither," said Tremayne, "they'll have seen us already. Running away will make them suspicious, fighting may not be necessary."

As the airship touched the ground, men and women in dirty brown dungarees, flat caps and goggles emerged and ran around the ship, grabbing ropes and fixing them into the ground. A small team of soldiers emerged in bright red uniforms with gold brocade and elaborate moustaches. They marched in an orderly fashion up to the three women.

The man in the lead was, unmistakably, the much-mourned Captain Ryan, only with a moustache. "Well I'll be d—-d!" he said.

Lacey could hear the dashes replacing the letters.

"Sir!" Tremayne threw a salute.

"I suppose you know you're dead, Lieutenant."

"No sir! I wasn't aware of that sir! I was under the impression you were supposed to be dead, sir!"

Ryan's eyebrows shot up. "Goodness gracious me! How jolly confusing!"

Lacey could hear Crane suppressing a snigger.

"Indeed," said Tremayne with an admirably straight face.

"I knew it. There's no way the anomalies could exist without the possibility of temporal changes!"

Lacey frowned at the figure that had suddenly nipped around Ryan. He was wearing a black suit which appeared a little small for him, with shirt cuffs and white socks visible at the ends of the legs and sleeves. A bowler hat was firmly pulled down onto his head and he, like the workers on the airship, wore goggles. Around his neck hung a large wooden box with brass handles and dials.

"I see Mr Temple is the same person, in both our histories," said Tremayne.

Connor straightened suddenly and looked affronted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Best not to ask, Connor," said an amused voice.

Three women had followed Connor's figure from the airship. Abigail Maitland was wearing tweed breeches, what looked like a moleskin waistcoat, knee-length boots and had a flat cap perched jauntily on blonde hair that was piled up on top of her head. Behind her, Jenny Lewis was dressed in a vivid scarlet ankle length dress with a bustle. Neat little boots were just visible beneath the hem of the dress. She was wearing a top hot. Behind her Helen Cutter was wearing a pith helmet, and looked like a typical Victorian explorer in a beige jacket and more breeches. Lacey knew she was gaping.

"Ah Miss Maitland, Miss Brown, Professor Cutter, maybe you can help with our little conundrum?"

Miss Brown! Lacey couldn't help looking sideways at Taylor Crane who's eyes were wide and staring. They all knew Professor Cutter, *their* Professor Cutter's story of the missing Claudia Brown who had been replaced by Jenny Lewis.

Miss Brown, who looked so like Jenny Lewis, smiled at them, though there was steel in her eyes. "Best take them back to London. Sir James and I can debrief them. I see we have Lieutenant Tremayne and Private Lacey and..." her voice tailed away as she looked at Crane.

"Taylor Crane, ma'am. Research Assistant, Anomaly Mapping Team, 2015, lately seconded to the ARC because of a temporal mix up."

Helen's eyebrows shot up into her pith helmet. "Anomaly mapping team?"

"2015!" added Connor.

"It's a long story," said Tremayne.

"Get them back to London, Miss Brown," said Ryan. "We can get up to speed later. Right now, there's an anomaly to deal with."

Tremayne coughed. "Leads to the pre-Cambrian. You'll want oxygen."

"Botheration!" said Connor. "I knew we should have packed some as standard."

"We'll load some on the airship and send it back to you," said Miss Brown with a laugh.

"Not much life in the pre-Cambrian though," said Helen. "I'll stick my head through quickly to verify what they said but after that a minimal guard detail will probably be sufficient. Everyone can go home in one cosy trip."

"Anomaly mapping team?" asked Helen. Her expression was distinctly arch. She sat down in one of the plush chairs that were scattered around the airship's observation deck. She sat elegantly in contrast to the Helen that Tremayne was used to. However her expression was as closely guarded as ever.

"You'll forgive us if we don't say any more, ma'am, but we'd prefer to wait until we've been debriefed," said Tremayne swiftly.

"Really, and why is that?" Helen smiled sweetly.

"You're not exactly a trusted member of the team where we come from," said Lacey bluntly.

Tremayne saw Claudia Brown smile teasingly at Helen. "You see, my dear. I said that husband of yours would cause no end of trouble."

"Quite the opposite, in fact," said Tremayne, stoutly. "Professor *Nicholas* Cutter has been a valuable asset to the team."

"He has? How droll!" said Helen. She reached for the teapot that had been placed on a little table in front of them and began to pour it out. "Along with his pretty assistant, Mr. Hart, no doubt. I knew there must be a universe where the lure of the Gentleman Adventurer didn't hold sway."

Tremayne realised she had no answer to that.

Lester had sideburns. Taylor Crane was trying, very, very hard, not to stare. They suited him, in a bizarre kind of way, though they made him look a bit like some kind of monkey at the same time. A very dignified monkey though, Crane felt the monkey would have been flattered by the comparison.

Lester had his hands steepled in front of him. They'd been through the standard 'who are you?', 'what is your background?' process. This was the second time Taylor had turned up out of time so she was feeling almost relaxed about the whole affair. This world change was very different from the last but she'd had comparatively few ties. In fact when she counted it up in her head there was a mild flirtation with Finn and a friendship of necessity with Hugh McAllister and Shane Wells, her fellow displaced anomaly mappers and that was it.

"I'm going to assume that you remain loyal servants of King and country," Lester said.

"King?" asked Tremayne.

Lester closed his eyes. "Yes, King. Don't tell me, I shudder to think. You and Connor can go over the time-line differences later and give me a precis. I have no doubt it will be both terrifying and illuminating."

"King and country! Yes, sir!" said Tremayne.

"Quite."

"Will that be all, sir?"

"No, I'm afraid it will not."

Crane glanced anxiously at Lacey and Tremayne.

"Sir?" asked Tremayne.

"You and Private Lacey died recently."

"An unfortunate lab accident, I was told," said Tremayne woodenly.

"Indeed, the kind of unfortunate lab accident that tends to make cynical hatchet men, such as myself, think of sabotage. I don't suppose you can assist at all?"

"I'm not sure, sir. Do you have an Oliver Leek working here?"

"Oh, him! No, no, we dealt with him a few months ago. Turned out he was working for the French, a terribly untidy affair."

"We never found out if he was working with someone," admitted Tremayne.

"The French, no doubt about it!"

"Unlikely, sir, given our time-line's politics."

Crane exchanged a glance with Lacey. "No EU?" she whispered.

Lester looked at them. "I heard that, and I dread to think!"

"European Union, one of the outcomes of the Second World War."

"I'm pleased to say we've so far managed to avoid a first world war. However we're engaged in what some are calling an arms race with Germany and they have this distinctly unpleasant little man in charge, name of Adolf Hitler."

All three of them jumped. "I take it you've heard of the man."

"He's been dead sixty years or more," said Tremayne. "But yes. The Second World War was fought against him."

"Something for us all to look forward to then. I'll need a dossier on him for the Foreign Office as soon as possible. Talk to Claudia Brown. She'll also bring you up to speed on the so-called lab accident angle. I'd very much like to know what your other selves were up to in Professor Cutter's lab. Officially you're all off duty pending investigation. Unofficially, I want you to find out as much as possible about what your alter egos knew. Your deaths haven't been announced yet. Get Claudia Brown to hand over your personnel files. I'll need you to talk to your families."

Tanya Lacey sat awkwardly in the Tremayne drawing room sipping tea out of a china cup and eyed the photograph on the wall that announced it was of King Francis II. She was uncomfortable in a corset and bustle but Claudia Brown had insisted on skirts.

"Your behaviour is likely to cause enough comment, without adding eccentric dress to the list," she had said.

"I just don't believe those terrible Germans," said Mrs Tremayne. "Your brains appear quite scrambled."

"I know, mother. It was a truly infernal device." Lieutenant Tremayne had latched onto their cover story with gusto. "I hardly know if I'm coming or going. It had cogs," she concluded darkly.

"These days everything does. I wonder what the world is coming to."

Lacey began to wonder if she wouldn't have been better off accompanying Crane to the British Museum to consult Dr Sarah Page, well-known Egyptologist and adventuress who was, apparently, briefly in Britain before heading off to the sands of Cairo.

"How jolly!" Crane had said which, it had to be said, had earned her a strange look from Claudia Brown.

What with the clothes and the mother downstairs, Lacey felt distinctly girlish as they headed up to Tremayne's bedroom.

"Why are we up here?" she asked.

"Loose floorboard. I used to hide stuff under it. Bet I'm still using it."

"Isn't that a bit unprofessional?"

"Lacey, if I've learned one thing, it is that this world and professional have only a passing acquaintance. Everyone is a bloody freelance adventurer!"

"Yes, but we're army."

Tremayne fished a small card out of a pouch at her waist and handed it to Lacey wordlessly.

Lieutenant Mary Tremayne
Royal Marines Rtd. French Foreign Legion Rtd.
Freelance Adventuress.
No problem too trivial for the dashing Lieutenant and her Chums.

"Am I a chum?" asked Lacey suspiciously.

"I expect so. We were hired in by Lester as extra security and ended up moonlighting undercover because we suspected a Nazi plot to infiltrate the ARC. At least that is apparently what I told Lester before I carelessly got myself killed."

"My day isn't getting any better," muttered Lacey darkly, and fiddled with her corset. Somewhere a bone was digging into her.

With a grunt, Tremayne pulled up the floorboard. Underneath was a hefty-looking leather-bound tome.

"I suppose it's too much to hope you didn't handwrite it all?" said Lacey. Tremayne's handwriting was a minor legend.

They met to compare notes in the tea room of the Savoy, at Claudia's recommendation. Apparently even the Germans wouldn't consider bugging the tea room. While she delicately sipped at what seemed to be her 500th cup of tea of the day, Tremayne eyed her fellow clientele warily and concluded that if anyone were to bug the place there wouldn't be a European secret they didn't know.

"Oil!" Lacey said, loudly enough to be heard at the neighbouring table where the Maharajah of Tashkent was eating Battenburg cake with the Shah of Persia.

At least the waitress had said that was who they were. Tremayne was already beginning to disapprove of the girl's indiscretion.

Crane scowled at Lacey. "Yes, oil. There just don't seem to be that many accessible deposits. Same with coal and with silicon, while we're about it. They've just about got industrial scale coal mining organised. To access deep coal deposits you need engines to pump the air. To run the engines you need coal. It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation. Anyway, they've got coal mining up and running, but oil's going to take them a while. In the meantime there are half a dozen different minerals and gases that are plentiful. Most of them I've never heard of. Science has taken a seriously weird route around here." Crane grinned and rubbed her hands together. There was a dangerous glint in her eye.

"So how did spending 30 seconds in the pre-Cambrian effect the distribution of oil and coal deposits?"

"Butterfly effect, small atmospheric disturbances, the oxygen that came in with us, large, wide area effect on the whole atmosphere fundamentally effecting geography."

"And yet, here we are in Great Britain, working for Sir James Lester at the ARC."

Crane shrugged. "Temporal elasticity. Besides, have you looked at a map? We're not where you may think we are."

"What's temporal elasticity?"

"Something Sarah and I just came up with. Temporal changes are transmitted in order to minimize effects."

"Total redistribution of mineral resources doesn't sound that minimal to me."

"It probably was though. Sarah's very excited about the idea. She's going to consult with a boffin in Cambridge. We might write a monograph."

"Explain about the maps," said Lacey suspiciously.

"We're on large peninsula, sticking out into the Atlantic. Imagine the Iberian peninsula only long and thin and sticking out sideways. Basically, this is Spain insofar as any comparison makes sense."

"I wish I hadn't asked now," said Lacey drily.

"So did you two find anything out?" asked Crane.

"There is a traitor at the ARC."

"Who?"

"No idea."

"Not only did she handwrite her notes, she handwrote them in code," said Lacey, pointedly.

"Okay," said Crane slowly. "So back to square one. Maybe Lester has someone who can crack your code."

"We also have tickets to Edinburgh. I found them in the diary. We leave from platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross in about three hours."

"You're kidding me," said Crane. "9 3/4?"

"It really exists. They started building it for a planned expansion of King's Cross. Then it was mothballed during a market collapse. They extended elsewhere but re-opened the platform when the new London-Edinburgh line was built last year. Officially it's platform 16, but it's between platforms 9 and 10 so everyone calls it platform 9 3/4."

"How do you know this?" asked Crane.

"She bought a guide book," said Lacey, "to the British Empire."

Tremayne shrugged. "We'll need something to read on the train anyway."

"Edinburgh, really!" Lester's eyebrows shot up.

Tremayne shrugged. "It's the only clue we've got until your boffins decrypt that diary."

Lester sighed. "That could take a while. What are you planning to do when you reach Edinburgh? In case you hadn't noticed it's Christmas Eve tomorrow."

"Send them anyway," said Helen suddenly from where she'd been sitting. "They've done well so far and we may need to move fast."

"I have an aunt who spends every Christmas in Edinburgh," said Claudia suddenly. "I'll wire her and she can meet you at the station."

"Does she have clearance?" asked Lester.

"Ex-SAS sir."

"Jolly good."

Three compartments had been reserved for them. A shared bunk for Crane and Lacey and a tiny bedroom for Tremayne with a little sitting room squashed in between.

The porter managed to indicate surprise at their lack of luggage with a twitched eyebrow and the polite question 'will this be all?'. Tremayne told him they were

en route from Peking and their luggage had been stolen by pirates in the South China Seas. Lacey was beginning to feel Tremayne was enjoying herself just a little bit too much. They had two bags of 'essentials', one from Claudia and one from Connor.

On investigation, Claudia's idea of essentials appeared to mean three pistols, a cavalry sabre, a hip flask of whiskey, copious quantities of tea cake and a framed photograph of His Majesty.

"What's wrong with a change of underwear and a toothbrush?" complained Lacey.

Connor's idea of essentials turned out to be a tangle of brass, clockwork and tubing. It took them an hour simply to separate it out into what looked like five different devices, function unknown. At least two were flying machines of some kind.

"No manual," muttered Crane.

"You were expecting one?" asked Lacey.

Crane grinned happily, produced a screwdriver from her boot and started taking the devices apart.

By the time they reached Doncaster, Lacey had got over the excitement of travelling on a real live steam train. Not that she had been that excited in the first place, you understand.

Tremayne had spent most of the journey devouring her guide book to the British Empire. She had an obscure family tradition which forbade her to set foot outside its dominions. The world, it would seem, had just become much larger. Lacey thought the tradition and the family as a whole were probably certifiable. Tremayne, however, had decided that, once the Germans were foiled, they should embark on a grand tour, first stop the clockwork towers of Bombay.

Crane had got one of Connor's devices sort of working. It buzzed around the compartment, clockwork wings flapping frantically. After a minute or so the clockwork would run down and it would drop to the floor like a stone. Beyond that it's purpose remained a mystery.

The Yorkshire moors stretched gloomily on either side of them as far as the eye could see in the twilight. Scrubby gorse bushes grew close to the track. It looked a grim and desperate landscape. Stuck out into the Atlantic, as the British peninsula was, meant it got more than its fair share of rainfall, even if the temperature was higher.

It was getting dark. Lacey thought she could see forms pacing alongside the train in the moorland outside. From somewhere came a long drawn out howl.

"The wolves are restive tonight," said the guard, sticking his head through their door. "Make sure you keep the windows shut."

"Wolves?" asked Crane.

The guard nodded. "They inhabit the Yorkshire moors."

"Oh." Crane's face hardly changed.

'Oh, indeed,' thought Lacey.

Their sleeping compartment consisted of two bunks and minimal extra space. Crane found herself squeezed into a corner as Lacey entered.

Tanya Lacey scowled. The expression was beginning to become habitual. "This looks uncomfortable."

"Bags I top bunk, if you're going to be such a misery." Crane climbed up onto the top bunk and bounced on the mattress. "Mind you I think the mattress has lumps."

Lacey sighed. "Everything in this bloody world is uncomfortable or crazy. Usually uncomfortable and crazy."

"Don't you think it's kind of fun?"

"No, I don't."

Crane wrinkled her nose. "Can you smell something?"

"No."

"Come on, Tanya! Get into the spirit of things."

"Lacey."

"We're chums now, not soldiers. Call me Taylor and I'll call you Tanya. I think I can hear hissing as well."

Tanya Lacey frowned. "Now you mention it."

Taylor couldn't help grinning. "You know, Former Private Tanya Lacey, now my good chum. I do believe the Germans are trying to gas us."

"Uncomfortable, crazy and surprisingly devoid of imagination."

Taylor slipped off her bunk and tried the door. She was unsurprised to find it locked. Tanya sighed and her face set in a pained expression. She hitched up her skirts, pulled the pistol out of her garter and fired through the window.

Cold air immediately blew into the cabin. There was a barking sound and something thudded against the window.

Taylor Crane caught a glimpse of snapping jaws and malevolent eyes. "Those creatures are going to give wolves a bad name," she said.

"Wolves have a good name?"

"Wolves are greatly misunderstood," there was another thud, "except around here obviously. Those look like bloody big buggers. I wonder if they are more like dire wolves."

"Let's not get close enough to find out."

Mary Tremayne reached instinctively for her gun when she heard the shot. She was about to dash out into the shared sitting room when she heard the sound of footsteps and low voices outside the door. Quickly she strapped on the cavalry sabre, grabbed the pistol and positioned herself next to the door.

It burst inwards and three men tumbled into the room. Almost without thought, Mary placed a shot neatly through the head of the first and second men. The third backed out into the sitting room area. Tremayne heard a sound that reminded her distinctly of old war movies. She dropped to the floor of the carriage, even as bullets rained through the walls, splintering the panelling and filling the carriage with downy feathers as they hit the bedding.

"That's automatic fire!" shouted Taylor.

"Tell me something I don't know," muttered Tanya. She aimed a sharp kick at the door. It shuddered against the frame, but held. The hinges didn't look that strong though. She readjusted herself and then kicked once more, this time aiming at the hinge stress points. The door burst open.

The two of them hid either side of the opening. The sound of automatic gun fire continued in a second burst. Tanya held up three fingers. Taylor nodded. Tanya began counting up silently, 'one, two, three'. On three she stepped smartly into the lounge area, gun aimed ahead of her.

Two men were crouched over what looked like some kind of ancient machine gun. Their backs were to her and they were firing directly into Mary's room. Tanya paused just long enough to aim and then shot. The first man fell with a cry. The second began to turn towards her and she shot him as well.

"Mary!" Tanya shouted.

Mary Tremayne burst out of her room, a pistol in one hand and a cavalry sabre in the other.

"Quick, the corridor!" she shouted.

Even as Tanya turned towards the door she could hear more footsteps. "More outside."

Taylor swung the machine gun affair to cover the door. "Not much ammunition left here," she reported.

"Fire a burst!" ordered Mary. "That will make them think."

"Then what?" asked Tanya. "These revolvers only contain six shots. How much ammo do we have?"

"None, we were supposed to get more in Edinburgh. Someone must have tipped them off that we were here."

"Lester, Claudia, Connor or Helen," said Taylor.

"My money's on Helen," said Tanya.

"Doesn't matter right now," said Mary. "What do they think we know?"

"They tried to gas us," said Taylor. "Why did they try to kill you?"

The door handle turned and Taylor fired a burst. Then she picked up the gun, carried it into the bunk room and tossed it out of the shattered the window. "At least that way they don't get to use it."

"We need to get to the rest of the train," muttered Mary. "We can't hold here for long."

A long howl sounded from outside the carriage.

While Taylor and Tanya did what they could to barricade the door, Mary leaned out the window of the bunk room and fired at the dire wolves that were running alongside the train. She had picked off a couple of them, but there were a lot left. She was aiming for the leader of the pack, hoping if she took the alpha male out then the others would drop back. She was running out of bullets.

The leader was a huge creature, in the light cast from the 'ether lamp' in the carriage she could make out the heavy muscles and see the salt and pepper grey-black of its fur. It turned its head and stared balefully at her. Then it jumped. Mary fired as the huge mouth loomed towards her. Instinctively she stepped back from the broken window as the huge body crashed into the tiny room.

At that moment, Taylor burst into the compartment carrying a large blanket in her arms. She threw the heavy cloth around the creature, grabbing hold of its

neck. Mary placed the gun against its head and fired her last bullet into its brain.

"Onto the roof, now!" she ordered.

Taylor needed no second bidding and climbed out of the window.

"Tanya! We need to get out now!" Mary shouted back into the living area.

She could hear the sounds of banging and shots being fired. Someone was attacking their makeshift barricade and Tanya was obviously firing back.

Mary tossed aside her useless pistol, shoved the sabre back in its sheath and climbed out of the window. She scrabbled at the top edge and hauled herself up. Once perched on the sill, she was able to catch hold of the top of the carriage and climb out onto the roof. She fought to keep her balance on the top of the moving train. Not only was there a fierce wind but the train seemed to shake unpredictably, even more so than when she had been inside. Taylor was crawling along the roof of the carriage on hands and knees.

"Here!" came a shout from below.

Mary looked down to see Tanya handing up Connor's bag of tricks to her. Not a bad idea. She caught hold of it and dragged it up onto the roof of the car. Tanya scrambled up after it.

"That door's not going to hold long," she gasped. "I'll stay here. Take pot shots at anyone who sticks their head out of the window."

Mary nodded and set off down the carriage roof after Taylor. Ahead of her she could see the younger woman had reached the end of the car. She realised Taylor was peering over the end. Then there was a sharp cry and Taylor vanished.

Mary staggered to her feet, drawing the sword, and crept forward warily.

A head appeared above the carriage top.

"Give me a moment to get on top of the carriage, old thing!" a man's voice shouted.

"Not on your life!" Mary hurried forwards and stamped on the fingers that were just clutching the edge. The man cried out and vanished.

She heard a low chuckle down below her. "Very resourceful, Lieutenant. However, I have what I came for."

"Who is that?"

"I'm Herr Walther, Lieutenant Tremayne. I'd remind you that we have crossed swords several times in the past, except that I gather you have never met me. I find that terribly fascinating."

"What are you doing?"

"Really, Lieutenant, matters are at far too delicate a moment for me to reveal my hand. However if you and Private Lacey care to remain where you are, we shall trouble you no further."

"What have you done with Taylor."

"That's for me to know and you to worry about."

Mary swayed on top the carriage, unwilling to let her guard drop sufficiently to climb down the ladder ahead of her. But she really had to if she was to have any chance of rescuing Taylor. She realised, suddenly, that the train was slowing down, balancing was becoming easier. There appeared to be a signal ahead.

Mary crouched, gripping the edge of the carriage, the sabre in one hand. The moment the train lurched to a halt she sprang across the gap between the carriages and then whirled around to face the other way. Men were already dragging what looked like Taylor's unconscious form from the train and loading her onto a large vehicle which looked something like a tank.

At that moment she heard a sound behind her. She whirled to see the man whose fingers she had previously stamped on, standing on top of the carriage, sword drawn. He lunged at her and she riposted with the cavalry sabre. At that moment the train lurched, preparatory to moving. Mary swayed with the effort of keeping upright. The man lunged for her once more but she blocked the blow and thanked her childhood fencing classes. She pressed an attack forward, uncomfortably aware that she stood at the very edge of the carriage.

The steam train let out a blast of its whistle. Mary saw the man's eyes suddenly widen and then a small device whirled past her ear. The man ducked and she stepped forward, knocking him sideways off the train with a hearty push. Looking back she could see Tanya standing on the carriage behind her, Connor's bag of tricks at her feet.

A second steam whistle went off and she saw the tank-like thing suddenly rise up on two legs. It lumbered forwards running along the length of the train.

"Carry on to Edinburgh!" Mary shouted at Tanya. "Link up with Claudia's aunt!" Then she started running down the top of the train to catch up with the tank. It was already picking up speed and then the steam train let out a further whistle and also started to move forwards. Mary was just about level with the walking tank. She grabbed her skirts and jumped across the gap between the two vehicles, landing with a clatter on the outside of the tank.

"Lieutenant Tremayne?" asked a doubtful voice.

Tanya found herself staring into the eyes of a tiny old lady, dressed in yards of black satin.

"Private Lacey, I'm afraid Lieutenant Tremayne got distracted en route."

"That doesn't sound good. I'm Captain Letitia Brown, former SAS." Tanya's hand was pumped in a surprisingly firm fashion. "Is this your luggage?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Don't apologise, dear. It's always good to travel light. Now, I've booked us into the Forces' Women's Club on Prince's Street. I stay there every Christmas with some of the girls. I assume you'll come to Christmas dinner with us."

"Well, that rather depends, doesn't it?" asked Tanya cautiously.

"Not at all, my dear. I'm sure we'll have these Nazis dealt with by Christmas lunchtime. Now where's a porter? I'll get them to move your luggage for you."

"We don't even know where the Nazis are."

"Oh, they'll be in the undercity. That's where all the secret bases are."

"All? The secret bases?"

"Yes dear. No imagination these huns."

"Oi!" shouted Lacey suddenly, feeling a small hand at her waist. Without thought she reached down and grabbed hold.

"Sorry, miss! I didn't mean anything by bumping into you, miss!"

Tanya found herself looking into the extremely grubby face of a small girl. She was thin as a rake and covered in soot or possibly engine grease.

"Ah! A guttersnipe! Just what we're going to need. Well done, Private. Bring her with you as we go."

Captain Brown's 'club' turned out to be a grand Georgian building. Inside women were everywhere. Women *in trousers* were everywhere. Women *in trousers smoking pipes* were everywhere.

"Jennings! See Private Lacey's belongings are taken up to her rooms and see if you can't order something more practical for her to wear. There is devilry afoot," ordered Captain Brown.

"Very good, Ma'am," a matronly looking lady in her fifties saluted smartly, and grinned at Tanya. "There's tea in the Waterloo room while you wait. Will the urchin be accompanying you?"

Captain Brown eyed the guttersnipe, name of Maggie MacDonald, warily. "Take her away and wash her. Bring her back when you've done. Now, Private, you need to fill me in on events and then we must start planning."

Mary Tremayne was jammed awkwardly underneath the tank. Her arms ached from where she had hung onto the thing as it lurched and lumbered across the Scottish borders. She cursed this crazy, crazy timeline. In the first light of Christmas Eve it had ducked into some kind of tunnel underneath Arthur's Seat and eventually brought her into what appeared to be a mad scientist's lair.

The walls were made of wattle and daub and hefty beams held up the roof. Every available surface seemed to be filled with clockwork, jars and tools. Large metal statues adorned the walls and strange exo-skeleton-like devices, in the shape of dinosaurs and the future predators were lined up along one wall. As the tank thing ground to a halt, Mary had just had time to climb down from it and slide underneath between the vast mechanical feet.

She could hear booted feet marching up and down. Herr Walther and about a dozen jackbooted soldiers descended from the creature. Taylor Crane was being escorted by two of them. Her hands were securely tied. Then a second woman's skirts came into view.

"Nick!" That was Helen's voice.

"Helen, thank god you're safe."

"No thanks to you. So careless pf you to get yourself captured, dear, though I imagine it was all Stephen's fault. I've had to go to no end of trouble to secure your release."

Mary strained to see and realised that Nick Cutter and Stephen Hart were both being held in some kind of cage, suspended from the ceiling of the laboratory. Helen, in a vivid blue dress, had run across the space and now stood before the cage.

"How touching," said Herr Walther. "I must say Dr. Cutter that your wife has proved most helpful, as have you."

"Nick, what have you done?"

"I had no choice, Helen. The villain was threatening your life and Stephen's. But there's no need to worry, it'll take him years to get the data he needs to make his fiendish device to work."

"What data?" Helen sounded worried.

"What the fuck is going on here!" demanded Taylor. "What the fuck is that machine. Helen, you're a fucking traitor!"

"Goodness! Your time line must have been most unrefined, Miss Crane," said Herr Walther.

Mary realised that Nick, Helen and Stephen were standing before a large machine that stretched from floor to ceiling. It looked a little like an organ, albeit one with columns of bubbling chemicals connected up to it rather than pipes. She could see Herr Walther, a blond man dressed in a black SS uniform, complete with knee length jackboots and a swastika. He strode up and down in front of the machine.

"I suppose it can do no harm to reveal my plans now," he said. Tremayne rolled her eyes. "As Miss Crane's story confirms, history may be altered. The smallest tweak can have the strangest effects. This machine, when loaded with the existing information on the anomalies will be able to predict and control those changes?"

Nick laughed from within his cage. "You'll need far more than existing knowledge on the anomaly network. There simply isn't enough information."

"That is where I had a stroke of luck! Miss Taylor Crane here comes from the future where she is a member of the Anomaly Mapping Team. All I have to do is access that information."

"I'm not telling you anything," spat Taylor.

"My dear girl, you make it sound like you think you have a choice."

"To what end though?" asked Helen. "Do you plan to blackmail the crowned heads of Europe?"

"Oh no! Why bother when we can simply change history to our liking. Think of it! The Aryan race striding across the continents, unencumbered by lesser people. We will be gods!"

"Fucking Nazi!" shouted Taylor. "What makes you think I'm going to help you?"

The man shrugged. "Your co-operation isn't necessary. The machine is built and the data I need is handily stored in your mind."

"You fiend!" shouted Nick. "Use of the mind probe is forbidden on four continents!"

"Connect the girl up!" ordered the Herr Walther.

Tanya was wearing tight leather trousers and a red velvet waistcoat. This apparently passed for practical in Jennings' mind. Maggie MacDonald had scrubbed up well and appeared to be a blonde-haired urchin of uncertain age. She wore

trousers and waistcoat that matched Tanya's own. At that very moment Maggie was rifling through Connor's emergency bag with an air of authority.

"Guttersnipes are always good at identifying machinery," confided Captain Brown. "Now I think you're going to need this."

This was large, very large. It was long with blue glass tubing encased in brass filigree. It was undoubtedly a gun.

"I've never seen anything like it," confessed Tanya.

"Not many people have, dear. It works on the same principle as an elephant gun."

"It does?" Tanya was sure it didn't. She wasn't entirely clear what an elephant gun was but she was pretty sure that, in her world at least, they didn't involve blue glass.

"Yes, dear. It packs a bit more of a punch though. We always called it the Dinosaur Gun. Given the circumstances, that seems like a nicely appropriate name. I'd watch out though. It has quite a kick, oh and it's liable to backfire."

"An etheric beam source!" cried Maggie, from somewhere near Tanya's feet.

"A what?"

"It'll be handy in the undercity. It casts lots of light."

Maggie was holding a large green sphere on top of some kind of wooden handle. It was attached to a heavy backpack that looked a bit like diving tanks. Maggie MacDonald struggled into the backpack, which dwarfed her small frame. "I'll be your light man, miss."

"Why are you helping me?" Tanya asked her weakly.

"Can't have the Hun getting a drop on us, can we miss? That wouldn't be patriotic."

"Quite right, young guttersnipe," said Captain Brown. "Now, Private, I want you and Miss MacDonald here to head into the undercity straight away. I'm going to round up some of the girls and we'll see if we can get the College of Surgeons to let us in to the undercity via their morgue. That's closer to where Mary here says the secret base is, but it may take us some time to talk the good Surgeons round."

"How do I get into the undercity?"

"Oh, the club has an entrance. The Duchess of Wellington had it put in, in case of troglodyte invasion."

Maggie MacDonald led them through a maze of tight alleyways where the empty houses towered over them oppressively almost joining at the top. The tips of their roofs almost touched the bricked up ceiling of the undercity.

"What is this place?" asked Tanya.

"Plague city, miss. They built over it. Bricked up the houses of the sick and dying and left them to rot. The undercity has been here ever since."

"Well, bugger me!" muttered Tanya.

"Language, miss!"

"Don't you start. We're the only people down here apart from Nazi spies. I don't care if they are shocked by a bit of swearing. Since you've lived on the streets all your life, I imagine you've heard worse."

"Excuse me, miss! But there are the little ones as well."

"Little ones?"

"Behind us, miss. I thought we might need help."

Tanya looked behind her and saw a crowd of small children creeping along the street, and over the rooftops, and running along planks and ropes stretched between the buildings.

"Who the fuck are they?" she asked.

"Language!" said Maggie again. "If you can't talk nice we will withdraw our support."

Two dozen filthy urchins stared at her with a mixture of eagerness and disapproval.

"Oh f... bother it! Whatever, which way now?"

"Main Street but...:

Tanya stepped round the corner into a much wider street. Stone columns ran down its centre, supporting the arched roof above.

"We don't use the Main Street, miss. Big Harry likes to roam up and down it."

"Who's big Harry?" asked Tanya, not budging from where she stood.

At that moment the ground shook.

"That's him coming!" said Maggie Macdonald.

"Holy Sh... Sheep!" said Tanya.

A large Tyrannosaurus rex lumbered down the street. It broke into a run and Tanya could feel the acceleration as the vibrations of its footsteps fell closer and closer together. Some kind of metal contraption was clasped around its head with a small glowing red light at the top.

She shouldered Captain Brown's Dinosaur Gun and pulled the trigger.

Taylor Crane was strapped into Herr Walther's device. Mary Tremayne had no idea how it was working, but what it was doing was clear enough. A bronzed helmet covered Taylor's face and wires led from it to the organ contraption. An assistant was reading times and locations off a small dial in front of him. Herr Walther played the keys and pedals maniacally, apparently in relation to the data that was arriving. In the middle of the room, a huge clockwork model was forming made of wires and that intersected and glittered where they did so. Electricity sparked along it. It was a map of the anomaly network, one that could be moved, manipulated and changed.

"You can't do this! It won't work," Helen was shouting. She had been locked in the cage with Nick and Stephen.

"It's too late, Helen," said Nick. "We've been out-manoeuvred."

"It's never too late."

"You shouldn't have helped them. Why did you tell them about Miss Crane?"

"He shouldn't have been able to do anything with her information and she was enough of a prize to get me access to you. Together we were bound to figure a way out. But, oh no! you had to go and build him a temporal manipulator!"

"This is not my fault!"

"How did you manage to get captured anyway? I thought you and Stephen had gone sight-seeing in the Permian? Didn't you take precautions?"

"It wasn't Nick's fault. I got bitten by something and fell ill. He had to get medical assistance," Stephen began sulkily.

Mary closed her eyes and tried to block out the squabbling.

"Großer Harry is getötet worden, Herr Walther!" shouted one of the soldiers. He had been sitting in an exo-skeleton affair, shaped a little like a rearing T. Rex.

"Jene Gossekinder! Geben Sie die Fleischfresser frei!"

Mary's German struggled to keep up, but she understood that there were children and that predators were to be released. To her horror she saw Herr Walther's men climbing into some of the exo-skeletons. Exo-skeletons shaped like the future predators.

"Fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck!" said Tanya. "And the next person who says 'language' is going to be sent to the front!"

A swarm of predators was racing down the tunnels towards them, red lights flashing from the metallic frames strapped to their heads.

The gutter children cowered behind her.

"Run! Hide! They hunt by sound. Find somewhere to hide and keep really still."

The children scattered. She braced her feet and fired the dinosaur gun again. A blaze of blue light shot out of its end. She staggered backwards, but managed to stay upright this time. Three predators fell to the ground. It wasn't enough.

Wires hung from the backs of all the predator exo-skeletons and seem to attach to a large pulsing glass tank. Sparks of electricity flashed deep within the liquid.

"Es gibt eine Frauen mit den Kindern," one of the soldiers said, "und eine Gewehr."

Three of the chairs suddenly sparked and the exo-skeleton limbs fell limp.

Mary Tremayne surged out from under the tank and ran down behind the row of predator machines, slashing at the wires with the cavalry sabre. Behind her showers of sparks danced, followed by explosions.

Tanya watched in amazed relief as, one by one, the predators fell from the columns and ceiling and lay twitching on the ground. She had no doubt however, that someone knew she was here.

"I think we had better hurry," said Tanya. "Which way to this secret German base?"

"Just along here. Third door on the right. Don't get confused with the door on the left, that's where the Illuminati hang out. Their guardian machines are tricksy."

"Or the second door on the right. That's Aleister Crowley's Order, they're a bit strange," said another of the children.

"Right!" said Tanya. "Third door on the right."

The sound of safety catches being removed is unmistakable - even when the guns involved are more closely related to Winchester rifles than AK47s. Mary Tremayne skidded to a halt, a tantalising 100 yards from the temporal manipulator.

"Lieutenant Tremayne, you continue to be so troublesome," said Herr Walther. "Surely you realise any damage you do with that sword will be easily repairable. At best you could only delay me by an hour or two. But as it stands you are already too late."

Herr Walther pulled a large red lever. The temporal manipulator flashed and pulsed. Mary gasped as a large anomaly formed in the centre of the lab.

"Alles in die Abweichung!" shouted Herr Walther. The soldiers began to form up.

At that moment the door at the far side of the room opened and Private Lacey stepped through the gap. She was holding an extremely improbable-looking gun. A small child stood next to her and appeared to be winding up several of Connor's devices.

"That red lever!" Mary shouted, pointing. At the same moment she threw her sabre. It arced through the air cutting the wires that held Taylor to the machine.

The child tossed a small device into the air. It swarmed across the room towards the red lever. Clockwork propellers whirring frantically as it buzzed along.

Walther whirled. "Zerstören Sie diese Vorrichtung!"

Tremayne dropped to the ground as several rifles fired. The small clockwork device buzzed up towards the ceiling, dodging the bullets.

"Automata!" shouted Herr Walther.

The large statues that had decorated the room suddenly lurched into life. Tanya swung her gun. There was a blue flash and one of the automata vanished. As Mary blinked the stars out of her eyes she could see Tanya lying flat on her back.

Taylor had managed to pull free of her wrist restraints and was tearing the strange helmet from her head. "Stop them," she cried. "Don't let them go through the anomaly."

Tanya was going to have to get past the automata first, which now formed a solid wall between her and the soldiers.

"Don't worry about these automata, miss," shouted a high-pitched voice. "We knows how tae handle them."

To Mary's amazement, hordes of children seemed to be pouring into the room behind Tanya. They all wore dirty leather clothing and were armed with a selec-

tion of wrenches, goggles and screwdrivers. They swarmed over the large machines.

Herr Walther, at the head of a column of men, marched passed her towards the anomaly.

"Oh no you don't!" muttered Mary. She threw herself at the German, bringing him to the ground with her best rugby tackle.

He struggled in her grasp and she had to duck as fist came out of nowhere. He pulled free, but Tremayne managed to grab him and throw him over her shoulder. Instinctively she knew that rifles were pointed at her back. Praying they wouldn't shoot at their commander, Mary dragged Herr Walther to his feet and trapped him in a head lock.

There was a whine of power and a bang, followed by some unladylike swearing. It sounded like Tanya's gun had broken.

Then there was a high pitched whistle and a clang. Mary Tremayne saw that the small flying device had successfully closed the lever. The anomaly winked out of existence.

"A minor inconvenience," croaked Herr Walther. "Let me go otherwise my men will shoot."

"Not if I wipe your data banks!" Taylor had snapped the restraints on her ankles and was now climbing out of the chair.

"Schießen Sie Fraulein Crane!" ordered Herr Walther.

Mary watched with horror as the rifles swung to cover Taylor.

"I don't think so, young man!"

Mary Tremayne looked up to see what looked like half a dozen geriatric old ladies abseiling down from the ceiling, all armed with rifles. Some of them were also carrying knives in their teeth.

"Captain Brown!" shouted Tanya.

"Drop those guns immediately," shouted Captain Brown.

"I think you'll find this is a Mexican standoff," said Herr Walther from where Mary held him. "My men outnumber yours and there are my automata to deal with."

A ragged cheer went up and there was the sound of metal clattering to the floor. The remaining automata appeared to be piles of so many spare parts.

"This is great," said a small voice. "These'll keep us in parts for years!"

"And I have a Dinosaur Gun!" said Tanya. "I can reduce all of your men to ash with one shot!"

"That gun backfired," sneered Herr Walther.

"And I fixed it!" piped up the small child who had come in with Tanya.

"Oh jolly good show, Miss MacDonald!" said the strange Captain. "Excellent teamwork!"

Tremayne felt Walther sag in her arms, defeated. "Lassen sie Ihre Waffen fallen," he said.

The soldiers ranged before her dropped their guns to the floor.

Mary gathered Tanya and Taylor next to the temporal manipulator. "Can you tell how it works?" she asked Taylor.

"Oh yes! I can just work out the basic principles of a mad scientist's machine in five minutes."

"But you were watching what the Walther did?"

Taylor nodded reluctantly. "Yeah!"

"So you could put the world back. Back to the one we knew?"

"Probably."

Mary glanced around. "It would have to be quick."

"But should we?" asked Tanya.

Mary looked at her in surprise. "I thought you didn't like it here?"

Tanya shrugged. "I dunno. I mean we're here now. Trying to change it back seems like the sort of thing Walther would do."

"Yeah!" said Taylor. "My time-line has changed twice now. I don't think we should meddle more than we have to. McAllister, Wells and I agreed not to try to change things back when we got to your world. It's not our place to judge. Besides I'm interested in their technology. I bet I could build a better temporal manipulator if we really needed one!"

"And you've got the whole British Empire to explore," pointed out Tanya.

"What about you?" asked Mary. "What are you going to do here?"

She saw Tanya glance over at where Captain Brown was deep in some discussion with Maggie MacDonald.

"Well, for starters, I've got an invitation to Christmas dinner I think would be ungentlewomanly to turn down."

Chapter 15

Well of Souls

An Urban Dead Short Story

15.1 Part One

I cursed as the lights flickered and went out. That was another generator gone. I finished soldering the wire back in place on the one in front of me. The soldering iron cast enough light to see the work by and, luckily, it was gas powered.

The late afternoon sun filtered through the grubby windows of the workshop. I grabbed a can of gasoline, fuelled the repaired generator to check it worked and then carried it to the door. I met Ian in the hallway, carrying a second shattered generator. I sighed. "What happened to it?"

Ian shrugged tiredly. "A Death Cultist emptied a pistol clip into the rotor"

Ian Carlyle is the youngest of the Dunell Hills Police Department command staff. Once, I think, he must have been skinny, but Malton has made him lean, giving him a look that suggests his body has concentrated on building fibre and muscle. He's tall too. If I stood on tiptoe, I reckon the top of my head would just about reach his shoulders. He has short brown hair and very blue eyes. I'd say kind eyes but I think it's more that Ian often looks thoughtful and that is unusual in an environment where we are almost always fighting. He's also American, East Coast, I think. There used to be a US Army Base on the outskirts of Malton. A lot of their service personnel got trapped in with us, trying to help out in the first days of the crisis.

I handed him the generator I'd just repaired and took a look at the broken one. I had a nasty feeling it was beyond my ability to solder and weld back together.

I've learned generator repair on the hoof. I've a good working knowledge but I never trained as a mechanic.

"I'll get on to it," I said.

Ian shook his head. "No."

"No?"

"It's almost dark and I'm prepared to bet we're facing a big attack as soon as the sun's down. That's why they're expending so much effort taking out the generators. We're going to need medical support soon and you've been in the workshop all day. I want you to grab a couple of hours sleep before the attack starts."

"And if they take out that generator as well? We don't have any spares left."

"I'll see if CMS have some guys they can get on it. Caiger's supposed to be their mall after all. But right now I'm more worried about the need for medics. Get some sleep. It's going to be a long night."

I shrugged. I had learned the hard way not to argue with Ian about strategy. He's one of the best tacticians the DHPD have and if he thought medical support was the priority, he was probably right.

I took the devastated generator back to the workshop and left it on the bench. Then I headed for the bunk room the DHPD had commandeered. Once upon a time it had been a medium-sized branch of Boots. We'd pushed the shattered remains of the display units to the front, to form an additional barricade across the entrance and then bedrolls and blankets had been spread out on the floor. No luxury spared. There were about a dozen sleeping forms there already as I clambered in. That meant command had reduced the watch considerably. They were expecting something big tonight.

I grabbed a blanket and rolled myself up on one of the pads. I had been working for nearly 12 hours, losing the fight against the death cultists' determination to deprive us of power. So I fell asleep almost straight away.

I was woken by a hand on my shoulder. "Purple Cat! Wake up!" It was Ian's voice.

Purple Cat is not the nickname I'd have chosen to get saddled with. I've always been called Cat. It's a diminutive of my real name, but Purple? I still carried one of Claire's old stuffed cats as a kind of mascot. It has purple stripes and somehow the name has become attached to me.

"Time to start stitching people back together?" I asked, sleepily.

"No, something's come up. We need to talk to you."

The Dunell Hills Police Department command staff had taken over a suite of offices on one of Caiger Mall's upper floors. Commissioner Bob and Goldstar, our Director of Field Operations, were there. Bob, Ian and Goldstar form the entire upper echelon of the DHPD. Ian came in behind me and shut the door. Bob and Goldy are both much older than Ian, more what you'd expect from senior officers in a police force, not that anything in Malton is quite how you would expect it to be. Bob and Ian had led us for a long time. They'd somehow managed to unite the rag-tag remains of a police force, miscellaneous soldiers and a bunch of civilians into something that had some shred of a claim to represent law and order in this city.

The Director of Field Operations was rotated around regularly. The force had learned the hard way that it was simply too stressful a job for one person to run with for long. Staying one step ahead of the undead and the death cultists required constant attention. Before Goldstar, Braunwyn Cleanslate had held the job. I shied away from that thought. I didn't want to think about Bryn. She'd led Dixie Squad before she took on DFO-C and had hauled my arse out of the fire more times than I cared to think.

Dixie is the DHPD's support squad. We're the medics, the scientists and the engineers of the department - usually all three at once. Bryn was a warrior, first and foremost, but she knew our value and she knew where to tell us to go and when to tell us to leave and she fought to protect us with all her heart and her soul. The department felt empty without her. Mostly I tried to pretend she'd never existed in the first place.

"What's this about?" I asked.

"Ghost Squad have missed their last three check-ins," said Bob.

This is what happens when I think about Bryn. BD just inevitably has to pop up to haunt me.

Ian pulled up a chair and sat down next to me, across the desk from Goldy and Bob. "We got a request to help out at Bale Mall and sent them over," he said.

"But we need them back here now, and fast," said Goldstar. "Caiger's not going to hold for much longer and the evacuation has hardly started."

"I've seen no signs of an evacuation," I said.

The command staff exchanged glances. "We're talking to the Caiger Mall Survivors," said Bob. "We'll have something organised soon."

I looked at Ian instinctively. "How many zombies outside?"

"Forty at the last count," he said. "But there are more arriving every minute and the place is crawling with death cultists. We're having several murders a day and we can't keep a generator running for more than an hour."

"We'll agree on an evacuation plan soon," said Bob firmly. "In the meantime we need the entire department here. We have to hold this place until the civilians are out."

"Where do I fit in?"

"We need you to go and extract Ghost Squad."

"What?"

"Cat, they've not checked in for three days," said Ian. "The only explanation is that they're all dead. We need someone to go up to Yagoton, revive them all and bring them back."

"There's the Revivification Clinic up there. The place is crawling with revivers. No way do they need another."

The command staff exchanged another look. "There's been no news from Yagoton or any of the surrounding suburbs for over a week," said Goldstar.

"What?" I realised I was looking at Ian again for confirmation.

"Nothing," he said. "That's one of the reasons we sent Ghost to answer the distress call. We wanted to know what was going on."

"Why will I make any difference?"

"Your job isn't to find anything out," said Bob. "Get in there. Get our boys back on their feet. Bug out as fast as you can. We'll deal with Yagoton once we've got this place under control."

"Why me?" I asked.

"Ian recommended you," said Bob. "You have a problem with the assignment?"

I shook my head. "No problem."

I was going to have to have a chat with Ian before I left.

I returned to the bunk room and filled my pack full of vials of the revivification serum and first aid supplise. I kept my toolbox. It was only a six-man team I was after and I had space to spare, even after packing twice the revivification serum

needed to get them on their feet. I was halfway through when Ian turned up with a shotgun, a pistol and an armful of ammunition.

"What's that for?"

"You don't know what you're walking into. I'd be happier if you were armed." He sighed. "I wish we could send a team but we simply don't have the manpower."

I eyed my backpack with irritation and then unloaded the toolbox to make room for the ammunition.

"Why me?" I asked as I repacked. "Bulldog and I haven't spoken in months."

Not since Bryn vanished in fact, though the argument itself had been about something else entirely. Would Malton be a safer place if they didn't keep dropping guns and ammunition down in the supply crates? Something like that. But in the middle of it all I'd shouted that Bryn would have stayed if he didn't repeatedly behave like such a jerk and he'd responded that at least he knew what it was like to love someone rather than viewing the opposite sex as some kind of meal ticket. And that had been the end of that.

"He's still your brother, Cat. You may fight like the proverbial cat and dog but you're both quick enough to leap to the other's defence if anyone else tries to get involved. If anyone's going to get him out of there you will."

"God speed," said Ian as I left. "I'm relying on you."

I approached Yagoton from the South West. It was a hot summer's day with that heavy oppressive feeling in the air that promises a thunder storm to come. I'd have said it was blisteringly hot, but that's the kind of statement that always makes the Yanks laugh. It was hot for Malton, though. My shirt was sticking to my body underneath the bulky flak jacket Ian had insisted I wore.

Yagoton is about a half-day's walk from Caiger Mall. I became increasingly disturbed by the silence as I approached the suburb. Malton's pretty quiet at the best of times but this was eerie. Even on the quietest of days you can hear the groans of the undead, but here there was nothing except birdsong, and that frightened me almost more than anything else. I'd have been reassured to stumble across a zombie.

What I was passing were the unsouled. They lay in the streets where they had been dragged out of buildings or stood staring blankly into space, stopped in their zombie tracks. Unsouling isn't picky, it'll take the walking dead as often as someone freshly killed. At first I assumed they were sleeping zombies and gave them a wide berth, but gradually the silence got to me and I had to find out. I had come across the unsouled before, but never in great numbers. They appear to be the end point of the disease that infects us. Sooner or later the cycle of life and death just... stops. I approached a small child, standing in the street, her mouth smeared with dried blood and the remains of a cotton dress hanging in tatters on her small frame. I held my shotgun at the ready. I nudged her cautiously with the gun and watched her crumble away. I ran my hands through the forlorn pile of dust. This was coming for all of us, sooner or later.

Street after street, building after building was filled with the unsouled. A creeping dread came upon me that I would discover BD and his squad in that state, staring blankly into nowhere in unearthly silence. I headed for St. Swithun's Church, the revive point operated by the Yagoton Revivification Clinic. It's where I would have gone if I had found myself dead in the suburb. As I approached I began to hear the sound of zombie groans and, twisted as it sounds, my heart lifted. There was still life, of a kind, in the suburb. I turned a corner to see a large horde of the undead, clearly awake and moving. There must have been a hundred of them milling around the church and its next door Necrotech building.

I beat a hasty retreat, back round the corner and out of sight. There was no way I was going to be able to get into the church. If Ghost Squad were all zombies, would they have the sense to realise that? I tried to think what I'd do in such a situation. If I managed to work out I wasn't going to get revived in the church I'd try to stand nearby. I had my back pressed against the side of a warehouse. This bit of Malton was old, a small mill village that had been swallowed up when they built the new town. The warehouse was tall and built from red brick. Its windows gaped open, high up in the sides. I should check it out while it was still light.

Inside, the warehouse was a big open space with a gently sloping corrugated iron roof. The remains of shelving were toppled and strewn all over the place. Shafts of light fell from the empty windows across the floor. One of them illuminated a familiar silhouette. It was Andy, my baby brother, who these days carried around a shotgun called Black Betty and styled himself Bulldog, or BD for short. Words endlessly fail me in describing the ridiculous machismo of the whole thing. What worried me even more was that Black Betty was actually his. I hoped that meant he'd owned a firearms license before Malton went to hell in a hand-basket. I didn't like to think that the jet-black 12 gauge had been an illegal weapon.

He was standing rigidly to attention with his back to me. But I could see his hands flexing convulsively so he was probably alert. I sat down quietly behind one of the tumbled shelves and began to mix serum. We cook up batches of the key ingredients whenever we can but, once you mix the final results together, they only remain active for an hour. Worse yet, you need heat to mix them. I had a small calor gas stove in my pack which I took out and lit. Then I mixed the liquid together into a syringe and heated it over the flame, shaking it to watch the chemicals combine. Eventually the L.E.D.s along the side of the syringe began to light up, showing the mixture was done. I shook the syringe one last time for good measure, watching the glittering sparkles swirl in the green liquid. I packed away the stove. Then I peered cautiously around the shelf unit to see what BD was doing. He was standing just where I'd last seen him. Which was good, I told myself. If he didn't see me approach it would make administering the serum easier. BD's never gone in for attacking as a zombie. I wasn't sure he'd ever eaten anyone. But it was better to be safe than sorry.

You'd never know we were siblings to look at us. I inherited my mother's small frame and my father's blonde hair. BD got the brown hair and the rugby player's physique. Add to that an interest in body-building and he must weigh twice as much as I do and none of it is flab. So I was pretty much relying on the fact that he would be a good, docile zombie. I was disconcerted when he turned around, apparently alerted to my approach, and fixed a baleful glare upon me.

"It's all right, BD." I said in as soothing a tone as I could manage. "I've got a nice syringe full of medicine here. We'll have you back to normal in no time."

BD opened his mouth and let out a long, loud groan. It echoed around the shadowy interior of the warehouse and, no doubt, out into the street beyond and to the vast horde crowded outside St. Swithun's and the Whatmore building.

"Shit, BD! What did you do that for? You want a horde of zombies on top of us, soon as you're on your feet?"

I was wary of his behaviour though, so I started trying to circle around. I needed to get behind him to administer the serum. Slowly BD shuffled to follow my movements. Shit.

"Come on, BD," I carried on talking, hoping something in my tone would break into his awareness. "Stand still like a good little zombie."

He lurched towards me, arms outstretched. Not good. I wasn't going to be able to circle behind him. I tried to assess my surroundings. A couple of the shelving units were still standing. It was a long shot, but gripping the syringe with my teeth, I clambered up one until I was crouched on a wooden shelf just out of BD's reach. I got there just in time as he reached the foot of the unit, hands

reaching up to grab me. Then he grasped the supports and began to pull the unit over.

I jumped. It was a seven-foot drop to the ground, but I've done a lot of running and jumping and I rolled as I hit the warehouse floor. I staggered to my feet turned and sprang again onto BD's back. It's a good thing zombie thought processes are on the slow side. BD was still gripping onto the shelving unit, though he had stopped pulling at it, obviously aware I had gone somewhere. I wrapped my left arm around his neck and my legs around his waist. You have to insert the syringe into the spinal cord at the base of the skull so I struggled awkwardly to get my right hand into position.

BD roared, turned and staggered backwards. We crashed into the shelving unit, driving the breath from my body. I was going to have some bruises from this little encounter. I managed to hang on though, still struggling with the syringe. I found the right spot and inserted the needle into BD's neck. At that moment he bit my arm, pretty much through to the bone. I had just about enough willpower to slam the plunger on the needle home before I passed out from the pain.

15.2 Part Two

"Come on, Cat. Swallow!"

I came round in a haze of pain. BD had a hand clamped over my mouth which was full of water or something. I swallowed convulsively without thought and felt pills slipping down my throat. They would be an anti-virus. Zombie bites are infected and the disease spreads through the system quickly.

BD lifted his hand from my mouth.

"Morphine!" I gasped, loudly.

"Shh! You'll attract the zombies."

"Give me some fucking morphine then. I can't believe you bit me, you tosser."

BD sighed. "When did you last have a shot?"

Morphine addiction is an occupational hazard of life in Malton.

"It's been long enough! Morphine! Now!"

"Very well. You'd better roll over."

BD had already bandaged up my arm while I was unconscious and bound it in a sling. Rolling over was agony since it trapped the arm under my body. I wasn't quiet about it.

"Will you keep it down!" hissed BD.

He was breaking out one of the pre-packaged morphine shots. The first-aid supplies they drop on Malton are intended for use with minimal training. Morphine comes in pre-packaged syringes designed to be injected into muscle, all wrapped up in a handy little information leaflet, complete with diagrams. Basically the recommendation is to stab the syringe into a nice large muscle, as far as possible from any major veins or arteries. That translates into your arse-cheek, in layman's terms. Fortunately, put me in enough pain and I'll stop worrying about my dignity.

When he'd finished, BD hauled me to my feet and began to bundle me towards the door of the warehouse. "We need to get out of here," he said urgently. "You've made enough noise to attract a small army."

"I've made enough noise! What about that bloody great feeding groan you let out?"

BD swore. On cue a human figure shuffled through the open door of the warehouse. BD unslung Black Betty and fired a round into it. It collapsed backwards on the floor, its face a mess of shot.

"Shelving unit." I said. "Against the wall, over there."

I pointed to where a loose roofing panel provided a way up onto the roof.

"We don't have time," protested BD.

I unholstered the pistol Ian had given me. "I've got six shots. You'd better be quick."

I headed for the door. Behind me I could hear BD cursing, but also the sounds of furniture being moved. A second zombie came inside and I shot at it, missing the head the first time but hitting the second. That's the trouble with pistols, they require rather more accuracy than shotguns. Then I kicked the door closed in the face of a third. There was a bolt which I rammed shut. Moments later, of course, an arm came through the door. To my amazement the hand scrabbled at the bolt, drawing it back. The arm withdrew. I leaned against the door and peered through the hole. A large male zombie stood right next to me. I put a shot through its head and pushed the bolt back into place.

Behind it stood two more zombies who charged at the door at a surprising pace. I stepped back. The hinges failed under the assault and the door burst open. It took my last three shots to put the two zombies down and then I was running back towards the shelving unit and BD. I pulled my arm free of the sling as I ran. I was going to need both hands free to climb. Luckily the morphine was already beginning to dull the pain. BD was climbing up one side of the unit and I ran to the other in order to balance the weight, somewhat at any rate. Below us the zombies surged into the room. BD reached the top of the unit first and waited for

me. He then jumped for the hole in the roof, catching hold of a side panel and hauled himself through. Down below me the zombies had reached the foot of the unit. I had seconds before they tipped it over. I jumped, arms outstretched. BD caught them and I screamed. There wasn't yet enough morphine in my system to override the pain of someone actually grabbing my injured arm. Below my feet the shelving unit tumbled to the ground with a crash. BD hauled me through the hole and I lay whimpering and cursing next to him until the morphine took hold properly.

Then the storm, that had been brewing all day, finally broke with a crash of thunder and rain began sheeting down onto us.

"We're going to have to move," said BD. "Get a few buildings along and then barricade ourselves in. We can't stay up here."

I stared at him in disbelief. "I can't free run in this state." I lay back and closed my eyes, cushioned by the familiar wooziness that came with a good dose of morphine.

"Well, you'll have to. If you stay up here you'll get exposure."

I was dimly aware of BD moving around on top of the roof. But I was getting distracted by the sounds of whispering voices in my ears. It was the souls of the dead. Every time a zombie eats a brain it ingests a fragment of someone's personality, a shard of their soul becomes lodged inside you somewhere. Even when you're brought back to life you can still hear those shards, occasionally, whispering to you. It's particularly obvious if you actually meet the victim again. It's one of the reasons I tend to avoid Conndraka, a former DHPD Commissioner. It's extremely disconcerting to have a voice in your head whispering someone's words to you moments before they utter them. Mostly the voices are pretty quiet but tonight they were singing a full choral symphony, helped along, no doubt, by the morphine.

"OK." BD's voice broke through and I opened my eyes to look at him. He was standing in front of me, rain pouring down his face. "Time to get going."

I blinked at him. I had no intention of going anywhere. It was midsummer. I wasn't that cold.

BD grabbed my good arm and hauled me to my feet. That's when I saw what he'd been doing. A makeshift bridge, constructed from a roof panel, led from the top of the warehouse to what appeared to be the remains of an apartment block that backed up close to it.

"You have to be kidding me!"

"You've got to get indoors Cat. I'll barricade you in and then go and find the rest of Ghost." BD nodded at the roof panels. "That should hold your weight. I'll

hold it steady at the other end."

He leaped across the gap and then sat on the end of the large roof panel. "Just walk slowly and carefully," he said. "You'll be fine." He smiled his cocky, lopsided grin that I always wanted to smack from his face.

I stepped out onto the bridge, holding my arms out to balance. But to tell the truth I wasn't really concentrating. I was listening to the voices in my head and they were calling down to the street level, singing in tune with the low sonorous minds of their undead brethren. They sang of unity, of the loss of self, of shrugging off the fighting and the striving and simply following the call. I remembered Bryn walking out, leaving her badge behind and saying she was tired of trying to hold all the diverse personalities in the DHPD together. Had she been following a call the rest of us couldn't hear? I paused halfway across BD's bridge and turned to face the drop to the street below, arms still outstretched.

"Oh fuck!" I heard BD say. "Cat, you've got to listen to me. There's something here that makes people behave strangely. Makes them want to be zombies and stay zombies. We bumped into a guy who said it had been going on for a while. People would get up in the night and sleep walk out of the barricades. Shit! I knew I shouldn't have given you that morphine."

Seriously, what difference would it make to BD if I did jump? The wind whipped around me, tugging at my clothing, calling me to leap into it.

"Cat! Don't you dare quit on me. Do you hear me? Don't you dare quit!"

Who's quitting? This was moving on. I raised up on my tiptoes experimentally, thinking about the jump. Somewhere more thunder rumbled.

"Shit, Cat! Can't you stick to anything? I mean seriously, did you ever hold down a job for more than six months? I thought you said things had changed."

Actually I once worked in Waterstone's, the bookshop, for a whole year before I chucked it in. I couldn't off-hand remember why, something to do with a plan to move to London. But who cared? Not BD, he always wheeled out the quitter line when he wanted me to piss off and leave him alone. Easy enough to leave him alone when you think about it. Why hadn't I thought about it before?

"You walked out on us 20 years ago and you've been walking out on people ever since."

It was a long time since he'd brought that up. I turned to look at him. In a flash of lightning I saw him, kneeling on the edge of the roof panel, fighting to keep it steady as my weight tipped it over. He had one arm stretched out trying to grab me, but I was out of reach. I blinked, puzzled by the reference to our youth and the thunder rolled again.

"I was 16, BD, and pregnant, and couldn't sit in the same room with Dad

without arguing." I shrugged. "What did you expect me to do?"

I'd gone to Barry's as I recalled, which was stupid, it was obvious even at that point that the relationship wasn't going to last until the birth. I moved back for a couple of months, and then I'd moved in with Steve. I frowned, trying to recall what had happened next. But it wasn't like I'd really walked out on them. I'd ended up back in the family home often enough. It was a long time ago.

"I was six, and I'd just lost my mother," BD shouted above the wind. "I expected you to be there."

Something in his tone pulled me back and across the bridge. The roof panel clattered down into the street behind me while BD held me tight.

"Thank God!" he whispered.

Malton's Zombie Apocalypse - bringing families closer together since 2005.

It was an apartment block. I was shivering with cold by the time BD got me inside. He picked an apartment on the top floor that was still relatively intact, found some discarded clothes in a wardrobe and left me to get changed while he dropped down to the ground floor and secured the entrances. I was half-asleep on the bed by the time he got back.

"I have to go and find the others," he said. "The place is pretty secure. It should hold until I get back."

"I'll be fine," I whispered. I just wanted to sleep.

He draped a blanket over me and I felt his lips brush my forehead. "Useless Hippy," he murmured fondly.

Before sleep overwhelmed me, I managed to say, "Fascist." Just so he knew I loved him too.

As I sank deep into slumber, the ghostly choir continued to sing.

"She's support, not strike. She'll slow us down."

That was Anton Weissenberg. I've never liked him much and he's never failed to make it clear that the feeling is entirely reciprocated. He thinks I'm a bad influence on BD. I think much the same about him. BD worships the ground beneath his size 10 SAS boots. I don't know much about Anton. He's a middle

height, wiry American with brown hair and brown eyes. Like most of Ghost Squad he's heavily into the tattoos, including a professional one depicting black flames that extend across his chest and over his right shoulder. Thanks to some complex military politics, no one has ever cared to elaborate for me, he got parachuted into Malton in the first days of the outbreak as part of an SAS team who all promptly got themselves eaten. He's in his early 20s now but has been in active military service, mostly in sniper units, for over a decade. Either he's lying or there's some very scary maths there. For some reason the squad always call him Whats. This is apparently short for Whatshisname. No, the joke is lost on me as well.

I cracked my eyes open. The bedroom door stood ajar, looking into the living room area. Ghost Squad were seated around a table, BD at their head. Whats had his back to me. Hawthorne, Famz, and Tarabon were all there as well. BD had been busy overnight. He'd obviously managed to find and revive almost his whole squad. Victor Hawthorne was a former fireman, the oldest and calmest squad member. Famz was a former US Navy SEAL and Tarabon was the squad rookie.

"We can't leave her here," BD said. "She'll be fine with us."

The looks on the faces of his squad were not exactly full of confidence. I sat up slowly, hoping no one would notice. I flexed the fingers of my left hand. My arm was sore and aching but it felt a lot better. It seems pretty clear that this is the effect Necrotech were aiming for. Soldiers that healed overnight. The whole shambling brain-eating stuff was just an unfortunate side effect.

Question was: how to get past the squad?

I walked briskly into the living room. "Hi guys!" I said brightly and waved at the squad. "With you in a minute." I carried on, through to the apartment's front door.

"Cat! Where are you going?" asked BD.

"Give me five. I'll be right back," I shouted as I headed down the stairs to the ground floor.

They'd done a pretty good job of barricading us in. Wooden boards had been nailed across the doorway and then loose furniture from the surrounding flats piled up against it. Outside, the zombies hammered and groaned. I pulled aside a bed frame to reveal a table. I climbed up on it, and then the book shelves it wedged in place and this gave me access to the top of the wooden board. I grabbed a loose piece of timber and started using it as a lever to pull the board loose.

"Outside," whispered the voices in my head and the horde roared in response.

"Shit! She's taking down the barricades." It was Whats, but the rest of Ghost was right behind him. I pulled desperately at the board finally prizing it away. At

the very least it meant the hands outside could gain purchase on the next board down. Then I reached for my pistol.

This is not a sensible thing to do in the company of an SAS Officer and a Navy SEAL. Whats was within a foot of me when I got the gun level and he didn't stop. I couldn't see Famz, but he couldn't be far away. I pulled the trigger.

15.3 Part Three

I'm lucky, really, that I hadn't had the chance to reload the pistol since my encounter with the zombies in the warehouse. If I'd shot Whats I doubt I would have lived.

Everything became quite confused. Whats had the pistol. Famz had pinned my arms behind me and was forcing me down from the barricade, while Hawthorne and Tarabon rushed to shore up the gaps. Then BD and Whats were kneeling on the table shooting into the throng outside. Famz flung me against the wall and I was very efficiently searched for weapons. He held me still, a gun against my head, and one eye still on the fight at the barricades.

It didn't take long. Hawthorne and Tarabon got the boards back in place and the squad piled more furniture up against them.

BD looked at me coldly. "Take her upstairs."

Famz pushed me up the stairs, my arms still pinned behind me. We reached the flat once more.

"Keep her in the bedroom, Famz," said BD. "We need to discuss this."

Famz dumped me unceremoniously on the bed. He placed a chair by the door and sat on it, eyeing me with apparent disinterest. I sat on the bed and considered my options. I could hear the sound of discussion from the next room, but not what was being said.

Famz and Whats both have a similar wiry build, a complete contrast to BD's chunkiness. Anton's mostly quite quiet while Famz is the joker of the pack, if you're into practical jokes and sexual innuendo anyway. But that gave me an idea. It was something of a long shot, but you work with the tools you have to hand.

"Famz," I said, standing up, aware of a wheedling tone in my voice which I tried to suppress.

"Cat?"

I crossed the room to him and sat astride his lap. "Did I ever tell you I liked you best of all the Ghosts?"

"Can't say that you did." His tone wasn't entirely discouraging and his arms had sneaked around my waist so I persevered and dropped my head down for a kiss and, since he reciprocated, I placed my hands on his chest and then ran them down over the abdominal muscles and towards the thigh holster and the pistol it contained. His hands moved up my back and out, cycling down my arms and reaching my wrists about the same time I reached the gun. At which point he grabbed hold and twisted my arms behind me, pulling me away at the same time.

"You know," he said conversationally, "if I had the slightest reason to suppose that you were of sound mind, this would be quite fun. You should put out more in the normal run of things, Cat. This kind of behaviour would be more convincing if you did."

I couldn't help hissing at him in anger.

"And," he added, as if he'd just thought of it. "There's the small matter of BD threatening to rip the balls off anyone who lays a finger on you."

Actually BD had had a similar conversation with me, warning of dire consequences if I so much as thought about considering sleeping with any of his squad. I struggled in Famz's grasp.

"BD!" he called. "You guys made a decision yet? Only your sister is getting quite lively in here."

The door opened and BD looked in, taking in the sight of me struggling on Famz's lap.

"Am I interrupting something?" he asked.

"Only an attempt to steal my gun," returned Famz. "You need to do something about her, mate. We can't risk leaving her in this state."

"Wait there," said BD and he went out slamming the door behind him.

When BD returned he had a needle full of the glittering revivification serum in his hands.

"Shit!" said Famz. "What's that for?"

BD shrugged. "We were all fine after we got revived and she was fine until the morphine. I'm gambling a dose of this will clear her system."

"You ever given that to someone living before?" asked Famz.

"Nope," returned BD.

I began to struggle harder in Famz's arms.

"Hold her steady," said BD.

"Fuck off, BD!" I said. "You're completely mad. You are not putting that stuff in me."

"It's this or shoot you between the eyes and dump you out of the window," he returned in a tight voice.

His hand came down on the back of my head, pushing my chin into my chest. I struggled desperately until I heard BD's voice in my ear. "Cat," he said. "I'm trying to inject a bloody great needle full of serum into your spinal cord. So help me, if you keep struggling, this really is going to kill you."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on his voice, which cut through the singing and the whispers. "Keep talking," I managed, "and do it quick."

"It'll be OK, Cat," he said. "All you have to do is hold still."

And I held still, feeling the prick of the needle at the back of my neck. Then there was white fire screaming into my brain and flaring behind my eyes. As if from far away I could hear people shouting.

"She's fitting!"

"Shit, BD! I hope you know what you are doing."

"Don't pin her down! Just make sure she can't hurt herself!"

Then the adrenaline payload hit and I sat up with a gasp. I had been lying on the floor and Ghost Squad were crowded round me. Inside my head all was blessed silence. I hate it when BD has no sensible argument on his side, whatsoever, but somehow manages to be right anyway.

"So is she sane again?" asked Whats.

"You all right?" asked BD as he knelt down to my level.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said. "Though Mandy Rice-Davies applies."

BD grinned that stupid lopsided number again. "She's back to normal. Well, normal for her, at any rate."

"The effect is spreading," said BD. "You said Shuttlebank was deserted too when you came through."

We were all seated around the table, except for Tarabon who had been sent downstairs to watch the 'cades. At the moment the barricades were holding but we didn't really expect the situation to last. We were packed and ready to go. I was studiously avoiding catching Famz's eye.

"The orders were to head straight back to Caiger. We're needed to defend the mall." BD had made it clear that this was all of Ghost Squad. Syvwkh Lloyd, always referred to as Sblmnl, presumably because it, too, lacked any sensible vowels, would not be coming back.

BD shook his head. "No, we need to sort this out and quickly. Caiger's going to fall whatever we do. Ian's just playing a numbers game to minimise the

resources wasted reviving people."

"You have absolutely no idea what is going on here," I argued. "Not a single clue."

BD ticked off the points on his fingers. "We know something here is making the zombies smarter and more able. We know it makes pretty much any zombie inimical to the alive which makes reviving difficult to impossible. We know that it can influence living people too, particularly after they have slept or if they've had a dose of morphine. So we can't afford to sleep until this is sorted out."

"What's it like?" asked Whats suddenly. He was looking at me.

"What's what like?"

"Whatever it is?" he persisted. "What were you trying to do?"

"OK," I tried to pull my thoughts in order. "You know how it is when you've eaten someone's brains. It's like you can hear their voices in your head?"

"Hang on just a minute!" said Hawthorne. "When you've eaten someone's brains? Their voices? Just how many people's brains have you eaten?"

I shrugged. Zombie brains aren't really up to counting. I looked to BD for support but his face was set in a carefully neutral expression. As far as he was concerned this was another mess I needed to sort out for myself.

"When the disaster first struck," I hesitated. "When the disaster first struck I ran with a horde for a while."

"How long is a while?" asked Whats, his voice unfriendly.

"Until the first siege of Caiger, or thereabouts."

"Fucking Hell!" said Whats. "That's more than six months. BD, she's virtually a death cultist."

"It was three years ago," said BD.

Whats simmered visibly but kept quiet.

"Go on, Cat," said BD.

"OK, so take it from me that when you eat someone you get an echo of them in your head. There's some Necrotech theory..."

BD waved his hand. "Theory later."

"OK so this thing, whatever it is, it makes the voices sing out and then talk about returning to the horde."

They sing of the joy of being a small part of something, rather than the whole. They sing of the lust for violence, the simplicity of the search for warmth and life and the splendour of the kill. No choices, no decisions, no complications, just blood on your tongue, flesh and bone beneath your hands and someone else's thoughts in your brain. They sing of acceptance and belonging without judgement or conditions.

"Hey! Cat!" Famz was clicking his fingers in front of my face. "You zoned out there a minute."

I caught his eye and I think I blushed. My cheeks felt warm at any rate. Why had I tried to seduce Famz of all people? It was like one of his less funny jokes.

"So basically the more brains you've eaten. The more susceptible you are to whatever it is," said BD.

"Why are we going to take her with us again?" asked Whats.

"No one gets left behind," said BD firmly.

"Well at least tell me we're not giving her any guns," said Whats.

BD looked at me and then shook his head. "No guns, for the time being."

"So where do we start the search?" asked Famz.

"The Whatmore Building," I said.

"Why?"

I shrugged. "The voices were calling to head in that direction and there's a massive horde of zombies outside. If that isn't a big red sign saying 'Here be dragons', I don't know what is."

We headed back towards the Whatmore building across the rooftops. None of us wanted to risk street level with that many zombies around. The apartment block and the Warehouse both had flatish roofs, although the warehouse roof was barely held together. From the warehouse though we had to cross a street corner to the top of St. Swithun's pitched roof.

Hawthorne slung a rope with a grappling hook over to the church and most of Ghost stood at one end, anchoring it, while Tarabon swung across, a second rope tied to his waist, and secured both at the far end. Then we all followed, leaving the ropes in place as an escape route.

Zombies milled around below us, visible through the missing tiles on the roof. We worked our way around the crenellations and gargoyles until we were opposite the Whatmore building. Like all the Necrotech buildings, it was a prestigious, architect-designed structure. In this case it was a complex, blocky thing with over-hanging cubes jutting out from wooden planking.

St. Swithun's is an old church, another remnant of the mill village. It was built right up to the boundaries of its land. When Necrotech, who basically bank-rolled the construction of our shiny new town, picked the plot next door for one of their

facilities, they built up to the boundary as well. So from the top of the church there was basically a two-foot gap onto the top of one of the pods.

BD went across first, followed by Hawthorne. They roped themselves together and BD anchored himself to the wall as best he could. The plan was that Hawthorne would climb up onto the roof of the Necrotech building, secure a line, and then the rest of us would follow. BD, as the heaviest person present, was responsible for holding if Hawthorne fell.

Hawthorne had just started the climb when all the lights came on across the building, blazing out of every window in a sudden flash. It felt like there was a vicious tug and I stumbled forwards, but Tarabon caught my arm. Then there was a rushing in my ears, like a wind passing by. I gripped Tarabon as I realised what it was. The souls of the dead were being pulled into the building, lamenting their fate to the grey summer sky as they rushed past. The souls within me cried out too, but were anchored by the flesh. Just as suddenly the lights went out and the sensation ceased.

"What was that?" whispered Tarabon. There's a reason they call him the rook and it's not just his recent transfer into the squad. He has a round face and a kind of innocence about him that gives him the appearance of youth.

"Something trying to steal your soul," I said.

"You're not serious," said Famz.

I looked at him managing, I think, not to blush this time. "Did you feel anything?"

For a moment I thought he was going to deny it and, knowing him, make a joke about fingers, but after a second he gave a sharp nod. I thought of the ranks of the unsouled. I don't know who first coined the term but the sense that, when you ate a brain, you stole a piece of someone's essence was profound. What could essence be but the soul? And if you lost enough of it to the ravening hordes what became of you? The blank staring faces and the bodies that turned to dust provided an answer of sorts.

"OK folks," said BD. "So now we know why there are so many unsouled around. Let's get on with this before it happens again."

BD opened the roof hatch and peered cautiously into the darkness inside. "This place is probably crawling with zombies," he observed. "How are we for torches?"

Famz and Hawthorne both produced torches. BD took one and hung through the hatchway, shining it around.

"OK, I've got one. Looks like it's snoozing. Take it out, Whats." BD sat up, holding the torch on something in the interior.

Whats un-holstered his mean-looking revolver and sighted through the hatch. There was a bang.

"Unsouled. It's crumbled," he said.

BD made a disgusted noise at the waste of ammunition and looked around his team. "OK, we treat this as a standard clear and 'cade, but be aware that the zombies may be more lively than usual." He looked at me in exasperation. "Cat, just try not to get in the way."

One by one, Ghost Squad dropped through the hatchway. I followed more cautiously. A clear and 'cade is an operation to clear a building of zombies and then barricade it to make it safe. Dixie nearly always arrived after the job was done. We were in a small stairwell, empty rooms with broken down doors standing on either side of us.

"Three in here," said Hawthorne quietly, raising his shotgun.

"Just a moment," said BD. We crowded in the doorway as BD crossed the room, gun upraised until he reached the first zombie. Then he kicked it. It crumbled into dust.

"Shit!" whispered Whats. "Unsouled too."

BD walked up to the next two, with the same results.

"It'll save ammunition," said Famz.

"They're too close to the power source," I said, almost without thinking it through.

"What do you mean?"

"When the power goes on it sucks souls. There's not much to hold a soul in a zombie body, no heart-beat, no circulation of the blood. They just get... pulled out."

It was then we heard a groan from the doorway.

It was the remains of a large man in a suit and tie. It looked to me like he'd been dead a long time. Hawthorne was closest and he hardly blinked. His gun came up and the zombie's head exploded in a shower of bone and brain. He and Tarabon picked up the body without comment, carried it to the open window and threw it outside.

"OK, so some of them are still alive," said BD.

I was thinking through a mental map of the building. None of the Necrotech buildings are the same, but they all conform to one of four or five basic layouts.

The tall upright ones, like the Whatmore, generally had a strange parabolic chamber that was called 'the well'. No one knew what it was for.

"We're standing directly above the well, if Whatmore has one." I observed.

Everyone glanced downwards at the peeling carpet tiles beneath our feet. "And that is relevant why?" asked BD.

"I want to go down."

"You're not going strange again are you?" asked Famz.

"Not so much. But you insisted on bringing me along. You might as well use me as your miner's canary if I'm here." I gestured downwards with my rapidly healing arm. "I'm telling you, whatever it is, is beneath our feet and in these buildings, that's the well."

They all looked to BD for a decision.

"We head for the well," he said.

"Mind you," I added, "that's where it wants us to go, so it's probably a trap."

BD just shrugged.

We met two more zombies on the stairs before we got to the edge of the well chamber. I didn't even see them, Tarabon and BD at point took them out and tipped them over the banisters to the ground floor below. Famz and Hawthorne moved behind them using the torches to light their way. Whats stood behind me, carefully not pointing the barrel of Rough Justice, his Ruger .357, in my direction.

The well chamber was round. Like all the wells, you enter onto a high gantry that surrounds the top edge of the parabolic pit. No one knew what they were for nor why Necrotech had built them, not even the few Necrotech scientists left inside the city.

Around the gantry of this well, however, were ranged the silent figures of the unsouled, facing inwards, still as death. BD marched around silently, collapsing each one in turn, checking that none were zombies. The rest of us gazed into the well. Instead of a deep, dark pit, this well glowed with faint blue light. It glittered and sparkled like glowing dust motes in the air. It sang to the voices in my head.

"Dear Lord!" I whispered.

"What is it, Cat?" asked Famz.

"This is where the souls have gone." I reached down to them over the gantry rail, only to be pulled back by Whats.

"Careful there," he said.

"None of this makes sense," said BD.

I struggled to put it together in my mind. "I think it does."

"How so?"

"Right, we know that one of the effects of the Necrotech virus is to keep a person's personality and memories coherent, even when the brain itself, the wetware, is destroyed."

"We do?" asked BD.

"Don't you guys ever talk to Doc Sy?"

"Shit, Cat, why would we do that? If he hadn't got himself bitten and ended up trapped here, he'd have us all strapped to a laboratory bench before you could say 'Experimental test subject' "

OK, a fair comment, but information is information right?

I sighed. "OK. Your memories and personality are stored as, basically, electrical signals in your brain, in a kind of personality matrix. In theory if you destroy the brain, you lose the signal. It doesn't matter if Necrotech zombie nanites, or whatever they are, reconstruct the brain itself. The wetware alone isn't the person, it's the electrical signals and once they're gone, they're gone. You should be a blank slate. With me so far?"

"Possibly."

"One of the things the zombie virus does is allow the electrical signals to continue processing, at least long enough for the wetware to regenerate and provide a basis for them. When a zombie goes for brains, it's the electrical field it's after. When you become unsouled, its because the electrical field has lost its coherency. That can happen for a variety of reasons including losing too much to zombie brain feeders or, on the other side of the divide, becoming overwhelmed by the competing signals of all the people you've eaten."

Tarabon was looking pale, in the strange half light that came from below us. "So this thing is pulling this electrical personality matrix out of people and putting it here?"

We all looked down into the lights.

"They were trying to build a fucking super-computer out of people's souls," said Famz.

Note to self: the joker of the pack is brighter than he likes to make out.

"Wait a minute, so these aren't actually souls. I mean this personality matrix isn't actually a soul," said BD.

I shrugged.

"Souls don't exist," he persisted.

I opened my mouth to argue the toss and then I thought of the missing Bryn. When someone vanished in Malton the assumption generally was that they had become unsouled. Bryn had walked out saying she needed a few days to herself and had never come back. I pictured her, standing in some darkened back street,

staring blankly into space, those porcelain perfect features ready to crumble to dust at the slightest touch. Her soul devoured by the horde. The image had haunted my dreams for months. Maybe it was easier to pretend it wasn't the soul that got destroyed.

"No, they are not souls," I agreed.

"So let's blow this shit up and go home," said Famz, ever practical.

"We have explosives?" I asked, surprised.

Famz grinned dangerously. "We can always improvise."

"There's something down there," said Tarabon who had been peering into the well for some time.

We all leaned over to look. The pale dusting of blue light made it hard to see, but there did seem to be something at the bottom of the well.

"Someone should go down and see what it is," said Famz.

BD nodded. "We all go. No splitting up."

I lingered behind as the others started down the stairway. Inevitably, Whats prodded me with Rough Justice. "Get a move on, Cat."

"Whats, I can hear whispering again," I said quietly.

"You becoming a liability?" he asked.

"Not yet, but soon, maybe," I returned.

"Why are you telling me?" He looked bored.

"Right now, if any of us gets killed, and there's another of those power surges, there's a chance they'll become unsouled. I don't see BD taking that risk where I'm concerned, do you?"

I think Whats actually looked at me properly then, for the first time ever. He has these warm brown eyes, but you shouldn't let that fool you.

"Don't worry, I have a bullet saved," he said.

I reflected, as I began the descent, that it's a pretty screwed up situation when you find a statement like that reassuring.

As we got lower, the sight at the bottom of the well unfolded itself before us.

"Well, fuck!" said Famz once we were down.

Bodies were strewn over the floor, crumbling to dust with the vibration of our footfalls.

"What is this?" asked Whats.

"Death cultists," said BD in disgust.

"Some of them anyway," I said. Several of the bodies were in robes. Where the hell did you get robes in Malton?

"Cause of death?" asked BD.

I looked around me. “Nothing obvious on this one,” I said, peering at a robed figure carefully and trying not to crumble it as I touched.

“This one was stabbed. All of these were and all unsouled” said Tarabon. There was a neat row of bound figures lined up on the floor. He caught BD’s eye. “Sorry Boss, all unpersonality matrixed.”

“OK, Cat. Tell us what happened here,” said BD.

I blinked. “How should I know?”

“Because you talk to Doc Sy, though goodness knows why. Why hasn’t one of these super-computers activated before?”

I looked around the chamber. “Well, I guess, if you normally switch one of these on, it doesn’t have enough power to actually pull in any souls.”

“Personality matrixes,” said BD.

“Matrices,” I said vaguely.

“Whatever. So why did the death cultists make a difference?” BD pushed.

I looked at the scene. “They were sacrificing people.”

“Making them into zombies,” Hawthorne spat.

“And they had the power on.” I walked over to the makeshift altar at the centre of the well. “They were right here.” I looked up at as the parabola spread out around me, up into the souls that whispered ever more strongly to mine. “At the focal point. They basically stood right at the focal point and killed a whole bunch of people, weakening the anchoring of the souls and then turned the power on.”

“But the power’s not on now,” said Tarabon. “Why are the souls still up there?”

“Same as when you head-shot a zombie. It’s self-sustaining for a while. At least for long enough to let the wetware regenerate.”

“But there’s no wetware here, Cat,” said BD.

“No, so it needs regular injections of power. That’s why the lights went on. It’s controlling a zombie to operate the generator.”

The voices in my head were singing with the voices in the air: community, conformity, regimentation, peace. I felt like I was sailing or flying. Nevertheless I kept slotting the pieces into place. “It calls to all the matrices, all the corrupted ones anyway. The computer isn’t just the souls in the well. It’s every zombie it can reach out to and every soul fragment in one of us. That lets it control the bodies. It uses the power not just to keep running, but to draw more souls unto itself in order to expand its field of influence. Everything gets pulled to this spot.” I thumped the altar. “To the focal point. The more souls it pulls in the wider its influence extends.”

“So, like I said, we blow this shit up and go home,” said Famz.

I was struggling to speak. Half my mind seemed to be shutting down. I could hardly hear as Ghost Squad debated. But I could hear the well of souls whispering to the zombie that stood crouched over the generator.

"Get out!" I shouted.

"What?" someone said.

I looked up. Ghost Squad were spread out around the bottom of the well.

"The power is about to come on again. We're inside the well, at the focal point. You have to get out now!"

15.4 Part Four

BD glanced around. "Everyone, nearest exit!" he shouted.

Ghost Squad split. There were doors on either side. I could see Hawthorne, Tarabon and Famz heading for one. Whats and BD went for the other. My hands wouldn't let go of the altar. The well screamed its rage in my head and urged the dozing zombie by the generator to move.

"Cat!" BD was struggling back from the doorway towards me. His feet crunching through the bodies of the dead.

"No!" I wailed. I looked beyond him to where Whats stood. "Whats!"

Whats raised Rough Justice, sighting down it towards me, but BD obscured the shot. Whats couldn't get a clear line. I tore my hands free from the altar and staggered towards BD.

"Get out!" I called.

"Not without you." He grabbed hold of my arms, pulling me back towards the doorway. I felt the zombie awaken and I began to run, dragging BD along in my wake. My feet slipped in the dust on the sloped sides of the well. BD caught my waist as I fell and then Whats grabbed my outstretched hands, pulling me forwards into the doorway. I turned and we both grabbed BD's arms and pulled him through just as the lights came on.

My soul streamed outwards and I took a half step forwards but BD rugby-tackled me to the ground. "Oh no you don't!" he shouted.

I closed my eyes. Right then I wanted to join the voices. I was tired of being judged and trying and failing and being someone's awkward big sister who was kind of flaky and unreliable. I wanted to belong with the voices, to dance away with all those shards of soul in my head.

"Stay with me Cat." It was BD's voice. I opened my eyes. He was leaning over me. He held my head between his hands, staring down intently at me. Our

eyes are the same brown. I'd never noticed that before. "You belong here, Cat." he said. Shit! Could he hear the voices too? The power went off. I realised my face was wet with tears.

"Why did the power go off?" asked Whats.

"It gets souls in the initial pull, then after a minute or two no more come in," I said without thinking. "It's going to wait a while and then try again."

"Right," said BD. "We need to destroy that generator."

"Then blow it up," said Whats.

"I think, without power, it will just dissipate naturally," I mused.

"Yeah, but we'd all be happier if it were blown up," said BD.

"Zombies!" shouted Whats.

We were in a narrow corridor that led away from the well and past a number of lab spaces. Whats was shining a torch down to where a shuffling group were visible at the far end. BD was on his feet immediately, feeding rounds into Black Betty.

"Here." He paused and hauled a second shotgun from Whats's pack. Rapidly he loaded shells into it.

"Hey!" said Whats. "Who said we were rearming her?"

"You want two guns or three against those zeds?" asked BD.

We moved down the corridor together, getting as close as we could to the oncoming group. Shoulder to shoulder we spanned the corridor so at least they couldn't out-flank us.

"Steady," murmured BD, "fire on my mark. Let's not waste shot."

The gun I'd been handed was a Remington pump-action 12 gauge. The magazine held 2 rounds and there was a third in the chamber. I had spare shot from the supply Ian had given me. Problem was: it was in my backpack. BD had a cartridge holder strapped to the butt of Black Betty and more in the gun's bandolier-style strap. He was going to be reloading a lot quicker than I was.

"Fire!" said BD. The front rank of zombies went down.

I pumped the magazine. "Fire!" he said again. The second rank went down.

"Back! Fire!"

Whats and I each took a pace back and fired. BD was reloading.

It was a drill we all practised, retreating slowly and in step in the face of a horde.

"Empty!" I reported.

"Fall back! Reload!" he barked.

I hauled the box of shells from my backpack, loaded the gun and stuffed the box in a pocket, in easy reach. BD and Whats retreated towards me. We were

going to be forced back into the well.

There were no doors leading off the corridor, but I knew that there were labs behind the walls. I had a feeling said walls were temporary partitions, built into the spaces beneath the well. I glanced up and down the corridor and spotted the obligatory fire axe attached to one wall. I slung the shotgun over my shoulder, broke the glass and freed the axe. Then I swung it at the wall. There was a satisfying splintering sound as it smashed through the plasterboard and wooden studs. I swung it a second time, and then pulled and kicked to make a hole.

"Through here!" I shouted, squeezing through into the lab beyond. I didn't have a torch and the place was in darkness. I had a dim impression of smashed benches and overturned furniture. The floorboards creaked and wobbled under my feet.

Whats slipped through behind me with a torch. "You're going to have to widen that gap for BD," he said.

There came the sound of another shotgun blast from beyond the wall. "In your own time," came BD's voice.

I judged where he was and swung the axe again on the far side of the hole I'd already made. Whats began pulling at pieces of plasterboard. I saw the back of BD's flak jacket and began to haul him through the gap. Black Betty roared again. Whats grabbed BD's arm and together we pulled him into the lab. Then BD tripped over the threshold, falling back onto us. The floor gave a protesting groan as we landed and gave way beneath us in a shower of twisted metal and plasterboard. BD slid away from me, his flak jacket torn free from my grasp. Instinctively I flung up my arms and felt a hand grab mine. My fall was arrested with a painful jolt. I looked up to see Whats above me and over his shoulder was a zombie. I scrabbled at the knife at my belt with my free hand. The zombie fell forwards, biting into Whats's shoulder as I hauled myself up, stabbing with the knife into it's head. At that moment the lights came on.

"Cat?" came Whats's voice through the now familiar tugging sensation.

"You might as well let go," I said. "I'm going." Not much point staying around anymore after all.

"I did," he said. "You're hanging onto me."

I opened my eyes. It seemed I had dropped the knife and my right hand now clutched the neck of his flak jacket. His shoulder was ripped open and bleeding nastily. I'm frankly amazed he was still conscious. The zombie was nowhere to be seen apart from the light dust that fell around the two of us. I let go, eager to be on my way.

But it seemed Whats wasn't giving up on me that easily. His good hand had

already caught hold of my belt. Didn't matter. The link to the flesh is not that strong. I closed my eyes again.

"Think about BD." There was a note of desperation in Whats's voice.

"BD's dead," I said, and my voice sounded far away.

"It'll take more than falling through a floor to kill BD," said Whats. "Have a little faith, Cat."

When had I last had faith? Not since I was a child really. "I put away childish things."

"What?" Whats sounded confused. "You're not making sense, Cat."

That's what he thought.

"Jesus!" I heard him mutter. "Thank God no one's relying on her."

A chain of association sparked off in my mind. "Ian is relying on me."

"What?"

"Ian. Ian's relying on me," I said.

"Yes, OK, good!" said Whats. "Ian's relying on you. You can't let him down, can you?"

Could I? I thought about that.

The lights went off. I couldn't see in the dark.

"Not bad for someone who hates my guts," I said.

"I only did it for BD," replied Whats from somewhere above me.

I waved my arms upwards and managed to get a grip on his shoulders once more. He screamed as I grasped the open wound.

"Fucking hell, Cat!"

"Sorry!"

I scrabbled around at the edge of the floor and somehow managed to haul me back into the lab. The torch had rolled across the floor and I retrieved it. Shining it down I could see that BD appeared to have crashed through the floor below but nothing further. I turned back and examined Whats's wound.

"BD," he said.

"You won't do him any good if you die of an infection." I was as anxious as Whats, but I was going to need his help.

I bound up his shoulder and fed him some of the anti-virus pills.

"There's climbing gear in my backpack," he said.

I fished out a climbing harness and struggled into it, tightening the straps.

"I should go," he said.

I poked the wound at his shoulder, causing him to grunt with pain. "Not a chance," I said.

"You could give me morphine."

"After what happened to me?" I asked.

"Point taken."

We set up a rope, pinned to one of the lab benches and looped around Whats's waist. I put my rucksack back on, but I also kept the Remington and helped myself to one of Whats's pistols. I looked up, as I was about to drop down the hole, to find myself staring down the barrel of Rough Justice.

"Flake out, Purple Cat, and I swear I will find you, chain you to a wall and put bullets into your brain until there is no soul left," he said.

It's nice to know he cared I suppose. In fact, I was less bothered by the voices than I had been in the well. I was going to get BD and Ghost back to Caiger Mall. I blew Whats a kiss and dropped cautiously over the edge.

I had the torch in my free hand and controlled my descent with the other. As I dropped through the floor below, the torch picked out BD and, standing over him, a zombie. Throwing caution to the wind, I gave up on the idea of a controlled descent and came down as fast as possible, landing on the zombie with my feet. I rolled free, drawing the pistol as I did so and leaving the torch on the floor.

The zombie stood up and groaned, turning around towards me. I put one shot through the head and waited to see if it would stop. Never waste ammunition. It rocked and then took a step forward. I stepped back and shot again. It rocked once more and then dropped to the floor, disintegrating into dust as it did so.

BD was a mess. There was a raking claw mark down the side of his head. The zombie had been trying to get at the brains. Sometimes, as a zombie, you forget that you really need to apply a good, sharp blow to break the cranium open and then you can scoop out the brains. Luckily for BD, this one had tried to peel him like an orange. It was messy, but it would heal. Airways: clear. Breathing: thank god. Circulation: there wasn't too much blood on the floor but there seemed to be something behind his head. Cautiously I felt behind the neck and towards the back of the skull. My training didn't really cover broken necks and backs. Dr. Snow, Bryn's replacement as Dixie Squad lead, reckoned breathing and bleeding were the priority. We didn't have the resources for broken necks. It was better to risk killing the patient. If they died, we could always throw them out the window and pick them up the following day at a revive point. But I wasn't going to risk killing BD just here, not with the well of souls sucking the life from any newly-dead body. The back of his skull felt damp and sticky, my finger tips came away red with blood but his skull felt as though it was still in one piece. One shoulder was dislocated and checking his legs I reckoned his right was broken. I wanted to fix the shoulder but that was going to involve twisting the body and exacerbating any spinal injuries. I cleaned up the cuts on his face and splinted the leg.

The lights snapped on again. I grasped BD's hand. From somewhere, a long way up above me, Whats was shouting. But the pull was a lot weaker than it had been before. I was beneath the well now. BD's eyes flickered open.

"Hey!" I whispered, mildly embarrassed that he should wake up to find me holding his hand.

His eyes seemed unfocussed and I suddenly noticed a pale blue aura lifting up from his body.

"Hey!" I said more firmly, "don't go anywhere, BD."

"Not planning to, Sis," he croaked and then he suddenly rolled onto his side and threw up, simultaneously groaning with pain. So much for worrying about spinal injuries. The lights cut out again.

"Time to see to that shoulder," I said.

I lay him back on the floor and began to manipulate the shoulder back, rotating his arm. His eyes closed and his breathing came in short gasps but I didn't dare give him morphine. He gave a grunt as it finally slipped into place.

"I'm going to throw up again," he murmured. I hauled him upright and held him as he retched. Then I kept him sitting while I cleaned the wound on the back of his head. I was right; his thick skull was still intact. Hopefully our super healing powers would sort out any internal bleeding, if there was any, before it became a problem.

"I'm feeling a bit woozy," he muttered.

"Concussion," I said.

"That's probably as bad as morphine, isn't it?"

"You should be all right, since you're so clean living and keep off the brains."

"I might have eaten a few." He shuddered in my arms. "Sometimes it seems quicker than heading for a revive when you can see the death cultists in the fight."

Shock was probably setting in. I shone the torch up above our heads.

"Whats!" I called.

Whats's face came into view, but he motioned with his hand for quiet. I shone the torch on BD's seated form and gave a thumbs up sign. Whats echoed it back then his face vanished. I wrapped my arms around BD, trying to keep him warm in the absence of blankets.

The lights came on again and BD jerked in my arms. "You still here, Sis?"

"Yes, I'm still here. We're in the basement of Whatmore. Whats is two storeys up. We're going to have to get you up there somehow."

"I can't climb a rope like this and even the two of you together won't be able to lift me." The blue aura swirled in and around him.

"We're not leaving you, you daft lump," I said, seeing what was coming next. "Ian will have my guts for garters, if nothing else, if I leave you behind."

"Oh! So this is all about Ian is it? And for a moment I thought you'd come for me." He laughed and then started coughing which turned into more vomiting.

The lights switched off.

"That generator should be down here somewhere," I mused. "That way a zombie can manage it without losing its soul."

"Personality matrix," mumbled BD.

"Whatever."

BD sagged back leaning against me. "Famz is pretty smart. He'll figure it has to be down here. Obvious place really, even without all the soul sucking shit. He'll be here soon."

Speaking of zombies, I shone the torch on the body that lay next to us, busy regrowing its brain. It was motionless. Brain regrowth takes a while but a zombie always gets up eventually. I gave it a kick to move it further away and my foot sank into crumbling dust. We may have been in a weak spot, as far as the well was concerned, but it was clearly not a good place to be growing a brain. One less thing to worry about however.

I switched off the torch to conserve the batteries and to avoid unwanted attention and we sat for a while in the dark as the lights came on and off. BD didn't throw up again but his mind rambled off to the edge of consciousness and then struggled back. The whispering in my own mind grew louder and more insistent but it seemed easy to ignore, somehow, with BD in my arms.

"Sis?"

"Yes."

"Why did you join the DHPD? Doesn't seem like your style somehow."

"Honest answer?"

"Sure."

"You know you said I was a quitter?"

"I didn't really mean it."

"No. It was a fair comment. Well, I quit on being in a horde."

I could feel BD beginning to laugh. "You quit being a zombie."

I shrugged. "I got bored." Which was pretty much at the heart of why I'd quit most jobs in my life. "First siege of Caiger. I got bored. Someone revived me. I wandered inside, a DHPD recruiter came round and I thought why not?"

"Just like that?"

"Pretty much."

He was shaking with barely suppressed laughter. “I can’t believe you joined the DHPD on a whim.”

“Well, I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Three years later. I’m impressed. Been in it longer than I have. It was a shock finding you here when I signed up.”

I ruffled his hair. “At least I finally did something you approve of.”

It was then we heard the sound of gunfire.

“My guys!” said BD. “We need to get to them.”

He began struggling to his feet and then cried out in pain as he put weight on his broken leg.

“Just hang on!” I said. I checked my guns and picked up the torch. Then I grabbed BD’s arm and dragged it around my shoulder. “OK, let’s go.” I said.

We staggered forwards, lighting our way with the torch. BD was bloody heavy, which shouldn’t really have surprised me but it made my walking erratic. We were in a small room at the end of a long corridor. Halfway down the corridor were the other three members of Ghost Squad. The corridor was wide and they were being forced back at a rapid pace to avoid being out-flanked.

Somehow BD unslung Black Betty. “Keep me upright!” he said and then he bellowed: “To me! Form up!”

The three men looked back at us, standing in the torch-light, and then they broke ranks and sprinted down the corridor to form up alongside BD. The zombies shambled on, only about a dozen, I reckoned. Tarabon fumbled with his shotgun, reloading it.

“Steady,” said BD. “Fire!” The spread of shot took out half the zombies.

“Once more! Fire!”

One zombie was left. “Take it, Famz!” said BD. There was a shot and the creature went down.

“What’s our situation?” asked BD.

“We can’t find the fucking generator,” said Famz. “Must be down here somewhere, but we keep getting chased by groups of zeds.”

The room we’d stepped out of was at the end of the corridor. “This is a dead end,” said BD.

“Where’s Whats?” asked Hawthorne.

“Two floors up nursing an injured shoulder. He was fine last time we checked.” I said.

“Generator must be on the next floor up,” said BD.

“We don’t have the ammunition to search the whole fucking building,” said Famz.

The lights flashed on. “That’s getting worse as well,” said Tarabon. I looked at the drawn faces around me and realised they could all feel it now. In spite of myself, I hoped Whats was OK. He was stuck much closer to the full force of the thing.

“Join us!” whispered the voices in my head, even as the lights dimmed once more.

“You’re just going to have to try,” said BD. “I can hardly move with this leg. I’ll stay here. Take Cat with you. Sweep each floor in turn as you move up the building. Connect up with Whats when you get there.”

I looked at the doubtful faces around me. This wasn’t going to work.

“JOIN US!”

“I have a better idea,” I said.

“What?” asked BD.

“Just keep a good hold of my hand, OK”

“Cat what are you about to do?” BD said sternly.

I grasped BD’s hand, leaned back against the wall of the corridor and let go.

“What’s that blue stuff?” I heard Hawthorne say. “The lights aren’t on.”

“Cat! Cat! Come back now! Do you hear me?” That was BD’s voice. I smiled and gripped his hand harder.

It was like diving upwards into a cat’s cradle. Not so easy when I was trying to keep at least some of my attention on the sensation of BD’s hand in mine. Within the web, fragments of people swam and dived around me, binding me into the matrix. I tried to focus on the idea of the generator. Somewhere, within this hive mind, I had to find the information.

“You won’t find it,” said a voice. “It’s far too well hidden.” The voice was feminine, deep and throaty and very familiar.

15.5 Part Five

Bryn.

The ghost of an image formed amid the lights of the matrix, all curves and guns. No wonder she had captivated BD as soon as he had clapped eyes on her.

She laughed her oh, so familiar laugh. “I like to think he saw a little more in me than that,” she said.

My heart was sinking. I’d hoped that she was still out there somewhere, having that time to herself.

"I'm sorry, Cat. I was pretty fed up with you all, it's true, but I wouldn't have stayed away this long."

And now she would never be coming back, not to the DHPD, not to Dixie Squad, not to BD, not to me. I thought about that a bit and then about the eerie peacefulness of the well.

"You'd get bored, Cat. This place is the pits and I don't want to hear any self-pitying bullshit about not belonging anywhere. You belong with the DHPD. Every time the power has gone on for the past day, I've had to listen to you whining about how nobody loves you and it's getting tiresome."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry and, seeing as how I was incorporeal, couldn't do either. It was Bryn who had kept me in the DHPD even after BD had showed up and my first instinct had been to move on. Though she'd been quite subtle about it at the time.

"A lot good it did me. I should've banged your heads together when I had the chance."

So that was that really. I was going back to the DHPD.

"Get on with that job of Ian's. You know, the one that involved not trying to find anything out and bugging out as soon as possible."

Hey! I was trying. I couldn't help it if Ghost Squad would follow BD into the depths of Hell without a second thought.

"You want to know where the generator is, then?" said Bryn's voice.

But she'd said that was impossible.

"I've had nothing to do for the past few days except poke around in here. It wasn't easy, but I've found it." A schematic of the Whatmore building opened up in my mind. No idea how Bryn did it - tweaked a few electrical connections, I suppose.

"Something like that."

So, my plan had worked.

"Not that it had any right too. Another piece of inspired stupidity from the Clark family."

She knew us too well.

"You have to go now, if you still can. If you stay here too long you'll be trapped."

I realised I'd forgotten to pay attention to BD's hand. I struggled to refocus.

"He's just here."

I'd have said that Bryn wrapped her arms around me and guided my hands, except that I'd long lost track of anything that constituted a body, but I became

aware once more of BD's hand in mine and I struggled back towards him through a tangled web that seemed to try to hold me back.

"Tell BD I love him."

Yeah, right! Like I was going to tell him Bryn was stuck in here.

"Better coming from you than anyone else."

Besides, she got eaten a lot. Just because there was enough of her in here to form a coherent personality didn't mean she wasn't still in Malton carrying on her life, just fine. She was going to be just fine.

"Oh! Cat. You can do better than that." Her voice was full of sadness.

I looked back, figuratively speaking, unsure what I wanted to say but feeling that a chance was being lost.

"I know, Cat, and take care. Look after BD for me and that's an order, Officer."

All that was there was the sparking of blue electrical connections and an angry fizzing as I tore through the tangling web that sought to constrict me

The image of someone blowing a kiss followed me out and down and back into the corridor.

She'd better not have hitchhiked out with me. Our family is screwed up enough as it is.

"What kind of a fucking stupid stunt was that, Cat?" demanded BD angrily.

I flung my arms around him and held him tight because Bryn wouldn't be coming back and would never hold him again.

"Farewell BD" The words echoed in my mind. *"Love you always."*

"Cat?" BD said cautiously.

"I know where the generator is," I said, proud of the steadiness of my voice.

"You what?"

"I know where the generator is. I reckoned the well must know. It was just a matter of getting in there and poking around a bit."

"I don't believe this. You had no idea it would work. It was fucking mad." Bd said angrily.

"Ah! But it did work though." I'm afraid I may have smirked a bit. I hate it when BD says that.

"So where's the generator?" asked Hawthorne.

I pointed back up the corridor they'd walked down. "Up there a little way, in a side room. You must have missed it."

"Shit!" sighed BD. "OK squad. Form up." His arm went around my shoulder again. "You're going to have to support me a bit further," he added.

We limped slowly up the corridor and I played out the schematic in my mind's eye.

"About here." I stopped, confused, in the empty corridor.

Famz rolled his eyes in the torch light. I took a deep breath. I wasn't going to whine 'I'm sure I'm right,' in front of these men.

Hawthorne nodded at some shelves. "Those aren't bolted to the wall," he said. "It's some kind of unit."

"Shift it," said BD.

Hawthorne, Famz and Tarabon grabbed the shelf unit and began to move it aside.

"What was it like? Up there in the well?" asked BD.

I shrugged. "Sort of whispery."

He gave me a hard look. "And that made you come over all family hug?"

Luckily for me, at that moment, the others got the unit aside, revealing a door. Yeah, I'm a coward. So sue me.

"I'm amazed zombies could move that unit," muttered Hawthorne.

"Not so difficult," said Famz. "They move them about easily enough when they're breaking down barricades."

He nodded at Hawthorne and Tarabon who placed themselves either side of the door. Famz lifted his shotgun to his shoulder and kicked it open. He stepped inside and I heard his gun sound twice.

"One zombie and one generator totalled," he reported, "and plenty of spare fuel. Just what we need to get rid of this place."

"Right!" said BD. "We head back to Whats. Famz, Hawthorne, Tarabon bring as much fuel as you can carry. We'll empty it out below the hole in the ceiling and then light it as we leave."

We staggered back down the corridor.

"Wine cellar!" said Famz suddenly, darting into a side room.

"It'll all be looted by now," I shouted.

He came out with three empty bottles piled precariously on top of the two fuel cans he was holding. "I only need the empties."

We stopped below the hole in the floor and fixed BD into the climbing harness.

"It'll take three of us to lift him," muttered Famz, gazing up.

BD nodded. "Famz, Hawthorne, get up there and check with Whats."

The two men climbed up the ropes. "Will you be OK, climbing up?" asked BD.

I rolled my eyes at him. "How long has this apocalypse been going on now?"

He stuck his tongue out back at me. "Watch it, you. My squad's a feminism-free zone."

"We're good!" came Famz's call.

BD tugged on the rope and he began to ascend. Tarabon and I set about emptying out the fuel cans onto the floor at our feet.

I flashed the torch out of the door of the room. It illuminated a new pack of zombies coming down the corridor. I reloaded the Remington.

"Incoming," I murmured, backing up.

"How many?" asked Tarabon.

"Enough! We just need to hold them off until the rope comes back down."

Tarabon glanced nervously upwards.

"Just hold steady and don't waste ammunition," I said.

We let off the first volley as the zombies came through the doorway. That felled the front rank. The rope dropped back down.

"Up! Tarabon!"

Somewhat to my surprise, he did as ordered.

I fired again into the oncoming throng. Then a third time. I then slung the Remington over my shoulder and switched to the pistol. The horde were spilling through the doorway. They'd have me surrounded in moments.

"Clear!" shouted Tarabon.

I wrapped the end of the rope around my left arm several times.

"I could do with a lift, guys!" I shouted.

Almost at once the rope jerked, hauling on my arm. I kept firing at the advancing zombies as my feet left the ground. One clawed at my legs and I kicked out and fired the last pistol round into its face. Then I was clear.

Several hands reached down, hauling me up into the small lab where I'd left Whats.

"You all right?" I asked, seeing him as I was lifted through.

"The well moved the zombies along as if they were in shifts," he said. "I've watched whole batches move down the corridor. The lights come on and they all crumble away. Then the next batch shambles along. Whenever one spotted me and came in here, it didn't last long enough to cause trouble."

"No more lights now," commented Hawthorne.

"Right, time get out," said BD. "We head up the stairs. Famz, time to do your thing."

Famz gave a wolfish grin. He had filled one of the empty wine bottles with petrol and stuffed a rag in the top. He fished a lighter from his pocket and lit the end. Then he dropped the bomb down the hole in the floor. There was a whump and a blast of heat.

Hawthorne was supporting BD as we exited the room. Famz and Tarabon were in front with Whats and me at the rear. We were in a side passage, but the hallway

it opened out into was full of zombies.

"Famz!" said BD. "We need another."

Famz lit a second petrol bomb. He darted down the corridor and hurled it into the throng. It was incredibly effective. The zombies crumbled to dust as the flames hit them, their souls pulled into the well. It created a clear space for us.

BD shouted. "The stairs, at the double"

Famz and Tarabon charged across the corridor. Hawthorne and BD followed at a surprising lick, given BD's broken leg. Whats and I came last.

Then we were backing up the stairway to the roof. Famz and Tarabon cleared the way ahead while Whats and I kept the horde, that had closed up behind us, at bay.

Rough Justice stuttered into silence. "Damn," Whats murmured. "Out of ammo."

"I thought you were saving a bullet for me," I said.

"I got distracted," he replied.

I changed in my last clip.

"I'm out of ammo!" shouted Whats.

"Here!" BD passed down his H&K USP .40.

We had reached the top floor.

"Keep them at the top of the stairs," shouted BD.

The stairwell was beginning to fill with smoke.

"Last one pays for all," said Famz, he was holding the final wine bottle. "Cat, get up onto the roof. Help BD through."

I scrambled up onto the roof as Famz threw his final petrol bomb down the stairs. Hawthorne was already up there and together we helped BD through. Tarabon followed.

"Whats! Famz!" I shouted. All I could see through the hatchway was smoke and flames. Suddenly Whats appeared, scrabbling for purchase with his good arm. Tarabon and I hauled him through. Famz followed, coughing with the smoke.

We dropped back down the ropes we had hung over the side of the Whatmore building and onto the roof of St. Swithun's. Flames were already visible through Whatmore's ground floor windows.

It was then the souls began to escape, just one or two at first, then there was a whole stream of them rushing past us. I felt a familiar pressure in my mind and the merest hint of a tut.

BD and the rest of Ghost Squad had stopped still, also aware of the throng around us. I stepped forward to grasp BD's hand.

"Bryn said farewell," I said quietly. I watched the understanding dawn in his eyes. "And that she loved you."

"Well, I do have some good points," he said gruffly. His head dipped a moment, avoiding my gaze. "I loved her too," he whispered. "Kept her badge."

He pulled it out of a pocket. We don't have proper police badges, just whatever we can knock up in the workshops. Bryn's was a flying eagle, welded onto a Mercedes badge. The word Dixie had been roughly etched into it, below the letters DHPD. It was battered and bent, but still proud and defiant. Gently, BD placed the badge in my hands and I ran my fingers over the eagle, flying fierce and free.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was sorry about everything.

Somewhat to my surprise I realised BD had put his arm around me and pulled me close. "I'm sorry too," he whispered, and kissed the top of my head.

We stood together on the roof of the church, holding Bryn's badge and listening as a heavenly chorus sung of freedom and joy. At our backs, the Whatmore building burned and around us the souls danced, taking flight upwards to wherever they were going.

Chapter 16

The Skull and the Soldier

A Primeval/Dr Who Books Short Story

16.1 Prologue set, as always, in a Supermarket Car Park

Helen Cutter paused at the edge of the supermarket car park and hoisted her backpack on her shoulders. It wasn't far to the open woodland and she thought her car would be safer overnight here than in the walkers' car park in the forest. She considered phoning Nick to let him know where she was and that she wouldn't be back until morning but rejected the idea. It would only start another argument about crackpot theories. She was fed up of hearing about her crackpot theories. Pulling on the straps of the backpack to ease the weight she stepped out onto the roadside.

"Little Sister."

She whirled at the voice. Two people stood before her, less than a metre from where she'd been standing. It unnerved her that they had crept up on her like that. They looked like they were heading for a Halloween ball, in masks of bones and elaborate clothing reminiscent of the eighteenth century, but Helen instinctively rejected the idea. These people were too serious by a long shot. In the street lamps their shadows danced. Helen blinked. In the street lamps their shadows were, literally, dancing.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The woman laughed merrily. "A better question is what do you want?"

"What do you want?" said Helen.

"To be honest," said the man, "we're more interested in what you want."

"Why would that interest you?"

"We'd like to offer you a deal."

"A deal?"

"Yes. An opportunity to have all your theories proved correct. How does that sound."

"Very tempting. What's the catch?"

"No catch," said the woman, "at least none that we can see. We're fairly sure that what you want and what we want align more or less exactly."

"Explain."

The woman laughed merrily again. "Now that would be no fun at all would it, little sister?" She held out a knife.

"What's this?" Helen didn't touch it.

"It's a fictional entity," said the man. "We had to go to a lot of trouble to get hold of it."

"A fictional entity?"

"It cuts time. It will take you wherever you want. All those theories you have about aberrant evolution? Here's the means to check them out first hand."

Doubtfully, Helen took the knife. It looked pretty ordinary to her. She would have said she was just humouring the weirdos were it not for the dancing shadows.

"Oh, and by the way," said the woman. "We opened a little hole earlier on. Just for fun."

The woman took the man's hand and the two of them walked towards and then through Helen. Behind them running down the street towards her was a Gorgonopsid. Helen turned on her heels.

It was four years before she found her way home and by that time she had a new agenda and a mission to pursue. It was eight years before that agenda drove her to make contact with her husband once more.

16.2 Remember the Children (Challenge 216: Crossover)

Sailing the time winds through the fractures of the Time War is hard. Compassion gifted me her wisest daughter. I sing and let Hope steer.

"I've had to tweak things a little," she says. Unlike the time lords she isn't afraid of Paradox. It is her play thing.

I step out into a dry desert. There is a warrior here, well-trained, with deep blue eyes. Not so pretty as my Andred, dying a hundred times in the first assault,

but close.

"He will care for your child," Hope says.

I look into his eyes and I know that he will.

16.3 Introducing Hope

Captain Tom Ryan tried to make sense of the situation in front of him. Helen Cutter, the Professor's no longer entirely missing wife, had somehow hijacked the Anomaly project. First they were hunting some future bat thing got loose in the 21st century via the network of temporal anomalies they had discovered. Then she'd insisted they take its young back, through the Forest of Dean anomaly that led to the Permian era, claiming it would lead them in due course to a further anomaly that would take the creatures home. He'd been leading the small team, Helen and Nick Cutter, his men Davis and MacGuire and then... his mind skittered over the thoughts. He'd dropped back because, because... he couldn't remember the reason. It must have been a good reason though. He'd dropped back and suddenly there were two women and a baby confronting him.

The first was about his age, he judged. She had long red brown hair and clear blue eyes. She was dressed in a leather outfit that left very little to the imagination and Ryan couldn't help admiring the toned muscles it revealed. He had no doubt she was a skilled fighter. He would have supposed that the Professor was wrong and that it was the time of the cave men, not the Permian, except that she had a gun, of a kind he'd never seen before, strapped at one hip and she was carrying what he could only describe as a futuristic baby car-seat in which a small child cooed and batted at hanging toys with its hands.

The second woman stood behind the first. She was dumpy with frizzy red hair and freckles and wore a bright blue sundress that fell to her knees. It was cut in a deep V-shape exposing an impressive amount of cleavage. She wore short white bobby socks and trainers.

"He will look after the child," she said.

The first woman's gaze flickered over him from head to foot. A cool calculating look that sent shivers up his spine. She nodded slightly.

"I need your help," she said.

Ryan looked around him at the retreating backs of the Cutters and his team. He counted three soldiers. He didn't recall taking three soldiers with him.

"They don't know you are missing," said blue dress. "Lieutenant Lyle is leading the expedition. You followed after them to warn of a second predator."

Ryan remembered now. There was a second predator. He needed to warn Lyle.

"I have a job to do," he said, turning to follow them.

"I *need* your help," said leathers again. "More than they do. This is important."

"So's my job, lady." He looked up the slope. He could no longer see Lyle and the others.

"Too late!" said blue dress. "They've found us."

She looked up to the sky and Ryan, following her gaze saw... Well he saw flying saucers descending down to them, even though he didn't believe it.

"Those are not enemy ships," said leathers.

"They are."

"Those are Dalek ships. I have seen them in briefings. The Daleks are not the enemy. This the Time Lords know."

One of the saucers opened fire, a beam of light that struck the ground nearby and exploded.

"You will surrender or be exterminated," grated a metallic voice.

"No time to argue," said Ryan. "Run. I'll cover you." He unslung his rifle and opened fire on the saucer hoping to find some vulnerability.

"Into me," said blue dress.

Ryan glanced in her direction and was startled into stillness by the sight of her splitting open down the middle to reveal a kind of black gulf within. Leathers grabbed his arm and dragged him into the void.

He found himself in a large round chamber. A column rose and fell in a central control unit.

"I'm taking off," said the voice of blue dress from somewhere above him.

"Enemy vessel, enemy vessel," the grating voice broke into the chamber. "Your vessel is now confiscated by the Dalek Empire. Surrender or be exterminated."

"They're closing on me," said blue dress's voice anxiously.

Leathers laughed. "It's just Daleks," she said. "They can't match you. They are irrelevant to the war."

"Leela," the voice continued, "they look like Enemy ships."

"Excuse me, will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?" demanded Ryan.

I'm going to interrupt at this point because, basically, you know what is going on or, at least, if you don't, I can explain it quickly. The woman in a blue dress is called Hope. She's a sentient time machine. She and Leela are in the middle of a time war against a largely unknown enemy. They're on the run from just about everyone involved in the war in order to find somewhere safe to squirrel away

Leela's son who is not only half-human and half-Time Lord but also the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the beginning of history.

The Daleks, for what its worth, are indeed something of a sideshow at this point in the war, using their own cobbled together time technology to scavenge fall out from the battles of the great powers. It's interesting that Hope mistakes them for the enemy at this point; interesting and ominous. It's a detail I was not aware of before - the sort of thing which happens when you start interfering with fictional accounts of actual events, or possibly the sort of thing that only occurs when you meddle at the interface of fiction and reality. Come to think of it though, since we're fighting a memetic war here that makes it the sort of thing that happens all too often.

It takes Ryan a little while to grasp it all, though, which, in his defence, isn't entirely his fault. He's familiar enough with the concept of time travel. He's been with the anomaly project from the start so he's comfortable with the idea of rips in time that lead to other eras. Well, perhaps not comfortable exactly, and he'd like a nice neat explanation of what they are, how they occur and, preferably who's responsible, but comfortable enough to keep up when people start throwing around words like Space/Time vortex. But he's not so familiar with the concepts of alien races, Time Lords and sentient time machines. He's also naturally suspicious and ill-disposed to take at face value the words of two women who, he is already dimly aware, have just kidnapped him.

So, while they bicker, I thought I'd introduce myself. I'm a conceptual entity. At one point we were pretty well known though that got rarer as the war progressed. Technically I am a shift; that's right **a** *shift, not* **the** *shift. There were always several of us but, for a while, it served the purposes of our masters to pretend there was only one. If you know anything about shifts you'll realise around now that you are actually still reading that tedious scene where Hope and Leela try to explain what's going on to Ryan. Believe me, the author has gone into it in excruciating detail outlining, entirely incorrectly if I may say so, pretty much every thought that passes through Ryan's head the whole time. I hate history presented as fiction, as if anyone except the three people involved actually know how that conversation went. That is facetious of me. Like I said, we're at the interface of fiction and reality - for all I know the account before you is the first iteration of that little scene. The original version if you like. Shame you're not going to find out how it ran. Whatever! Every version of the conversation is long and tedious.*

Anyway I'm a shift, a conceptual entity. I exist by manipulating concepts, in this case the ones you are reading on the page. If you want to place me somewhere then right now I'm between your visual cortex and your language processing areas

but, take it from me, that's not a very useful way to think about the situation.

"The Dalek ships will be in range in five minutes," said Hope.

"Can you withstand their weapons?"

"For a while but they're in enemy ships and I'm not combat ready."

Leela looked around her, gripping the hilt of the knife at her waist.

"We're travelling through time?" said Ryan for what felt like the hundredth time in the conversation.

"Yes," said Leela, wearily.

"And there's some kind of big time war going on."

"Yes."

"Do you know where or when the battles are? Can you get to one?"

"Why?"

"Even if Hope is not combat ready, there will be ships there that are. It's a matter of getting somewhere you will be safe and your pursuers won't."

"He speaks wisely," said Leela.

"The Time Lords won't let you slip away a second time," said Hope.

"It was never my intention to slip away for long."

"Whatever," said Hope, "there's a force massing off Dronid. I'll head there."

Seconds later the central column ceased its movement. The ceiling above Ryan seemed to fade into translucency and he saw an expanse of space above him. Hanging against the vista were hundreds upon thousands of people. They wore a frightening array of armour and war paint. Each was different but with hints here and there that spoke to Ryan of Samurai warriors or Native American Indians or the Knights of the Round Table. Suddenly, in one part of the screen, Ryan saw the saucer like ships of the Daleks emerge. Seconds later there was nothing there. Several of the hanging time ships had turned towards the Dalek saucers. Ryan had expected rays or explosions but there was nothing. One minute the ships were there, the next they had gone.

"They want to talk to us," said Hope, "in the command ship."

Leela nodded. "Take us there."

The panorama vanished to be replaced by a plain white room and a reception force of what looked like armed guards.

"What's going on?" asked Ryan.

Leela turned to look at him. Her expression was neutral, like a carefully maintained poker face.

"I have to go, see if I can strike a bargain with the Lord President."

She picked the baby out of the carrier and dropped a gentle kiss on his head. Then she handed him to Ryan.

"I don't think I'll be able to come back. Look after him," she said, her voice carefully steady. "His name is Johnsmith."

"Hang on a minute," Ryan began.

"Hope," she called, "let me out. Keep him here."

And she was gone.

"It's an Earth Colony. You'll be safe there," said Hope.

Ryan stared dubiously down at the cluster of domes nestling at the foot of the hill. He looked at the baby at his feet, once again in its carrier.

"Be reasonable, Hope. Take me and John back to his mother and we can sort this all out."

Hope shook her head. "Not possible, Leela wants him protected away from the Time Lords. This is the deal. I've got the two of you somewhere safe. I can't stay here and Leela can't get here and his name is Johnsmith, all one word."

"I never agreed to this!"

Hope shrugged. "Whatever! You'll do it though."

"Let me back in, now!" demanded Ryan.

"Goodbye, Captain."

There was a wheezing groaning sound and Hope vanished from view, like a Cheshire cat with poor dress sense.

Ryan crouched down in front of the baby. "Well, Johnsmith, all one word, it looks like we're stuck with each other."

The baby's face scrunched up in a look of concentration and a suspicious smell wafted up. Ryan closed his eyes for a moment. Then he picked up the baby carrier and started walking down the hill towards the colony. It didn't appear that he had any other choice.

16.4 Mother of Gallifrey

Leela of the Sevateem, Warrior Queen of Gallifrey, pulled on her battle headdress. It was made of a light-weight titanium alloy so she barely felt it resting on her head. Once in place, a screen popped up in her visual field showing tactical schematics, restricting her awareness of the immediate surroundings. That still troubled her. She had grown up with the importance of complete awareness drummed into her. Although she realised that the overlay of information added

valuable extra context it still made her feel edgy. It gave her a sense that she wasn't fully concentrating on the task in hand. She ran diagnostics and flexed her hands inside their armoured gloves, watching the output as the movement sent signals through her combat suit.

She glanced at herself in the full length mirror and grimaced at the absurdity of it all. The headdress was worked into a face, somewhat like her own but lined with age. Her eyes were blanked out by the screens she looked through. Metal straps, pretending to be armour, crossed her chest and hips. Hydraulic pistons glided down her legs and arms, connected to elbow length gloves and thigh length boots. It left half of her vital organs exposed, but then the point of the armour wasn't protection. Like so much in this strange war, the point of the armour was image. Here was the Warrior Queen of Gallifrey! Here was the Pythia of old reborn and joined with the new Time Lord race! It was the Pythia's death mask that had been used as a template for the helmet. The only bit she had never understood was the revealing nature of the armour. The Time Lords lectured her, frequently, on the extent to which they had broken free of earthly desires. Why then, did they insist she marched around in little more than underwear?

She allowed herself a small smile. Andred had never appeared particularly untroubled by the pull of the flesh. Their son was living proof of that. Andred had been dark, with a slight build that belied his strength. Too often, these days, her mind slipped to the other end of the spectrum, to the powerful, blond man, in whose care she had left their son.

The assault on Gallifrey had been minutes old when she had fled the capitol. In those minutes, time had changed and rewritten itself a dozen times and in each version Andred had died. She had listened to his final moments over the comms channel again and again, each time it happened. Instinct had driven her to the TARDIS holding bays and Hope. She was trusting to a chance remark Compassion had once made to her.

Compassion, companion to the Doctor, like herself, mother of the new generation of TARDIS had passed her in the corridors of the capitol and had leant down to whisper "Hope is yours," before she had moved on, flanked by the chancery guard.

So Leela had sought out Hope and Hope had taken her to Captain Tom Ryan and, clutching desperately at the only straws available, she had bargained one trip for Hope, Ryan and the baby with Lord President Romana. She trusted that Hope would leave them somewhere safe. Meanwhile she continued her existence as the Gallifreyan figurehead Warrior Queen, the price of her son's freedom.

There was a movement behind her. Benine and Carron walked into the small

fortress the Time Lords laughingly called her command tent. They were both cwejen of the familiar and common type one. They were identical in their blond-haired, blue-eyed enthusiasm for the fight. She nodded to them and turned to leave the tent, flanked on both sides.

The ground battle was bogged down. The engagement had started before she'd even left the tent but the front line remained a mere hundred yards from the encampment. Leela walked at a measured pace through the crossfire. Her younger self would have laughed at her foolishness. She was relying on sophisticated shielding to keep her safe and it could only take so many impacts. But the reality was she wasn't really a soldier in this war. She served more purpose walking slowly across the battlefield than she did in the front line. This irked her more than she liked to admit.

It was with relief that she dropped into the first trench. There was a platoon of cwejen there, all type one. Identical blue eyes turned towards her as she landed amidst them.

"Report," she barked.

"Enemy line is 200 yards south. They're laying down covering fire."

"What troops?"

"Unknown at present."

Leela checked the displays. They were worryingly devoid of information. Whatever it was the enemy had ranged against them it wasn't going to be regular ground troops. They'd have made a move for the trench by now if they were.

It was a trap, she decided. The intent was to lure her men towards the enemy lines.

There was a whole manual on how to deal with traps. Leela hadn't exactly written it but the grey beards of House Military had locked her in a room with a frightened secretary for a week and she'd tried to explain the rudiments of combat to him. She'd started reading the end result once, all thirty volumes of it, but had been put off by the flowery language. She'd never really got good at reading anyway. The grey beards, however, assured her they had married her practical knowledge to their tactical simulations in a "profitable synergy". There was a whole volume on traps. It was stored in the tactical memory of her battle armour and cross-indexed to the quick look-up features in her helmet. She could access the synergistic wisdom of the Sevateem and House Military in less than a second. Her troops could do so even faster. The knowledge in the thirty volumes had been hard-wired into their genetic make-up. They were born knowing every detail of the manuals. She didn't bother to look anything up, though. There was only one option open to her anyway. Spring the trap and see what happened.

One platoon should be sufficient. It would be wasteful of resources to take more to certain death.

The Doctor would have gone alone.

She cursed.

"I'm crossing over Dead Man's Land," she said.

"We're coming with you," said Benine.

The problem with the cwejen was that they were modelled on Christopher Cwej and Christopher Cwej had travelled with the Doctor. They, like her, instinctively knew what the Doctor would do. Every single one of them was itching to volunteer to heroically spring that trap in his honour.

Leela looked down the line. The entire platoon nodded as one.

"On my signal," she said.

They went over the top in a long strung-out line. Their suits were linked. The bio feedback meant you could switch to full control at any point but formations were easier if you let the suits do most of the positioning work. Leela watched the enemy trench approach. Whatever it was they were going to trip, it would happen soon.

Leela felt time shift. She wasn't supposed to be able to do that. The Time Lords had explained to her many times that she couldn't feel time shift. She had no doubt that was what she had felt. That moment of blankness that meant that for a split second she hadn't existed and had never existed before the Time Lord reality machines yanked her back, repairing whatever damage had been done. Leela glanced to either side. She could have used the displays but old habits died hard. About half the cwejen remained. A couple had converted to type three. The big, souped-up bodies of the Regen-Inf thundered through the mud. That would help.

The time shift was essentially artillery, at least in her terms. Leela was still looking for the trap. There was another momentary shift and then...

...then she was in a large dimly lit room. Below her walked women in long red robes. She recognised these from paintings in the Panopticon.

"This is the trap," she said.

"Pythia?" asked one of them. The Pythia again, it was as though the legend haunted her. She wondered sometimes if the Time Lords feared her, expecting her to issue some new curse upon them like the curse of sterility that had fallen from the last Pythia's lips.

"This is the trap," she repeated.

It must have been a reality bomb of some description. Leela didn't really understand reality bombs. They were specifically triggered to individuals and

trapped them inside a bubble reality. This prevented the reality machines repairing them. Reality bombs had to be calibrated for a particular individual, which made her the target. Victims in their second reality never realised they had been moved. Leela didn't believe that any more than she believed you couldn't feel a time-shift. The Time Lords often didn't really understand their own technology.

Her withered hands shifted to the charms hanging from her dress, fingering the strange shapes.

"Pythia," asked another woman. "Would you see the future?"

Leela wished to shake her head. Fore-seeing was ill-omened *and impossible* she reminded herself. She could hear whispering at the edges of her mind and realised she was brushing against the thoughts of the women below her. *Show me the future* she thought and gripped the wicker cagework around her.

One of the adepts touched a control and a cloud of smoke rose up around her from below, in a rich bitter vapour. Her mind flew free of her body, spiralling upwards with the clouds of smoke. She surged forwards through time, tasting the fish bones that were bought to feed the Pythia down the centuries. She saw a cowled figure and felt the hatred of him sharp in her heart and the whisper of his name in her mind: Rassilon. Words rang out in her cracked and ageing voice. "This world is doomed. I curse it. As I die so shall it whither" and the cage plunged into the depths of the abyss below her. The words were straight from the legend of the Pythia's curse. Leela struggled through the hallucination to tell if she was caught in history or myth. The Pythia existed before history but instinct told Leela she wasn't trapped in a legend.

Before her stood the door. The door to the future. Legend said that the Pythia had seen it in visions, blocking off history from the Old Time. The Pythia hung upon the door and pleaded for it to open. Leela did not plead. She shrugged out of the Pythia's form and fought free of the life and the vision they sought to trap her within. She seized the door with both hands and hauled upon it.

"I am the future," she cried. "I am the mother of Gallifrey."

The door opened and she flew forwards from the Old Time into the New.

There was the taste of gunpowder on her lips from where Ryan had... would... kiss her.

A skull rose from a dusty cairn, an Earth woman brushing it clean as she lifted it. She wore practical clothing and a backpack and had long brown hair that hung loose to her shoulders. Her face shone with a look of triumph. In the distance a form walked away. One man over the shoulder of another.

The waves of prophesy carried her forwards.

Time shifted again.

There were but five cwejen with her now. Three had the blond hair of type one and the remaining two the heavy modifications of type three. Her display showed her their names. The mundane fire had finished. They dropped down into the enemy trench to find it empty and deserted.

"What happened?" asked a type three. "Where was the trap?"

"I sprung the trap," said Leela. She looked round the empty trench. "The trap was the only point of this battle."

An icon flashed in her eye-line. The War Council wanted to see her.

Benine and Carron were still at her side and she let them flank her as she approached the location she had been given. Mere yards behind the enemy trench stood a bunker. It looked like it had always been there. It had probably always been there, ever since she got the message about five minutes ago. The Time Lords had different words for these different notions of forever but she had never mastered the vocabulary. As far as history was concerned the bunker had always been there but it had only always been there because she had successfully fought her way to the enemy trench in a time line in which there was no bunker and had never been a bunker. She rapped on the door and it opened to admit her.

Leela left her guards at the door to the inner sanctum. Beyond, in a long low room, sat the War Council. She wasn't entirely surprised. Lady President Romana sat at the head, flicking at her earrings, a habitual gesture she did nothing to quell. Leela's eyes flickered over the others at the table. Representatives of all the Old Blood chapters sat there, either in full Time Lord regalia or in the armour of modern warfare. A type two cwejen was lurking in the shadows by the door as she came in. There was no one else there.

Leela stood before the long table facing Romana. Romana took her hand away from her earring and placed both hands on the table. Her black bob danced.

"Leela," she said, "so good of you to come at such short notice."

She gestured with one had to indicate Leela should sit.

Leela suppressed her irritation at Romana's manner. She liked the president well enough and owed her far more than she could ever hope to repay, but she found the air of studied frivolity maintained by this regeneration somewhat tiresome.

Frankly, Leela also finds most Time Lord ritual and deliberation dull. She's in for a long session of it in this scene so I thought I'd spare you from that. There will be lots of talk of battle fronts and manoeuvres, all working up to the basic point

that the Time Lords are losing. It's not obvious yet by a long shot. Certainly not to anyone outside the depths of House Military and the inevitable is still centuries away. Of course, for the Time Lords, centuries pass in the merest blink of an eye. This lot are running scared. Leela probably picked up on that. She had an instinctive ability to judge an opponent. It's a shame, in a way, that she never got to meet Lieutenant Lyle. But I get ahead, or possibly, behind myself.

It's me again, in case you hadn't noticed; the Shift. If you've forgotten, or don't know, who and what I am, I suggest you go back and read part one. Look, here's a link ready made for you to follow. Come back when you've caught up.

So there you go. I'm a conceptual entity, one of the major weapons' of the War, if you hadn't worked it out already. In this case I'm really just dropping in to whisk you past the boring bits of the War Council.

And to put in a good word for Leela. In this instance she's right and they're wrong. I feel I can say that without "spoiling" anything for you.

"The essential problem is," opined the cwejen from behind her, "that they don't know who the enemy is."

Leela bit her lip. She'd told them plenty of times who she thought the enemy was but they refused to see it. They lectured her endlessly on the value of symbolism, the interaction between observation and reality, but when she suggested that the enemy wasn't a *thing*, wasn't a single entity or organisation they could track down and *defeat* they simply refused to comprehend the fact.

"So," said Romana brightly, "we propose to change the enemy to something we do know how to defeat."

Leela blinked. Involuntarily, she looked behind her to the type two cwejen, hoping he could interpret the statement. He just shrugged.

"How will you do that?" she asked.

"We will need something very powerful," said Romana. "Something powerful enough to warp reality but something that won't work like Time Lord technology. Something the enemy won't be expecting."

"Faction Paradox has a number of such artefacts," pronounced the head of the Prydonian Chapter. "One, in particular, has recently come to our attention. According to our sources they've acquired a skull. They are using it to power up a network of temporal anomalies all over Earth, a network that, so far, has remained undetected by the enemy."

"We need the skull," said Romana.

Leela peered down the table at her. "How can I help? I'm no good at covert operations."

Romana smiled. “Any strike against the Eleven Day Empire is unlikely to be particularly covert, although it will, of necessity, be surgical and precise.”

“How will we get in?” asked Leela. If the Time Lords had known how to breach the defences of the Eleven Day Empire it would have been long gone, swept away by the second wave troops, if nothing else.

“The Doctor could find a way in,” said the head of the Prydonian Chapter.

Behind her, the cwejen snorted. “Even if he could,” he said, “he’s already refused to have anything to do with this.”

“If the Doctor thinks that this is a bad idea then I do not agree either,” said Leela.

Romana sighed, “Be reasonable, Leela, this is about bringing the War to a swift close. A few protocols will be broken but we are not even threatening lives. I’m frankly amazed the Doctor is so opposed to the idea. He never used to hold the protocols in much regard.”

There was a murmur round the table but Leela knew this was a lie. She had never known the Doctor break the protocols. Other tenets of Time Lord society he had scattered like the winds, but he had respected the protocols. Romana knew this. Leela watched her closely. Romana had done much for which Leela was grateful but she had no illusions about this regeneration. It had been forged in the crucible of war and would exact a price.

“We think Johnsmith could do it too,” said Romana.

“Why?” asked Leela. “None of us have seen him since he was a baby. What makes him special?”

“He’s the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the Pythia’s curse,” said the cwejen behind her. “That makes him of huge symbolic importance. If the Faction get a whiff of a possibility they might recruit him, he gets a free pass to the Eleven Day Empire.”

“No,” said Leela.

Romana raised an elegant eyebrow.

“No,” Leela repeated firmly. “Not my son.”

They could not ask for Johnsmith. He was the only reason she was here. The only reason she carried on this charade of the re-incarnated Pythia for them was to protect Johnsmith. It was the deal she had made with Romana. Hope had taken one, unmonitored trip to a never revealed location and hidden Johnsmith, with Ryan to look after him. No one except Hope knew where they were. Leela had never even dared broach the subject in case someone, somewhere would divine their location. Johnsmith’s safety was the deal they had made. They could not take that away now.

"Very well," said Romana. She shuffled her papers. "This Council is ended."

Leela stood on the bare earth of the battlefield. She was shaking with fear and the aftermath of a fight that hadn't happened. She felt a presence at her elbow. It was the cwejen.

"I'm not going to agree," she said.

"I don't think they thought you would."

"Then why ask?"

He shrugged and dug about in his pockets, eventually producing a cigarette which he stuck in his mouth. Leela watched as he lit it and drew in a long breath.

"They're setting a train of events in motion," he said at last.

Leela looked at him closely. "You're Cwej aren't you," she said, "Chris Cwej, the original."

He nodded. "You think I'd have been in the council otherwise?"

"Why are you here now?"

"I'm your minder. They want me to keep an eye on you."

She regarded him closely. She'd met him once before, before his "regeneration" into his current dumpy body. Then, he'd looked like a type one cwejen, blonde hair, blue eyes and boyish good looks. She let her eyes drift to the remains of her cwejen patrol: two type one and two type three. She wondered if he resented the Time Lord intervention in his time line that snatched the promised Regen-Inf form from him and trapped him in his current type two body. She didn't ask.

Last time she'd met him had been before he'd taken up Time Lord employment when he'd still travelled with the Doctor, before whatever conditioning they had instilled into him since. She had trusted him then but she wasn't so sure she trusted him now.

There was a blur of movement on her sensors and she reached instinctively for a knife. Cwej was moving too. She caught an image of something bluish and gangly and let her training take over, slashing with the knife at the jaws reaching down towards her. Cwej, she saw, had an arm around the creature's neck, bending it back and upwards. Leela took the opportunity to plunge her knife deep into where its eyes should be. It thrashed once and then died.

"What's this?" she asked, stirring the body with her foot. She'd not come across anything like it before, long limbs with grasping hands. No eyes that she could see.

"A babel, I suspect," said Cwej. "They still have a few left. I imagine it's a hint that we get a move on."

Leela looked at the creature with distaste. Even the Time Lords admitted the babelin had been a mistake. They were almost mindless in their viciousness and barely controllable.

"We will talk to Hope," said Leela.

16.5 The Day the War came to Town

Ryan sighed quietly to himself and stared at the fetishes on the table before him. Each year, on the anniversary of their arrival on the colony, Faction Paradox had presented him with one. Fourteen now ranged before him, each one untouched and unused since he had been given it. Initially it was straightforward suspicion that had prevented him taking them at face value and had caused him to lock them away out of sight and out of mind. But as the grip of the Faction increased and as its members became more open about their activities and rituals he had gained enough understanding to know that use of any one of the fetishes would incur a price.

He was in full battle regalia. In actual fact, this was not a great deal different from the uniform he'd worn into the Permian all those years ago. The Wartime powers tended to favour elaborate armour, mostly for its symbolic effect. Ryan preferred to keep things practical. He still wore his old tac vest; a fetish of his own, in many ways, but it was also practical. The gun was a new model, high-energy weapon, not that that was likely to be of much use in the conflict to come. He'd also bought a lightweight scanner array which looked much like a pair of mirrored sunglasses. He'd strapped a force-field generator to one leg. The field it produced wouldn't last long but would deflect most incoming energy and ballistics. He'd also purchased an exoskeleton. It wrapped around his legs, chest and arms, designed so it would not impede his motion but it could double the force of any blow and the length of any stride. It had saved his life a number of times.

In his heart, though he knew that none of this would be any use. He'd tried to bribe a way for John and himself onto one of the transport ships but he had not been able to. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that Faction Paradox had paid larger bribes to keep him here. They had been round almost daily for the last week suggesting he join up.

Last night, he and John had attended one of the Faction's public scryings. It was against his principles to go but sometimes the need for information was

too great. He'd watched the ritual of sacrifice, based on, he suspected, old earth tales and had winced as the Faction Mother pawed through the beast's entrails. He hadn't been surprised that John could read the portents as well, if not better, than the Mother and it had been useful to receive the news without the filter of the Faction's propaganda. Nevertheless he resented that circumstances had forced him to put a fourteen year old boy amidst such a crowd.

The news left them with little choice though. In fact it left him with only one choice: which fetish to use? He picked up the knife. It was carved from bone and had feathers and beads tied around the handle. It was an ugly thing but it was obvious enough how to use it.

"What are you doing, Dad?"

He looked up. John stood in the doorway. He wore a long flowing red coat, with a short top cape. His black hair was cut in a tonsure. Ryan thought the whole outfit bizarre and a little insulting in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. He looked like a monk, crossed with a cardinal, crossed with a highwayman. The look was very in at the moment and was generally referred to as Christian Gaijin. It was all the rage among the colony's teenagers. Ryan understood vaguely that it had overtones of fear, savagery and general alienness. It was a very Faction Paradox look. They liked scary imagery that hinted at the savage, yet mystical, Other.

"You saw the portents," said Ryan. "Hell, you interpreted the portents. The war arrives here, today. The moment I use this," Ryan hesitated with the knife over the palm of his hand. "The moment I use this, Faction Paradox will know. They've been trying to recruit us, well you, for fourteen years. They'll get us out of here."

"They want you too," said John. "Don't know why but I'm fairly sure we're a package."

Ryan narrowed his eyes at the boy. John must have been talking to Paradox recruiters behind his back. He was going to have to have words with him.

"However," said John, "I have a different plan."

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

John disappeared behind the door and then reappeared with a large contraption which he dumped on the table.

"Ta da!" John looked at him expectantly.

The contraption appeared to have been made from cobbled together electronics, parts from Ryan's motorcycle (something else they would have to discuss) and the contents of the kitchen drawers.

"What's that?" asked Ryan.

"Biodata interception unit."

"You what?"

John gave an exaggerated sigh. "You know what biodata is right?"

"Temporal DNA. I've sod all idea how it works but it's someone's past and future history all wrapped up in a neat bundle."

"Right, so when you use the fetish you'll be performing a kind of surgery on your biodata, changing some part of your past or future. Faction Paradox will detect and intercept that change. Firstly, they'll be able to manipulate the change to their own advantage and secondly they'll be able to use it as raw power, probably to extract us from the colony to some location of their choosing."

"I'd worked that bit out."

"This," John tapped his machine proudly and the knives jangled, "this will intercept all that. I can limit the effects of the biodata change so it should be effectively undetectable *and* harness the power to get us out of here."

Ryan eyed the contraption doubtfully. John's class teachers kept telling him how brilliant the boy was (and what a shiny future he had in Faction Paradox) but this sounded pretty advanced, even by their standards, *and* it was made out of chopsticks, knives and a whisk.

Ryan looked out the window. They had a good view from here of the colony. In the distance there was a strange greenish tinge. Squinting he realised it was ivy growing rapidly over the buildings. Beyond the ivy he could see the ruins of the yakuba. It looked as if it had fallen into decay years ago. The effect seemed to be travelling towards them as if on a shockwave. They were out of time.

"Fair enough, how does it work?"

John set the chopsticks spinning and hit a button on one of the jury rigged pieces of electronics.

"Just make sure you're holding your hand over this bit," he gestured to a shallow depression, "when you make the cut."

Ryan shoved the other fetishes into a pocket and then held his hand out over the contraption. Using the knife he made a small cut on his palm and watched as the blood dripped onto John's machine. The effect was instant. There was a puff of smoke from somewhere, but the chopsticks carried on spinning. Around them, the walls of the house began to crumble. Ryan watched as vegetation forced its way between the cracks. It looked almost as if it was pulling the house apart. Before him the kitchen table remained solid and firm. The house fell away and Ryan had the unpleasant sensation of falling, down through the building, then through the rocks of the planet and then out and beyond into a psychedelic vortex.

"John? Are we time-travelling, entirely unprotected?" he asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Something like that, I think. I didn't have time to completely work out the theory."

Ryan closed his eyes. "I see."

"We're alive though, aren't we?"

"We're alive," Ryan conceded. Flotsam in the time winds, he thought. He wasn't necessarily convinced they were better off. He opened his eyes once more and took a good look around. It was easy to see the edge of their bubble. A circular section of the kitchen floor had come with them, along with the table and two upright chairs, Ryan had managed to purchase to go with it. Ryan was glad that he had packed before getting out the fetishes. That meant they had a full survival kit under the table. John was also clutching a bag, so hopefully he was prepared as well. They had several pieces of miscellaneous electronics and half a dozen knives, a drawer full of chopsticks, a whisk and, Ryan squinted into the depths of the machine, a novelty bottle opener.

Ryan checked the perimeter again and then double checked. "John?"

"Yes Dad."

"This bubble is getting smaller."

John glanced round. "That's not good."

"Can you do anything about it?"

John stared at him a moment then blinked. "Must be able to."

He fished his datapad out of his bag and began rapidly typing on it.

"What are you doing?"

"In theory I can manipulate our path a bit by, err, rearranging the knives. It's just a matter of working out where and when we are now and where and when we can get to."

Ryan eyed the perimeter. It seemed to be contracting more rapidly. "A little haste may be in order."

"I think we're rather early." John sounded worried.

"Early?"

"Close to the Anchoring of the Thread."

"Is that possible?"

John shrugged and then grinned. "Well, yes, but it's only *theoretically* possible. No one's ever managed to do it."

"Let's worry about it once we're safe."

"Safe may prove a rather relative concept."

"Right now? I don't much care."

John nodded. "OK. Safe, then."

He grabbed a handful of knives and detached them from his machine. The kitchen table shuddered, causing Ryan to grab it. They were plunged into sudden darkness. Ryan became aware that there was a faint light reflecting off John's face. Carefully he turned round. Three figures sat behind him at a raised table. They were all middle-aged men. If they'd been human he'd have put them in their late fifties or early sixties but, as it was, who could tell. Ryan distinctly observed the three exchange glances and then the central one rose.

"Welcome to Gallifrey," he said. "I am Lord President Rassilon, first independent ruler of the same."

We can skip the introductions and explanations, I think. You know who Rassilon is, right? Or, if you don't, first president of Gallifrey should pretty much cover the basics. You remember the Pythia from Leela's vision in part two? He took over from her, bringing rationality, reason and history to the universe. That's was the stories say. Of course, Rassilon wrote the stories. The Time Lords were the first sentient creatures in the universe and they pretty much moulded it in their image, including, so they say, the linear conception of time we all find so difficult to do without. They refer to this imposition, rather grandiously, as "The Anchoring of the Thread". The moment they bestowed order.

The Pythia, of course, hadn't taken kindly to being deposed. She cursed the Time Lords to sterility and, since she got the curse in just before Rassilon imposed rationality and reason and what have you, it stuck, which must have annoyed Rassilon no end. John and Ryan had stumbled upon the first of the secret debates on handling the crisis. You would have thought that discovering John was the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the curse would have energised the situation. In fact they all take it very calmly. You would almost think they had been expecting John and Ryan to appear.

Oh! And in case you're wondering, to Rassilon's right sat Omega, Time Lord engineer. If you've not heard of him, don't worry about it. To his left was a figure that history would later refer to only as the Other, which is as good a title as any for the time being.

Ryan watched John, deep in discussion with Omega and Rassilon. His eyes were shining, but then he was meeting legendary figures. Rassilon, Omega and the Other weren't talked about much by Faction Paradox, but even they couldn't deny their influence and importance and John, acutely aware of his Time Lord heritage, had lapped up all the information he could access.

Ryan himself was divorced from the situation. He was only a bodyguard cum foster father and his grasp of temporal mechanics was fairly minimal. He didn't

even know what the "Protocol of Linearity" was, nor why it was so incredible that they'd managed to break it. A lot of equations, using an alphabet he didn't recognise, appeared to be involved. Personally, Ryan thought that if you took a half-human, half time-lord, a Faction Paradox fetish and a home made time machine almost anything was possible. He couldn't cast that into maths though.

He sat on one of his kitchen chairs and kept a wary eye on proceedings. Then the Other rose from his seat and came over to him. The Time Lord was wearing a long cloak with a hood that shrouded his face. Ryan thought he looked self-consciously mysterious, but refrained from saying so.

"Walk with me."

Ryan eyed him dubiously but stood up. They exited the chamber and Ryan found himself in a long colonnade with high arches over-looking a vast plaza hundreds of feet below. There seemed to be an awful lot of people out there. The Time Lord nodded.

"They are awaiting news of a plan."

"You don't seem as fascinated by John's equations as your friends are," challenged Ryan.

The Time Lord shook his head. "I have a slightly different perspective."

"So what are we here to talk about?"

The Time Lord laughed. "Direct as always." He opened his hand and a tiny ball of light appeared hovering above his palm.

"What's that?" asked Ryan.

"The Mark of the Celestis."

Involuntarily, Ryan took a step backwards.

"There's no need to fear. They can not mark you unless you agree to it."

"You are marked?" asked Ryan.

The Other shook his head again. "No. I had to agree to give this to you, though. You may carry it with you safely. You will only become marked if you use it."

He held the glittering object out to Ryan. "Take it. Never use it."

Ryan looked at the thing. It was a matter of priorities, like the faction fetishes. If he took it, he had an option of last resort. If the worst came to the worst he could make a deal with the Celestis in return for accepting the mark. He reached out and the ball of light transferred to his palm. He closed his fingers around it and it vanished.

The Other sighed. "I wish you hadn't done that."

"I don't have to use it."

"No," the man agreed, "but you will."

This is not quite the most stupid thing Ryan ever did. But it's close. Actually using the damn thing is obviously the most stupid thing he did. Allowing himself to get talked into a situation where he felt he had to use it was also pretty dim. I don't know. In the long catalogue of stupid things Ryan did, this one is definitely close to the top.

16.6 Picnic at Anomaly Junction

You'll be wanting to know who the Celestis are now and what the significance of the mark is. The Celestis are ideas. They used to be corporeal. In fact they used to be Time Lords but they decided to side-step the whole war thing. They erased themselves from time and became memetic creatures of pure thought, hiding out in their citadel of Mictlan, like a cancer on the exterior of the universe. No, I don't know how that works, but that's where Mictlan is supposed to be. I work for them. That said, all this messing around with the story you're reading is happening in my free time, not that I officially have any. This is the sort of thing that happens when you fight a conflict in which sentient ideas participate. Not that the Celestis would ever admit to taking part in the conflict. They removed themselves from history precisely in order to avoid that. They are taking part, though. So you are reading a piece of fiction, but that's essentially a bunch of ideas and, in this conflict, that makes it into a weapon. Confused yet? I know I am. It's a state of affairs I've come to terms with. I've been confused pretty much from the moment I discovered there was a war.

The mark of the Celestis is easier to get a grip on. You'll have heard of the King's Shilling. The essential concept is the same but involves less beer. You accept a favour from the Celestis and in return you receive a mark. On your death you then become one of their servants, trapped in Mictlan. The purpose of the servants is largely to think about the Celestis. If you've turned yourself into an idea, you need people to keep thinking about you. And yes, before you ask, I did accept their mark and I am now trapped in Mictlan.

On the whole, I imagine you're thinking that this doesn't sound too bad. While an eternity spent thinking about the Celestis isn't quite up there with the cupids and heavenly chorus, there have to be worse after-lives out there, right?

Wrong.

Why do you think the Celestis excised themselves from history? They were running scared, that's why. So they idealised themselves as the epitome of fear. The many towers of Mictlan are haunted by the stench of death and terror wreathes

mist-like through its empty streets. The slaves of the Celestis are bound forever to think and perceive only Mictlan and only the Celestis, the Lords of Loathing and Fear and Horror. Sometimes we get sent out on missions and sometimes we get to snatch a small amount of time in someone else's ideas but inevitably, and always, we are pulled back into the well of despair.

It's one of the reasons I'm a little garrulous here. I would never have described myself as particularly garrulous in life but when you exist only as an idea, images and words are pretty much all you have.

I'm not here simply to wallow in self-pity though. I have a plan. We'll come to that shortly.

Ryan sat awkwardly in front of the kitchen table. John's home-baked array of electronics and chopsticks had been replaced by something altogether more elaborate but, in many ways, no less ramshackle. Omega, Rassilon and John were fussing over it like children with a new toy. Ryan had not seen the Other since he gave him the mark of the Celestis.

"Is this a good idea?" he asked for the hundredth time.

Rassilon straightened up. "One of the first tenets we put in place when we Anchored the Thread was the Protocol of Linearity."

Ryan sighed, "Gallifreyan time cannot be travelled through. No Time Lord should be able to move backwards or forwards in Gallifreyan time."

"It is a little embarrassing, therefore," said Rassilon, "that you have managed to completely shatter it within days of its establishment."

"Not exactly days from our point of view," pointed out Ryan.

"We think it must have been partly because of the Faction Paradox fetish and partly because I'm only half Time Lord," said John.

"Even Faction Paradox can't travel through Gallifreyan time," objected Ryan. "Can they?"

John shook his head. "Don't think so. We were just a freak effect."

Ryan rolled his eyes. Personally, he doubted the "freak effect" theory. It explained away too much whilst explaining away precisely nothing at all. However, the two greatest figures in Time Lord legend, not to mention his disturbingly intelligent foster son, were remarkably keen on it.

"More to the point," said Omega, "since you can't possibly be here at this time it should be simple to eject you back into current Gallifreyan time."

Ryan shook his head but nevertheless fished a second Faction fetish from his pocket. This one was a small gold cross with tiny pins at three of the points. Ryan winced with distaste. He held his hand over the machine. Rassilon and Omega stood back. John gripped the edge of the table. Ryan curled his hand tight around

the cross, letting the pins bite into his skin. Three small drops of blood dripped into the heart of the machine.

The travel this time was much faster. A brief sensation of blurred movement and then Ryan found himself sitting in one of his kitchen chairs on a grassy hillside. On every side of him, as far as the eye could see, anomalies blinked and sparkled.

"Captain Ryan, what an unexpected surprise."

Ryan stood rapidly and whirled round. Helen Cutter was behind him, rucksack on her back, long hair loose about her shoulders.

Helen Cutter is not my favourite person. Not that she would care about my opinion at all. One of the most disconcerting things about Helen was her total lack of giving any kind of a toss about what people thought of her. The worst crime anyone can commit, of course, is not caring what other people think. Helen didn't care at all. She had no interest whatsoever in being nice or accommodating. She was prepared enough to play the game when it suited her agenda but she was never terribly good at it. If it hadn't been for her intelligence, and other assets, she would never have got as far as she did.

She was never all that interested in being the good guy either, another unforgivable crime. To give her credit, I don't think she was particularly interested in being the bad guy. She just got on with being curious about things. These days I find I have a kind of grudging admiration for the woman, for her single-mindedness, if nothing else. All that said, if I am ever again in a position to do so, I will enjoy paying her back for the lives she has sacrificed along the way.

Ryan picked his gun off the table.

"Oh, very macho!" said Helen.

"Who's this?" asked John.

"Helen Cutter, Professor Cutter's missing wife."

"The one who disappeared through the anomalies for eight years and didn't come back?"

"That's the one."

"You never said she was with Faction Paradox."

Involuntarily, Ryan glanced at Helen's shadow. It seemed to be in the right place but nevertheless it looked a bit sheepish, like it had just darted there.

"I didn't know," said Ryan.

Helen pouted. "I'm quite surprised to see you here," she said. "I'm surprised, in fact, to find you made it out of the Permian in one piece."

"There was this..." began John.

Ryan shot him a look and John shut up. He wasn't always discreet and had no concept of "need to know". But he had a good nose for impending trouble.

"Yes?" asked Helen.

"Never you mind," said Ryan.

"You know about the Faction though," pressed Helen.

Ryan mustered what he hoped was a contemptuous snort. "Renegade Time Lords, like to make out they're on some kind of anarchistic ideological crusade."

Helen's face darkened.

"Are you a cousin?" asked John, "or just a little sister?"

Helen almost snarled. "Never you mind," she threw at them.

"Well, *little sister*," said Ryan, emphasising the words. "We don't want anything to do with you or your kind so I suggest you get out of here."

"You may not want anything to do with the Faction, Captain Ryan. But believe me, the Faction is interested in you."

"You have our answer."

Helen raised her eyebrows, then shrugged and leaped through the nearest anomaly.

Ryan waited a minute before lowering his gun. His exoskeleton wasn't neurologically linked. He'd never liked the idea of letting his brain anywhere near Faction doctors. It slowed him down in the field- a lot, but at least he knew his thoughts were his own. He keyed a perimeter warning into the control pad on his arm. He put on his sunglasses and patched a tactical readout in front of one eye. If Helen returned with reinforcements he wanted to be ready.

"Are these anomalies?" asked John. He was peering at a readout on his machine.

"Yes. I don't know if this is the same place we called anomaly junction but, if not, it's something similar."

"Interesting," said John. "We should set up camp here and map them."

"Should we now?"

"If you think that's a good idea, Dad."

Ryan sighed. "Let's be honest, you're the brains of the outfit. I'd have thought we should be able to find a way back to the 21st century from here. It might not be the safest of places but at least I know it. We shouldn't stay too long - this must be a regular through route for dinosaurs."

"You can handle them."

John was probably right. It wasn't like Ryan was stuck with 21st century equipment any more.

"We stay for a bit," said Ryan. "But then we find a way to the 21st century."

At that moment, his perimeter alarm pinged. Ryan whirled to where his tactical readout said the intruder was, but it was moving too fast. Ryan stilled his breathing. The readouts were telling him he was facing a mythical creature, a babel from Time Lord legend. It was one of the shock troops created for the early waves of the war: violent, deranged and ultimately uncontrollable. It provided him with an image. Ryan had seen one before. It was the "future predator" Helen had helped them trap. It was the young of one of these that Lyle had been delivering through the Permian when Hope and Leela had abducted Ryan; when he'd been pursuing Lyle's party to warn them of second predator on their heels. His blood ran cold at the thought that they'd actually been transporting a crate full of babelin.

Unsurprisingly, the battle computer was having trouble predicting its movements. At the moment it appeared to be circling them, no doubt deciding upon a plan of attack.

"What is it?" asked John.

"Babel. Keep down. Stay Close."

Ryan activated his shield. It should protect both of them, for a while at least. He watched the creature circling on his readouts. Ryan laid down a burst of covering fire ahead of its position but mistimed it. The creature turned. Several warning lights indicating a directly incoming opponent flashed on his glasses. He still couldn't actually see anything though, it was moving too fast.

He let off a burst of gunfire directly ahead of him and then the creature slammed into his forward shields knocking him backwards off his feet, onto the ground. He clenched a fist, hearing the servos whirr softly in the exo-skeleton and then punched forwards with all his might. He connected with something. John was crouched in front of him, hands held protectively over his head. Ryan placed a hand on his shoulder, keeping John down while he stood protectively over him. His shield was at half-strength. The computer readout showed a criss-crossing display of where the babel had been but still wasn't giving him any predictive information. Ryan fought, once more, to still his breathing and pulled a small proximity grenade from his tac vest. He set its detectors to its blast range and lobbed it in front of him.

"Keep very still," he cautioned John.

He pulled out another and lobbed it behind them. Then he stood as still as he could and waited for the babel to come to them. He hoped his shield would survive the blast.

The warning lights began flashing once more and he braced himself. He watched the line of approach on the sunglasses cross into the detection range

of a grenade. The blast threw him backwards off his feet, triggering the second grenade at he did so. He ended up face first on the ground on top of John. His shield readout stood at zero but the battle computer wasn't detecting anything larger than a mouse in the perimeter. Cautiously he lifted his head.

The creature lay still and unmoving a few feet away from them, surrounded by the remains of his table and John's time travel machine.

"Is it really a babel?" asked John, already on his feet and walking towards the creature.

"That's what the readouts said. Question is, was it following Helen?"

"I should dissect it."

Ryan sighed but his mind was whirling with questions. Helen had told them she'd picked up her "future predator" in the Permian and it had followed her to the 21st Century. But now he knew she was a Faction Paradox agent and it would not have surprised him, entirely, to discover she was leading a babel to the 21st Century. But why? What interest had Faction Paradox had in luring Nick Cutter, presumably, into the Permian with a crate full of babelin young?

Fortunately, Ryan's kit bag was blast resistant so it was not long before he and John had set up a moderately secure camp. Ryan spread a number of automated devices around the perimeter which would prevent most things getting too close to the camp itself. They would certainly prevent any dinosaurs accidentally blundering their way.

Ryan initially refused to let the map-making activities get too carried away. He was concerned about anomalies closing while they were on the far side. However, within a day, John had worked out how to predict the lifecycle of an anomaly. Ryan still didn't like straying too far from the junction, uncomfortably aware that all too many things could arise to delay them, but nevertheless they soon had a fairly impressive map of the anomaly network.

"You know something?" asked John on their fifth day.

"What?"

"The anomalies work a bit like capacitors."

"What?"

"I mean they store temporal energy. Every time something passes through an anomaly, jumps across time as it were, a small amount of temporal charge is generated."

"Why do the anomalies close up then? Surely they should just get bigger or something."

"I don't know, but I think something, or someone, is siphoning off the power for some reason."

Ryan stared around the glittering anomalies thoughtfully. "That's an awful lot of temporal energy someone is generating."

"We should contact mother."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You know why not. She wants you kept out of the war. The deal with the Time Lords permitted Hope one unmonitored trip. After that all bets are off. If we make contact with her you will immediately be co-opted into the war effort, as a figurehead if nothing else."

"I'm fourteen, I've already accidently broken the Protocol of Linearity, and I've discovered that someone is using the Earth as a giant temporal battery. I'd say I'm already involved in the war." John paused, glancing down at his hands. "I'm also half Time Lord as well as half human. I can't just hide away with this information when it could be of use to them."

Ryan regarded him closely. He'd grown up fast on the Paradox infiltrated colony. He'd grown up even faster in the last few days. And he had a point about the strategic value of his information. Eventually Ryan nodded.

"I assume you've a plan for contacting her?"

Ryan watched suspiciously as Hope materialised in front of them. She looked the same as before, but then she would. He paused, briefly, to wonder why *anyone* would choose to look like a dumpy red-head with freckles but then he didn't run universe manipulating block transfer computations in his head, so who knew.

He did a double-take, though, when Leela stalked out of the machine. The leathers she had worn when he had first met her, fourteen years previously, had not left a great deal to the imagination. Her current outfit left even less and there was clearly some support work going on in the bikini top.

"It makes me look more like a warrior queen," she said fiercely.

Ryan tore his eyes away from her breasts and up to her face. "It makes you look more like something, certainly."

Her face was full of fury. "You were not supposed to contact me."

Ryan shrugged. "Events have overtaken us."

"Mum?" interrupted John. The poor boy had gone bright red and was staring fixedly at his feet. Mind you, if he'd only seen his Mum for the first time at age fourteen and she'd been wearing that get up, Ryan would have had trouble knowing where to look. John was going to have issues.

Actually John, it has to be said, has never shown much sign of issues. It's probably the Time Lord half. Since they've reproduced asexually for millennia, Time Lords aren't really wired up to respond to anything much sexually. For all I know Time Lords have a small compartment in their mind where they can shove all that "yucky stuff" and pretend it doesn't happen.

I have no idea how John came to be conceived, though I suppose if Leela came at me with a knife demanding sexual fulfilment and, you know, I still had a body, I would apply my full Time Lord mental powers to resolving the situation. If I was Andred, that is.

I'm just marking time here while there's more exposition and enjoying my brief holiday from Mictlan. Ryan and John are describing their flight from the doomed colony Hope left them in and you already know all about that. Hope explains why the colony was the only possible place she could have left them, even though she was aware of the Faction Paradox presence. Cwej has tagged along with Leela so there has to be a terribly tedious round of introduction. Leela threatens pretty much all concerned at one point or another. Once she's calmed down a bit, she explains the Time Lords want John to infiltrate Faction Paradox and they all launch into a whole new round of argument. And so on and so forth.

"I'll do it!" said John.

"No!" said Leela and Ryan in unison.

Cwej slumped on a rock and lit his third cigarette with an air of weary resignation.

"I don't see how you can stop me," said John.

"He has a point," said Cwej.

"*You* keep out of this," returned Ryan.

"The Time Lords know where I am now," said John. "As far as I can see we're committed."

"Not necessarily," said Ryan.

Leela looked at him, "You have a plan?"

"Faction Paradox have this skull in the Eleven Day Empire right? And we know of only one assault that has ever successfully breached the Empire."

"Star Chamber on Earth, 1834, using Babbage's Analytical Engine," said Cwej.

"John can design and build an analytical engine. We know the key is Bach's Musical Offering. We can enter the Empire ourselves."

Cwej shook his head, "No good. They'll have closed off that route now."

"Not if we make the attempt before Star Chamber did."

"Not possible," said Cwej. "It'll break the Protocol of Linearity."

"We launch an attack sometime after the founding of the Eleven Day Empire and before the 1834 attack. Sometime between 1752 and 1834, Earth time."

Cwej shook his head, "Even if Hope managed to travel to that period in Earth history, and it's notoriously difficult to get there, you still wouldn't be contemporaneous with the Eleven Day Empire. The Protocol of Linearity prevents it."

Ryan looked at the anomalies glittering all around them. "Who said we were going to use Hope to travel?"

16.7 The Tremaynes are At Home to Captain Thomas Ryan and Family

"This dress is ridiculous!" Leela tugged angrily at the stays everyone seemed to think she should wear.

"The men's clothes aren't much better," commented Ryan, without turning.

Leela let her eyes run over his breeches and tailored waistcoat, as he leaned out of the window.

"No," she agreed, seriously, "they are too tight for combat."

He straightened up and leaned against the side of the window. "You complain about your dresses every day."

"They are impractical."

His gaze drifted to her breasts, "They do wonders for your figure, though."

"That is beside the point."

Ryan looked out of the window.

"What are you looking for?" asked Leela.

"John and Cwej, they went out earlier to meet Cwej's watchmaker contact. I'm worried they'll make themselves conspicuous."

"Everyone in this city is conspicuous."

Ryan laughed at that. "We're in the fashionable end of town. So you may have a point."

He looked out of the window once more. "But it's a Sunday," he said. "It's conspicuous doing business on a Sunday."

"How did you know about Star Chamber?"

"Sorry?"

"How did you know about Star Chamber? I've been thinking. The Faction won't have told you. They'd want to conceal the fact someone nearly managed to break in to the Eleven Day Empire. It's not common knowledge. I didn't know about it. So, how did you know?"

Ryan regarded her coolly for a moment.

"The anomaly project."

"Yes?"

"It's not like the British government went into it blind. They've been aware of the time-active powers since they sold those eleven days to Faction Paradox in 1752. Not many of the people on the project knew about Faction Paradox and the Time Lords, but a few of us did."

Leela cocked her head to one side. Instinct told her Ryan hadn't explained everything. So she stared at him expectantly and waited for him to fill the silence.

"There's even a rump of Star Chamber left within the government," he admitted, finally. "I worked for them."

"You still work for them?"

Ryan shook his head, "I don't think so. I have a different priority and I think we might disagree about how to handle him."

Leela regarded him closely and then nodded, satisfied, temporarily at least.

Ryan ushered his "family" into a pew in the Church. Hope had suddenly converted her appearance, after living in London for two days, to that of a tall elegant black woman and she'd taken to wearing finery that put the rest of them to shame. Her dresses hung stiff with gold and silver thread and must have weighed a ton. Ryan had tried to suggest that she should either revert to her white red-head appearance or wear clothes more appropriate to a servant but she had given him a look that had frozen his blood and had asked if that was an order from Leela. Ryan didn't want to argue with someone who could rip holes through space and time. More importantly, he didn't want to know what it was like to be able to build universes inside your head but be hard-wired to obey your operator in all things. He particularly didn't want to know about the Time Lord force-breeding program, the bull TARDISes in the restraints of the birthing cages, the programming and the conditioning and the atrocities committed in the name of an arms race. If Hope wanted to make a point then he wasn't going to stop her, but he wished she didn't make them quite so horribly conspicuous.

He'd mentioned it to Cwej who had just shrugged and said, "At least she's not looking like her mother any more. That has to be a good thing."

It was around this point when Ryan started worrying quite how dangerous a sentient time machine with issues might be. He didn't know a lot about Hope's mother, Compassion. The name, he was told, had been ironic. She had originally lived on a Faction Paradox colony, then she had travelled with the Doctor. Some days Ryan wondered if every significant figure on the Time Lord side of the war had travelled with the Doctor. At some point, something entirely unexplained had happened, and she had mutated into a time machine and from that moment the race had been on to co-opt her into the War. She'd kept ahead of the war-time powers for a long, long time but at some point and for her own reasons she had made a deal with the Time Lords. Hope and her sisters were the result of that deal. They were bound to their Time Lord operators and abandoned by their mother. Ryan considered pointing out to Hope that there were no slaves in 18th Century England but he had a feeling the conversation would not go well.

Even in his Sunday best, Cwej managed to look dishevelled. Leela looked rebellious. Hope looked bored. At least John looked intent and fascinated and almost normal in his powdered wig. As long as he kept his mouth shut they should be able to get through the service and home again without incident.

"Why are we here?" hissed Leela as they sat down.

"Because our lodgings are across the street and it will be noticed if we don't attend," returned Ryan with, he felt, exemplary calmness given they'd had this conversation several times already. Several times, in fact, every week that they had been here.

"The Doctor always said," began Leela.

"That superstition was the retreat of the timid mind," completed Ryan. "Yes, I know. This is religion not superstition which is different, so shush!"

"I do not see the difference," said Leela, loudly enough to earn a chuckle from Cwej and a stern look from the vicar.

This Sunday was different though. About halfway through the service which, 18th Century political ignoramus that he was, Ryan thought might be about Trade Unionism, he became aware of faint movement out of the corner of his eye. He became more alert and, keeping his eyes fixed on the vicar, nevertheless started to pay attention to his peripheral vision. At his side, Leela began hoisting at her skirts in a way that told him she was about to liberate the small armoury she kept there and, no doubt, horrify the parishioners with a show of leg. Ryan rather appreciated Leela's legs so he allowed himself the odd glance as the hem of her skirt crept up her shins and over her knee. Behind him, he heard Cwej cocking the

pistols he kept concealed under his coat. Ryan gripped the end of his sword-cane. They'd agreed to carry only contemporary weapons in the hopes it would make them less conspicuous to any time active power that might be watching. He rather wished they had stuck with the high-energy weapons.

Shadows were dancing up the aisles and in and out of the tall pillars holding the roof aloft. It looked like the Faction had found them. Keeping track of the shadows from the corners of his eyes, there was no point looking straight at them, you never saw anything if you did that, Ryan's mind raced. Faction Paradox were always incredibly impressed by symbolism. It made a certain sense, caught up, as they were, on the sidelines of a war that was not only *about* ideas but fought *with* ideas and, if Leela was right, was essentially being fought *against* ideas. Ryan personally thought that Faction Paradox tended to fetishise symbolism more than they needed to, but on this particular occasion it might serve to protect them. In particular a word floated across his mind and that word was Sanctuary.

Ryan had a sudden dissonant image of a naked Stephen Hart holding a can of beer. He blinked and it was gone but his conviction remained. Faction Paradox would not launch a full frontal attack in a Church and, while they remained in the Church, they would be safe. Stephen Hart, naked, fully clothed or dressed in a bunny suit wouldn't make any difference to that.

At this juncture I feel I should comment on the whole naked Stephen Hart thing. I should, in fact, draw your attention to the whole primeval_denial Sanctuary thing. I expect you'll be getting irritated around now. There's breaking the fourth wall and then there's ripping the whole thing to shreds and jumping up and down on it going "nya! nya! nya!". But the point is I'm **not** *the author. I know you* **think** *I'm the author being all pretentious and meta-textual but I'm not. I'm a shift. I'm a conceptual entity. The author did not write this.*

Look! The Time Lords are fighting a war with ideas and ideas are insidious things, hard to pin down and hard to control. They escape and find their way out. They insert themselves into fiction. They worm their way into one mind and leap from that to another and another. Rodlox had this idea of putting Leela and Ryan together and the idea leaped from his mind to Lsellersfic and she wrote a drabble. Feeding upon the attention, the idea grew and now Ryan is sitting in a Church admiring the shapely curve of Leela's thigh while she admires the tightness of his trousers and both of them, frankly, are getting a little hot and excited and not just about the fight they anticipate happening in the near future. And they are really there! This is not just a story. It's balanced on a fine line between fiction and reality, ideas knocking against ideas, in a war that stretches across all time, a war that is about our deepest most fundamental conception of how time and reality

work and which is causing the boundary between reality and fiction to fray a little at the edges.

Then into this you drop the word Sanctuary and a host of other ideas get set free. Ideas that leap from one mind to another. It's not even clear how that meme started. People were upset when their favourite characters in a TV show died. An internet community was set up. Mysteriousaliwz wrote some porn and the idea jumped to Athene and then Fredbassett and then Luka and by that point it was out and free. Such a harmless idea. Take the pretty boys and put them somewhere safe after they died and then watch them having sex but, as I hope you've realised, they're all combatants in a war, whether you believe it or not, whether you like it not and those two ideas: that Ryan escaped from the reaper and went off to have exciting adventures with Leela and that Ryan succumbed to his fate and ended up strapped to a bed with cable ties while Stephen Hart licked ice cream off his nipples come into head to head conflict.

No wonder the poor man's having visions of Stephen. He's a foot soldier in a war. You're the tactician, safe behind the lines, at least for the moment. Don't forget that!

The church was empty. The vicar stared at them from where he stood.

"Are we going?" asked John quietly.

The shadows continued to move.

"Not yet," said Ryan.

The vicar walked over towards them. Ryan struggled to recall his name.

"Fascinating sermon!" said John brightly, as the man approached and he vaulted over the pew and perched on the back of the one in front facing the vicar. "Not sure I'd have made the parallel between David and Goliath, Parliament and People myself, at least, not with Parliament in the role of David. Though I suppose you could do a kind of analogy, if you leaped across the pond and suggested the Scarlet Pimpernel was an agent of the British Government."

"Not written yet," said Hope.

"What?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel. It's not been written yet."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel's fictional?" said John. He looked to Ryan for confirmation who shrugged back.

"OK, forget about the Scarlet Pimpernel." John raised his hands at the vicar.

The vicar stared past him stonily at Ryan.

"Mr Ryan. I assume you have some business with me?"

"Not quite," said Ryan, carefully. "We seem to have attracted company."

At that moment the whole Church dimmed as if the sun outside had vanished behind a cloud. The shadows rushed across the walls with a faint chittering sound.

"We claim Sanctuary," said Ryan, loudly. "You will not attack in a Church."

A shadow halted, inches from his polished and buckled shoes.

There was a sudden silence.

"We should escape," said Hope standing. "I can..."

"No," said Ryan. "We stay here." He looked round at Hope. "I'm sorry Hope, but if we try to take your route out of here I don't think we'll ever get another chance."

The vicar clutched the Prayer Book to his chest.

The shadows started to move again, as if gathering strength for an attack. Leela and Cwej both produced pistols, but there was nothing to aim at. Then the vicar slammed his prayer book down on the front of the pew.

"You will not violate the sanctity of this place."

The shadows stilled.

The sound of soft footfalls echoed in the aisle, alongside the tapping of a cane. Slowly Ryan rose and turned to face the newcomer. A man, elegantly attired in black with a fashionable wig, stood facing them, his face was obscured by a grinning white mask. Leela cocked her pistol and aimed it at him, as did Cwej.

"Mr Ryan, if you wish to claim Sanctuary, your people can not harm me."

Ryan nodded at them. Cwej locked eyes with him a moment and then lowered the gun.

"I do not trust this man," said Leela.

"Neither do I, but let's hear what he has to say."

Leela's gun lowered, by maybe ten inches.

The man flicked his fingers and a small card appeared in them. He held it out.

"What's this?" asked Ryan.

"An invitation."

Ryan stared at it suspiciously and then looked at Hope. She was his best bet if there was something fishy about the invitation itself.

"Is it safe?" he asked.

Hope's wide hooped skirts prevented her sidling along the pew so she walked out into the side aisle and then swept around the front of the church, all eyes upon her, head held high, lightly fanning herself. She stopped in front of the man and her fan closed with a snap. She waved one hand ostentatiously over the invitation.

"It depends what you mean by safe," she said.

"He means, can he take it?" said John.

Hope looked levelly at him. "Yes, then."

Ryan took the invitation and flipped it over.

Mr and Mrs Thomas Ryan, Esquire
Detective Christopher Rodonante Cwej, Mr Johnsmith of House Redlooms and the Lady Hope
Mr and Mrs William Tremayne will be at home, this afternoon, 2 o'clock

"Why should we come?" asked Ryan.

The man tutted, disapprovingly. "We can do this in a civilised fashion or an uncivilised fashion, which will it be?"

Ryan gazed at him. Faction Paradox were not renowned for their civilised approach to problems but he doubted even the determination of the vicar could hold them off for long.

"I accept," he said, carefully.

The invitation burst into flames in his hand and he held it carefully as it burned, finally letting the ashes drop to the floor. The man gave a satisfied smirk and stalked back out of the Church.

"You should not have accepted," said Leela. "It is a trap."

"So we'll spring it."

"Besides," said John, "only Ryan has to go. He said 'I accept', not 'we accept'."

"Well spotted," said Cwej.

"I don't see how that helps," said Hope.

Leela grinned, a predatory glint in her eye. "It gives us options."

"I agree you should not have accepted," said the vicar.

Ryan bowed formally to him, as best he could, he'd not had time to get to grips properly with the footwork required.

"Thank you for your protection but I do not think it would have held them for long. This way we take the fight out of your Church and hopefully, we will have time to prepare."

The vicar returned the bow. "I appreciate the concern but I think, perhaps, this was the best place to fight that enemy. Holy ground is the place to fight the ungodly."

"Why do we talk?" asked Leela. "It has been decided?"

Ryan couldn't help smiling. He enjoyed Leela's ability to cut through the crap and get to the point.

The vicar glanced at Leela. "As you see fit, Mrs Ryan. Good day."

"Good day," said Ryan. He held out his arm to Leela who took it. "Shall we return to our lodgings, my good wife?" he said.

She glared at him.

"I am not your wife," she whispered quietly as they walked the wrong way down the aisle towards the door of the Church.

"Life would be a lot simpler if you two did get married," opined John, from behind them.

Ryan and Leela both stopped to turn round and stare at him. He flushed bright red.

"Though maybe you should... umm," he waved his hands about, "sleep with each other first. Just to see if you like it."

"Not helping, John," said Hope.

"You do like each other don't you?" he enquired, plaintively.

"I think you and I had better have a chat," said Cwej, grabbing John by the arm and steering him around Ryan and Leela. "We can leave your parents to resolve their sexual tension in peace."

Hope stomped out after them, blue skirts swishing along the floor. Ryan heard her mutter, "Humans!" under her breath as she brushed past.

Ryan found himself staring into Leela's eyes.

"I am not a chattel," she said.

"Understood."

"I do not obey foolish orders."

"Got that."

They stood awkwardly looking at each other.

"John should not attend this afternoon," said Leela.

Ryan blinked at the sudden change of subject and then nodded. The analytical engine was almost complete. This afternoon need only be a delaying action.

"We can't leave him alone though," he said.

"We may be able to," she said, "if they think he is with us," and her eyes fixed on the tracery in the dirt where Hope's dress had passed.

"Mr and Mrs Thomas Ryan and Party," announced the footman to the empty room.

Leela stalked in and stood before the nearest mannequin. The room was full of them, dressed in elaborate ballgowns and powdered wigs. She tapped on its forehead.

"Wood," she reported, puzzled.

"They're meant to unsettle us," said Cwej following her. "It's called the uncanny valley effect."

She looked at the rows of brightly painted faces and staring eyes. "Why would I be afraid of wooden dolls?"

She felt Ryan come to stand beside her. "Don't you find them, a little creepy?" he asked. She shook her head. He leaned close to murmur in her ear, "I must show you some horror movies some time."

"This is pointless," said Hope, sweeping in imperiously. "We have come and fulfilled the contract. Now we should go!"

"Really? What a pity!" The man from the church had appeared on a balcony above them.

"Mr. Tremayne, I presume?" said Ryan.

"I'm afraid not. The Tremaynes are proving," the man paused for effect, "obstructive."

"What do you want with us?" asked Leela.

"Hmmm... that would be telling really. However there seems to be a member of your party missing."

"He's somewhere safe," said Ryan. Leela watched as his eyes flickered towards Hope. The man on the balcony did not move like a hunter, but all the Faction cousins should be able to pick up clues like that.

"Really?" said the man on the balcony. "In that case..." He waved his arms in an elaborate gesture and the great double doors they had come through closed with a clang.

Hope cried out. "He's temporally sealed us."

The man laughed, "Oh indeed! You didn't really think we'd allow them to bring you as a convenient escape route, did you?"

The man leaped over the balcony and landed nimbly on the floor of the ballroom. "All the chickies in one little basket," he sang and chassayed across the floor towards them.

"You're not a Time Lord," said Cwej, producing a gun from inside his coat. "You're a human recruit," and his voice dripped with contempt.

The man laughed. "Look at yourself Christopher Rodonante Cwej. I'm an equal in the Faction - what matter it if I am human, if I have imagination and talent and ambition? Whereas you, a human? You will never be more than a tool for the Time Lords. Don't you find it ironic that you can stand there defending the racial purity of a power bloc that you would despise if they allowed you admittance, that have robbed you of your own blond hair and blue eyes because it suited their purposes better to have a dumpy and insignificant tramp in their employ. Didn't

they promise you they would regenerate you into a super-soldier? I've heard about the type three cwejen. That body would have been yours wouldn't it? if they hadn't had a sudden change of heart and fiddled with your biodata?"

Cwej fired the gun. Leela heard the distinctive click of the hammer falling. The man laughed again.

"State of Temporal Grace, old chap. Why do you think we let your weapons in, in the first place?"

"At least I know I'm on the side of Law and Order," said Cwej, tightly.

"Time Lord Laws, Time Lord Order. Just because they got here first, what right do they have to the Universe?"

"You are beginning to sound like the Enemy," said Leela.

The man came up close to her, eye to eye. "What do you know of the Enemy?"

"More than you and the Time Lord greybeards," she said. The enemy was a process, she was sure. The enemy was the idea of being opposed to the Time Lord vision of a rational universe. That was why it was so difficult to pin down. It was an idea taken life which infected minds far and wide. It could spring up independently and separately in a hundred time zones but once it was there, it acted swiftly and decisively.

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"Let us go."

They stood eye to eye for a moment. "You know nothing," he said.

He sidled up to Hope. "And now to open you up, my dear, and fetch out young master Smith."

His manner was all violence and menace. Instinctively Leela stepped forward.

"If you lay a finger on her!" Her voice faltered.

"You'll what?" asked the man. "Lecture me on the wisdom of the Sevateem?" He turned back to Hope who began to back away from him.

"You didn't really think young Johnsmith would be safe inside you did you? Time Lord keys open Time Lord ships and Faction Paradox are Time Lords."

Suddenly the man's hands were at Hope's throat. Almost as one, Leela, Ryan and Cwej leaped forwards. His hands peeled apart, ripping Hope open. She screamed.

16.8 Assault on the Eleven-Day Empire

Hope had become a pulsating distortion in the centre of the room. A four-dimensional shape endlessly folding in on itself. Her screaming continued echoing round the

chamber. The man staggered back.

"Where is he?" he asked. "Where is John?"

Ryan grabbed him in an arm lock. "Release her," he hissed.

"Hope! Swords!" Leela shouted, trusting that Hope would be able to hear them through the pain.

Two swords shot out of the distortion and rolled to her feet. She picked one up and stabbed it hard into the man's shadow. The man screamed and the shadow writhed.

"Bypasses Temporal Grace," said Ryan with satisfaction and released his hold stepping back. John had made the swords for them, specifically to fight the Faction with.

Leela was impressed. She picked up the second sword and held it over the shadow heart. "Release Hope."

Cwej nudged the sword, already pinning the shadow arm. "Temporal Grace doesn't appear to protect shadows. What a pity. I'd do what she says, you know. She's not easy to reason with when she's angry."

There was a screeching sound and Hope suddenly reappeared. She launched herself at the man, screaming and sobbing. Ryan caught her.

"Leave it!" he ordered.

Leela took one look at Hope's face and stabbed her sword down hard into the heart of the shadow.

The man made a gurgling sound and collapsed to the floor.

Cwej walked up and stirred him with his foot. "The Doctor wouldn't approve," he said.

"The Doctor is not here."

He shrugged and looked about. "Hmmm... looks like our friends have woken up, though."

All around them the wooden mannequins lurched into life. Cwej pulled a second gun from his pockets and emptied both them into the nearest doll. Its head exploded but the body moved on.

"The Temporal Grace is gone as well," he muttered, sounding satisfied.

Ryan stepped forward briskly, pulling his sword from the floor. "Hope, can you open the doors?" he asked.

Hope ran for the doors, toppling dolls like ninepins as she barged past them. Leela, Ryan and Cwej ran in her wake. Leela and Ryan turned in the doorway for a fighting retreat. The thin rapiers were not going to be efficient against the wooden mannequins but they were all they had.

"Duck!" said Cwej suddenly.

In his hand was a stick of dynamite which he lobbed over their heads into the throng.

They ducked down as the wave of heat passed over them. Looking up, Leela saw that most of the dolls were burning and collapsing to the floor. Hope had ignored the blast, her dress not even singed. Her hands wove across the doors. Suddenly, she grabbed the handles and hauled them open.

"Basic temporal theory. He locked the door to his biodata, once he was dead the temporal seal broke. After that it was just a matter of a bit of atomic manipulation," she muttered.

"Good," said Leela and they burst into the hallway to be confronted by five masked figures, all en garde. Two men were in fashionable outfits of the day, their masks elaborate feathered affairs. There was woman was in a kind of pirate costume, and then there was a harlequin and a fox.

Leela blocked the harlequin's blow but instinct made her twist to one side and she knew her sleeve had been nicked, even though the man was nowhere near her. She eyed the shadow warily, noticing the dagger in its off-hand. Ryan had engaged the two fashionable gentlemen. Leela watched fascinated as he whirled and ducked, blocking both real and shadow weapons, rapier in one hand and a dagger in the other. She knew that he and John had practised this, considering it a necessity when living in a Faction dominated colony.

She focused on the harlequin in front of her and his shadow, treating them as she would two opponents and pulled her own knife from her belt. She blocked the shadow's gladius with the rapier, silently thanking the technology John had built into it. Then she parried the man's rapier and threw her knife, dispatching the harlequin. The shadow fell with him.

Hope stood at the bottom of the entrance stairway by the front doors to the house, once again weaving her magic. Cwej had abandoned his guns. The Faction agents were wearing some kind of energy shield that absorbed the blast. He was fending off his piratical opponent and the fox with a chair.

Given both her companions were, just about, holding their own, Leela paused to asses the situation. Ryan had managed to shed his constricting coat and was fighting in his waistcoat and shirt sleeves. A table stood by the banister at the top of the stairs and he leaped onto it, giving him the advantage over his opponents. Leela took the opportunity to run the Fox through from behind. The pirate woman turned to face her and Cwej immediately clubbed her over the head with his chair.

"Doors open!" shouted Hope.

Cwej ran for the stairs. Leela looked to Ryan who was still fighting his two opponents from his vantage point on the table. The rope that tethered the grand

central chandelier was fixed to the wall close to Leela. She pulled it loose from its hook and leaped up beside him, parrying a shadow rapier thrust at the same time. He glanced up at her and then wrapped both arms around her waist.

"You're mad," he whispered in her ear, as she jumped over the bannister and into the central hallway. Their descent was rapid but Ryan threw himself clear as they approached the ground and rolled across the floor as he fell. Leela released her hold on the rope and they dashed for the door as the heavy chandelier crashed down behind them.

Hope and Cwej were already outside but Leela paused in the doorway to grab Ryan and press a hot kiss to his lips. He responded enthusiastically. A slight taste of gunpowder stirred a half-formed memory of clouds of smoke and the smell of fish.

Leela broke away startled.

"Time to run!" he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her down the steps.

They hadn't got far though, before he seized the opportunity to pull her into a side alley, press her against the wall and kiss her again.

"Promise me," he said, "that you won't go and get yourself killed in the assault on the Eleven Day Empire."

"That would be a foolish promise. It is not in my gift."

Ryan returned to kissing her, down the side of her face and towards her neck.

"Well, promise me you'll try to stay alive at least until I can get you somewhere a little more private than a back alley."

"What purpose would it serve?"

"It's good luck!"

"It is superstition!"

"A little superstition is good for an old soldier now and then," he murmured into her chest. Then he broke away, clearly exasperated. "Besides, if you don't promise, I may have to expedite matters. You think I've never made love in a back alley in 18th Century London before?"

Leela considered that. "I do not believe you have ever made love in a back alley in 18th Century London." She thought about it a little more and then pushed him away from her, "And if you have, you are getting a full medical from Hope before you touch me again."

"OK, I haven't made love in an 18th Century back alley before."

"Tell you what," said Leela, relenting.

"What?"

"I promise that if you survive the assault on the Eleven Day Empire and manage to get me somewhere a little more private than a back alley then you can make

love to me as much as you like." She spun him round so that now she pinned him against the wall and kissed him once.

"Deal?" she asked.

"Deal."

"So?" said Ryan, "this is the analytical engine?"

John nodded. "Pretty much, I've made a few improvements but the principle's the same."

Ryan walked around the machine. It was huge, and expensive. Hope had carried a lot of mineral wealth in her interior which had funded it. But the sheer expenditure had made Ryan nervous. Sooner or later, he had worried that their activities would draw the attention of Star Chamber or the Grand Families or, as it had transpired, of the Faction itself. Still the machine was now built. John had spread a manuscript copy of the Musical Offering across the table.

Leela had donned battle fatigues, with more of an eye to practicality than her previous outfit. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail and she wore a loose-fitting trouser suit under a stripped down version of her Time Lord battle-armour. Ryan was once again wearing his exoskeleton. Cwej continued to wear the clothes of the time. In a rumpled greatcoat he managed to look much as he always did. He was smoking.

"Those'll kill you, you know," commented Ryan.

"I doubt it somehow. The Time Lords wouldn't have created this body to be vulnerable to something like cancer."

"That sounds handy. You get the boost but not the drawbacks."

"I don't get the boost. I think there must be filtration systems somewhere. Alcohol has no effect either. They don't want my judgement impaired, it would seem."

Ryan frowned. "Then why smoke?"

Cwej shrugged. "Seems to go with the general look. I'm not the dashing action hero anymore, at least I can enjoy the pretence of being a jaded private eye instead."

"OK," said John, "I'm ready to go."

He sat down in front of the harpsichord which he'd wired into the analytical engine and began to play. He'd jettisoned his wig and returned to his red highway-man come cardinal outfit. He had shaved his head though, so the disconcerting monk's tonsure was gone.

At first nothing happened, but gradually Ryan saw a vortex beginning to form in the centre of the room. Gradually it widened out until he could see through the still point at its centre. Beyond lay a vision of London, glowering under a deep red sky.

"We go!" said Leela and plunged through the hole.

Cwej and Hope, still dressed as an eighteenth century courtier, followed. Ryan turned to look at John.

"On three," said John. "One, two," on 'three' he lifted his hands from the harpsichord. The vortex began to close. John dived with Ryan on his heels.

They walked up Whitehall to the Palace of Westminster.

"That is not Westminster," said Leela. "I saw Westminster."

"It burned down in 1834," said Hope. "That's the new one."

"But it's only 1793," protested Ryan.

"Not here," said Hope.

"Technically," said Cwej, "it's 1752 here. That's when Britain abandoned the Julian calendar for the Gregorian one and the Faction bought the spare eleven days. But the Faction seems to have built their mirror London out of whatever bits took their fancy."

Ryan shrugged. He'd had the Eleven Day Empire explained to him before. If he understood correctly, it only worked because so many people had believed the eleven days had been stolen. He didn't like to think he was wandering around somewhere that only existed because some people were stupid.

"At least I know those Houses of Parliament," he said. "It will help us find our way around."

Cwej pulled a complex looking device from his pocket. Their plan depended rather heavily on it.

"Anything?" asked Ryan.

"Loads," said Cwej. "Unsurprisingly that place is full of temporal energy sources. The biggest one, though, is over there," he pointed.

Ryan laughed harshly. "Star Chamber? Well, I certainly know my way there and back."

"There was no Star Chamber in this Palace," said Hope.

"Not officially, no," agreed Ryan.

Cwej stuffed the detector back in his pocket. "The Faction never miss an opportunity to be ironic."

Leela was surveying the building. "This palace does not appear to be guarded."

"They don't expect anyone to be able to break into the Empire at all," said Cwej.

"Still," returned Ryan, "arrogance and complacency are not really among their many faults."

They all stared at the Palace. Ryan uploaded a map of its interior onto his eye display. He wired it to Leela and Hope as well.

"Standing around out here isn't going to do any good," commented Hope. "I suggest we take the direct route. It will be quickest."

The interior of the Faction's parliament was uncannily silent. Their footfalls echoed hollowly as they traversed the halls towards Star Chamber.

"Where is everyone?" asked Ryan, sotto voce.

Cwej shrugged. "Who knows."

"I do not like this," said Leela. "It is a trap."

Ryan had to agree. "Since when did my job become walking into traps?"

"Since it got interesting?" suggested John with an eager grin.

"And since when did you get so reckless?"

John leaned back and spread his hands in a 'who me?' gesture.

"Hope can you detect anything close by?"

"No."

They could turn back but they didn't really have the certainty of a trap to force that particular decision yet. Ryan looked at Cwej, who shrugged. He would want to go on, since his primary objective was to recover the skull, probably at any cost. Ryan looked at Leela.

"We continue," she said.

Star Chamber was a model of its 20th century equivalent, crammed in at the top of Victoria Tower. The furniture in this version was gothic and ornate whereas Ryan was used to a more functional decor and the ceiling was painted a deep dark blue with gold and silver stars sprinkled across it in constellations with which he was not familiar. Most striking, however, was the presence of a huge white crystal in its centre. The crystal was an awkward jagged shape, not unlike an anomaly and gave the impression that the chamber was filled with a giant spider's web. Nestling in its centre was a single grinning skull.

Ryan checked the chamber with his eyes and his sensor arrays.

"There is no one here," said Leela.

"How do we remove the skull?" he asked.

"You can just pick it up. It is not attached to the crystal," said Hope.

"How do you know that?"

"The crystal is a by-product of the energy it creates. A physical manifestation of the travel network it maintains, if you like."

Ryan stepped forward and eyed the skull cautiously.

"Here goes nothing," he said and reached out a hand.

The sudden arc of energy knocked him back off his feet. Before his eyes flashed a sudden vision of of rapid movement and vicious teeth, the sensation of the babel as it bit into him. Then the vision was gone.

"That was a surprise," he said.

"Not really," said a familiar voice.

Ryan was on his feet in seconds, gun trained on the figure that walked into the room. She was wearing full Faction battle regalia, an armoured suit crafted from the bones of creatures that had never been. The skull came down over her face covering her features, but he would have recognised the voice anywhere.

"Helen Cutter," he said.

"*Cousin* Helen," she returned emphasising the title.

Her shadow darted round the chamber, knife in hand.

"Care to explain?" asked Cwej, idly.

"Not really," said Helen.

Ryan let the safety off his gun.

"Really, Captain!" she snapped, "as if I'm going to be concerned by a little hot lead."

Ryan didn't move. Both Helen and the Faction were masters of the bluff and the double-bluff and his gun was considerably more sophisticated than its 21st century counterparts.

Helen snapped her fingers. Anomalies began opening around the chamber and further Faction Paradox troops walked through.

"We knew someone would come after the skull some day," said Helen. "It must be said we weren't expecting quite the little haul we seem to have here." She glanced round the group. "The first child born on Gallifrey in millennia, his mother, the template for an entire wave of Time Lord troops and a walking paradox." She walked right up to Ryan and poked him in the chest. If he hadn't recognised her before, her sinuous movements and the way she leaned against him would have revealed her identity.

"Sorry?"

"You were supposed to die in the Permian. In fact you saw your own body the first time you walked through an anomaly and yet, here you are?"

"Maybe I just haven't got there yet."

Helen shook her head. "No, it's all lovingly documented. I suspect that is why Hope chose you. You wouldn't be missed and your very presence probably gave that extra little boost of energy. Eh? Hope?"

Hope's stare was cold and hard. "I needed the Paradox to hide them from the Time Lords."

Ryan glanced at her. He recalled clearly finding the body and the skull the first time he and Nick Cutter had stepped through an anomaly. How could he forget? It was the moment they realised Helen might still be alive, that these anomalies in time could have been opening and closing for years without anyone becoming aware of them. But he was beginning to realise he now had a dual memory of their second trip through the Forest of Dean anomaly. He remembered both leading the team that went with Nick and Helen Cutter to return the predator young, that he now knew were babelin, and also remaining behind while Lyle lead the expedition. He remembered being entirely unaware of a second babel on their heels and chasing after the group to warn them. He remembered the feel of its teeth as it tore him apart.

He was going to have to have a conversation with Hope.

Ryan looked around him at the amassed armoured might of Faction Paradox. There wasn't a lot any of them could do. They were heavily out-numbered. However, allowing John to fall into the hands of these people was not an option.

He was still standing within feet of the skull. The skull that generated all the anomalies, so a skull that must have been generated from a Paradox of some description. A skull that had short-circuited violently at his touch. Time to test out the power of a symbolic gesture for himself. He opened his hand and looked at the glittering shape of the mark of the Celestis. Then he reached out and slapped the mark down on the skull his fingers curling through its gaping eyes as he pulled it free from the crystal.

And that, gentle reader, is the stupidest thing Ryan ever did.

16.9 The Little Sister and the War King

The glittering shards of an anomaly formed around Ryan with the skull at its centre. He leaped through it. Behind him he could hear shouting and the thumping of feet. Over it all drifted the voices of Leela and Cwej as they urged first John and then Hope through the anomaly.

He was standing in Star Chamber once more with Leela, Cwej, John and Hope gathered around him. He glanced at the anomaly and willed it to shut. It did so

with a pop.

"Captain Ryan!" Sir James Lester sat at the head of the table.

"Sir!" said Ryan awkwardly, snapping to attention.

Behind him he heard Cwej murmur. "Time to get out of here I think."

"I hope you have an explanation for your unexpected appearance and accompanying menagerie?"

"Hope, we should be able to travel as normal from here, if you would be so good," continued Cwej, ignoring Lester.

There was the slight sensation of air rushing past him and, judging by the looks on the faces of his superiors, Hope had just opened up.

"Sorry, Sir!" said Ryan, still clutching the skull. "There'll be time for a debriefing later."

"This man is with me," said Leela suddenly and firmly. He felt her hands grasp him by the scruff of the neck and he was hauled backwards into Hope's interior.

Leela found Ryan sitting in the dark in the room assigned to him by the Time Lords. The room was tiny, about six foot square, big enough to contain a bed and small cabinet fixed high up on one wall.

He was still in his combat gear, just staring into space.

Their reception had not been promising. John, the skull and Hope had been whisked away on arrival.

There had been a moment, when a chancery guard had said, "Get rid of the surplus," that Leela had thought Ryan was going to be shot. Put down like some wild animal but Cwej had intervened.

"He may be important," he had said.

Leela had lost track of Ryan and Cwej as well in that moment. She spent the next few hours trying to find out what was going on, trying to find where John was, or Hope, or Ryan. Trying to find Lord President Romana.

Everywhere she turned she was met with the polite amusement of the Time Lords at her savagery, an amusement she had grown so used to over the years that it had faded into the background, but now she felt it bitterly. Romana was not to be found, instead the Time Lords referred to their War King.

Eventually she had found some of the cwejen and they, in turn, had found where Ryan was. He was not officially a prisoner, but he'd been put in a holding cell and promptly forgotten.

She wrapped her arms around him and dropped a kiss onto his head. "Someplace private" seemed like a bad joke now.

"Is John all right?" he asked.

"I don't know," she had to admit.

"You know these people," he said. "What is going on?"

She shook her head. "No one will tell me anything. We'll try again in the morning."

She began, pulling at the straps of his exoskeleton, pushing the enclosing metal away from him. He moved then, his head leaning against her. Gently, he pulled her into his lap and kissed her back.

"Not quite what I had in mind," he murmured.

Hands reached up into her hair, pulling away the band that tied it up. She began working at the buttons on his tac vest, and the shirt underneath, letting her mouth drift down past his chin. *And I think we'll stop here, shall we? They're entitled to a little privacy I think and it's not like you can't find plenty of porn if you want it.*

I might as well take the opportunity to talk about Faction Paradox and the Time Lords and how they all fit together because, so far, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the Time Lords are the good guys and Faction Paradox the bad guys. But matters are never that simple. In so far as the Time Lords stand for anything they stand for the status quo, and it's a status quo which has the Time Lords at the top and in which they are, essentially, inviolate. For millennia they acted as mostly hands-off dictators but, on the few occasions they chose to get involved, they had no compunction about erasing entire races from history without trial, appeal or redress. It is worth remembering that. The identity of the enemy is unclear but, if Leela was right, it is the process of opposing the Time Lords and that is not the "opposite" of the Time Lords but the process of being opposed to them. There's not much to show that, should the Enemy triumph, the outcome would be a lot different than with the Time Lord's in charge.

My masters, the Celestis, consider themselves a little above all this. They pretend to a lack of interest in controlling the real estate of history but, if truth be told, they are extremely interested. They are formed from the upper echelons of the Time Lord intelligence service, people used to considering themselves the power behind the throne. Every last one of them is a master manipulator with a heart of stone and ice. This is why thinking of Mictlan, which is what I'm supposed to spend most of my time doing, is like rubbing your brain with sand paper. Each sharp corner and cold doorway is the embodiment of the concepts they hold dear. That's one of the reasons I like it here. With you thinking about me I'm torn free

of their realm, for a short while at least.

Last of all comes Faction Paradox and, compared to the rest, they begin to look quite appealing. The Time Lords justified their rule with the idea that time needed protection and policing. That's probably why their employment seemed so attractive to Cwej. He was a cop by temperament as well as by employment. What the Faction showed is that time can manage just fine without the elaborate Time Lord protocols. In fact, time manages fine with a fair amount direct messing around. The Faction like to appear distasteful. Half of their purpose is to shock, hence their obsession with blood and bones. While the enemy is opposition to the Time Lords, the Faction is the opposite of the Time Lords. They've no interest in governing time. They simply want to revel in it. Some days I half wish I'd joined them. Some days I watch them with despair, they are like small children playing unsupervised. And some days I am appalled by the cruelty and degradation their determination to flout any and all rules leads them in to.

What Ryan didn't figure out until too late, probably because he was never that interested in human history let alone Time Lord history, is the significance of John. Not only is John the first child born on Gallifrey since the Anchoring of the Thread, he is the first Gallifreyan of mixed heritage: half-human and half-Time Lord. Or, more importantly, he is the first Gallifreyan with documented mixed heritage. Two others had claimed mixed heritage. The origins of the original trimuvirate of Time Lord engineers, Omega, Rassilon and the Other, rooted as they are before the Anchoring of the Thread and before the creation of history, are obscure. Very little is known about the Other, in particular, but some of the legends say he was half-human, on his mother's side. The Doctor, a more modern Time Lord legend, also occasionally claimed to be half-human despite the extensive records held in House Lungbarrow showing clearly that he was loomed like any other Time Lord after the Anchoring of the Thread. Of course legend had always stated that the Other committed suicide, throwing himself into the same looms in the depths of Lungbarrow that were later to weave the Doctor. All three brilliant Time Lord engineers, all three wayward or at least (in John's case) showing signs of waywardness. This will not have been lost on the ruling Council of Time Lords nor on Lord President Romana. She may have been a friend to the Doctor but her ability to protect his companion and her son in this time of extremis eventually failed and John, Leela and Ryan are about to discover the consequences of that failure.

They've finished having sex now, so I'll return you to the story.

Ryan looked at the assembled ranks of the cwejen. The mess room was much like any other mess he'd been in, except that every single man in it was identical: blond hair, blue eyes, square jaw and puppy-dog excitement. One was at a computer terminal trying to access records to find where Hope and John were. One was on some kind of phone to a Time Lord high up. Leela was off somewhere with several others trying to pull strings. They were all completely loyal to the Time Lords, Leela had warned him, but they were used to her being their warrior queen. They'd do anything they could for her that didn't compromise that basic loyalty.

There was a knock at the door. Ryan glanced up to see Cwej, his Cwej, the original. It was very bizarre watching the unkempt and slightly dumpy figure sidle through the door and knowing that a few decades earlier he would have bounced in like an excitable puppy. Cwej looked wearily round the room at the cwejen, all beavering away on Ryan's behalf. He was smoking again. Ryan had given up long ago, but it didn't stop the pangs.

"You should take it up again," said Cwej seeing his glance. "Believe me, the Time Lords are no more going to let you die of lung cancer than they will me."

Ryan considered it but he knew Leela would see it differently so he shook his head.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"Can we discuss that skull we bought back?"

Ryan regarded him coolly. "And why would I tell you anything?"

"Well, I'll admit, I work for the War Council but I also travelled with the Doctor."

"I never met the Doctor." In Ryan's opinion "the Doctor" was invoked altogether too often as some kind of arbiter of the right course of action. "And," he added, "from everything anyone will tell me, the Doctor didn't want the Time Lords to get hold of the skull."

Cwej eyed him thoughtfully. "That was all very strange. I'm not sure the Doctor would ever have approved but something about the plan actually scared him and he wouldn't tell anyone why."

"He probably didn't like the idea of over-writing the protocols quite as drastically as this plan will. You realise the Time Lords will almost certainly overwrite half of their own history in the process? They may transform the enemy into something they can handle, but they will transform themselves into something else at the same time."

Cwej shrugged. "They're desperate all right. But it wasn't that which upset

him so much. I think he foresaw some consequence of the new enemy and the change that he simply couldn't face."

"Anyway," said Ryan. "They have the skull now, they can make the change or not, as they choose."

"They don't know why the skull is so powerful. They can't even figure out who it belongs to, although they have a pretty good idea." Cwej shot Ryan a long hard look. "Follow me," he said. "I've had a little trip authorised. Hope will take us."

Ryan and Cwej looked out over the Permian on Hope's scanners. Hope had transformed herself into a rock formation, or so she said. The two men they were watching wouldn't even know they were there. Ryan looked on in silence has Nick Cutter and his younger self examined the body in the cairn and the camera lying by it.

"We know all this," he said. "We found a body and a camera. About six weeks later, according to all the documentation, though not my memory, we both returned to the same spot, only years earlier. I was killed and the camera was dropped. But there were two other soldiers with us. There is no evidence that body was mine. It's not a paradox so much as confused documentation."

"It was meant to be you, all right. Hope deliberately rewrote your biodata when she intercepted your party. Didn't you Hope."

"I had my reasons," echoed Hope's voice.

Ryan still needed to have that conversation with her.

"Hope placed you in an alter-time state which made it particularly difficult to trace your biodata or that of anyone close to you. Theoretically that's impossible, but Faction Paradox have been doing it for years and Hope's mother had plenty of contact with them one way or another."

Ryan felt the merest drop in temperature as if a cold breeze floated around him. He wondered how hard the Time Lords had questioned Hope about her actions and what they had done to try and persuade her to reveal her secrets.

Ryan settled on a shrug as his only reaction. "Why are we here?"

"I'm interested in what happens next."

They watched on the screen as Ryan's younger self knocked Cutter out and set off to carry him back to the anomaly site. They had barely vanished over the horizon when half a dozen Faction Paradox militia appeared in full regalia. Helen Cutter stood between two of them, still in her twentieth century clothing, dwarfed

by their gigantic forms. She stepped forward and lifted up the skull, a powerful look of triumph on her face.

"Hope, sound please?" shouted Cwej.

"You have done well, little sister," one of the masked figures was saying. "The link is now established. We can pass safely through the labyrinths."

Cwej whistled. "I wondered if your anomalies were linked to the labyrinths."

"What are the labyrinths?"

Cwej waved him to silence.

Helen pulled an elaborately carved knife from her belt and flung it into the sand at her feet.

"I have completed my task. I claim my right to the Sombre Que Cortas."

"Indeed, Cousin Helen."

"That was her initiation?" asked Ryan. "Delivering my... the skull."

Cwej nodded. "Makes sense. She pretty much set up your death using captured babelin."

Ryan shook his head. "I don't see how any of that would work. My dying, if I did die, wasn't a paradox, just a kind of sick irony."

"It's a pretty powerful symbolic idea. We've assumed for years that much Faction Paradox technology is essentially powered by ritual, which is basically a codified manipulation of ideas. This was something similar, I imagine. A ritualised time loop, used to create the anomalies."

"But that *is* a paradox. The loop wouldn't have occurred without the anomalies."

"That's Faction Paradox for you. They must have boot-strapped the process somehow and then got Helen to solidify the loop."

"And what are the labyrinths?"

"Temporal worm holes. A network of time travel that predates machines like Hope here. They've become dangerous to traverse but the anomalies obviously provide a network of safe routes through them and, as you have demonstrated, a network that bypasses the Protocol of Linearity."

"OK. For the sake of argument, let's suppose that is my skull and, more specifically, the skull of that version of myself that died fourteen years ago and that it powers the anomalies. How does that make it powerful enough to completely rework history?"

"Well firstly, you didn't die fourteen years ago."

Cwej leaned back against the console and lit another cigarette. "That puts the whole identity of the skull into a kind of flux. It can only power the anomaly system if you died, if you didn't it can't. Even if you had died it would be a

paradoxical artefact since you couldn't have died without the anomalies existing and they only existed because you died. If you *didn't* die then you couldn't have been in place for Hope to abduct you and prevent you dying. Then, of course, you had to go and bind the mark of the Celestis to a skull that may, or may not have been yours. I expect the ramifications of that were percolating forwards and backwards throughout its history. Moreover if it was your skull then clearly you couldn't have survived to bind the mark of the Celestis to it. But if it wasn't your skull then you couldn't have bound the mark. The whole thing is a complete bloody paradoxical mess."

"You're transmitting all this back to Gallifrey aren't you?" said Ryan.

Cwej looked at him properly for the first time. "Sorry about this. All's fair and all that."

Ryan ducked as Cwej's fist came towards him and he rolled under the console and up the other side.

"Hope!" he shouted.

"I can't steer," Hope cried, "I'm being dragged."

Ryan glanced at the monitor. It no longer showed the Permian but the swirling colours of the vortex. Then he dodged again. He wasn't under any illusions about this fight. Cwej's body didn't look like much but it was the result of a Time Lord imposed regenerative cycle. It might not have the built-in hardware of a full Regen-Infantry unit but it was going to be quicker and stronger than he was.

"Hope! Shunt him somewhere!" shouted Ryan.

"Override 556," shouted Cwej, and Hope cursed in anger.

Ryan blocked a punch and felt the power of the blow reverberate down his arm.

"What's going on Cwej?"

"The skull needs a little boost before it will do precisely what the Time Lords need it to." Cwej shrugged. "Nothing personal."

Ryan took a swing and watched Cwej dance out of the way, coming back with a counter-punch that knocked him halfway across the room. Ryan was on his feet and backing away towards the wall. Cwej leaped over the side rail and came at him again, punches raining down. Ryan blocked as many as he could and got a few extra blows in here and there, but the man's physical advantage was starting to tell.

He was aware of the sounds of landing and the main doors swinging open. Then Cwej came in with another of his power punches and Ryan found himself sliding through the open doors into the centre of a ring of Time Lords. Leela and John were being held to one side and the skull, his skull, had pride of place in the

centre. Cwej came out of Hope. Ryan noticed some bruises blossoming on his face and felt a small amount of satisfaction.

"Where's Romana?" asked Leela.

A middling sized man in black with slicked back hair and a goatee smiled at them both wolfishly.

"Desperate times require desperate measures."

"What have you done with her?"

"Nothing at all. She recognises the necessity for this little piece of theatre. She just finds it distasteful. She resigned last week."

The man turned his gaze back to Ryan. Ryan had seen his image and already knew his reputation from the cwejen. He was some sort of black sheep returned to the fold, lots of useful military and tactical knowledge. Officially he was Lord President of the Time Lords, unofficially he was the War King.

Ryan sat up. "What little piece of theatre?"

The man picked up the skull. "We need a lot of energy for what we are about to do. For instance the energy released by resolving its flux state. We could do that by making certain that you could never return to the Permian era on your little planet and get yourself killed there."

"No!" shouted John.

The man walked up to him, "and you, young man. You have risked so much to aid your people. You have a bright future with us, I'm sure."

Ryan was on his feet now but strong hands grabbed him. He was forced to his knees next to the skull.

"We really need more energy," said the War King. "There are several options. You know where we are?"

John looked about him sulkily. "The caldera on Gallifrey, where the thread was anchored. The place the Pythia once sat."

"Ah yes! The Pythia, the last mother of Gallifrey plunged to her doom in this spot. And here we have the first mother of the new Gallifrey."

The War King gestured with a hand and Leela was dragged forwards to kneel next to Ryan.

"I will gut you and leave your entrails to rot in the sun so you die without honour or memorial," she spat.

The War King smiled thinly. "Such an example to us all."

John eyes flicked desperately between Ryan and Leela.

The man thrust a knife into John's hands. "Personally," he said, "I'd kill both of them. It keeps things tidy. But I can see you might have a sentimental attachment to one or the other."

The War King stood back. "You only need to kill one of them, mother or father."

John stepped forward raising the knife. Ryan looked into his face and recognised the expression. He braced himself to act quickly. John put his free hand in his pocket and drew out a Barbie doll, one of the Faction Paradox fetishes.

"Neither," said John and he stabbed the dagger through the doll's heart and into his own hand. There was a blossoming of light. Ryan lunged forwards, grabbing hold of John. Leela moved at the same moment, throwing off her guard, her hands grasping Ryan's as they spun into an alter-time state. He was dimly aware that Hope had also surged forwards and was enclosing herself around them.

16.10 Closing the Paradox Loop

Hope was shouting instructions which Ryan didn't understand. In the interior of the console room, sparks flashed and panels exploded. Ryan grabbed hold of both Leela and John and pulled them in under the wing of the central console.

"What is happening?" demanded Leela.

"Search me."

"One moment," John leaned out and start stabbing at controls on the panels above him. Ryan pulled him back just as there was another explosion and a shower of sparks.

"I think," said John, "we're breaking the Protocols of Linearity again."

"We're what?"

John shrugged helplessly. "It's not my fault every time I try some temporal engineering the protocols get broken."

Ryan gave him a hard stare. John shrugged back again.

"OK," said Ryan. "Where are we going?"

"John, I need more power to the central regulators," shouted Hope.

"One moment," said John, and darted out once more. Hitting levers and cranking a large handle. The room suddenly levelled.

John stuck his head back under the console to look at Ryan and Leela. "Back in time I think."

"What?" asked Ryan.

"Where we're going: back in time. I think. Gallifreyan time."

Cautiously, Ryan and Leela emerged.

"To that council we met last time?" asked Ryan.

"Earlier than that I think."

There was a short silence.

"Before the Anchoring of the Thread?" whispered Leela.

John nodded.

"Did you do this on purpose?" asked Ryan.

"Rescuing the pair of you? Well yes, now you ask. The going back before the Anchoring of the Thread." John looked a little shifty. "It might have occurred to me it was a good idea. And it'll have generated lots of temporal energy. The Time Lords will be happy."

"You've entangled your biodata with Faction Paradox though," spoke Hope.

"I think I've got that covered. At the very worst the paradox stain will be slow in evolving, could be centuries before there's a problem. I'll have plenty of time to sort it out."

Ryan sighed. "Thanks son," he said. There wasn't really much else to say.

The cavern they emerged into was dark with a tangy bitter smell in the air.

"I have been here before," said Leela, absorbed in memories of the receding frontier of time.

"I doubt it, Mum."

"Where are we?" asked Ryan.

"We've travelled in time but not in space," said Hope.

"To before the Anchoring of the Thread?" pressed Ryan.

Hope nodded.

"So this would be?" Ryan looked bewildered. Gallifreyan lore had never been his strong point.

"The chamber of the Pythia," said John.

"Who disturbs the Pythia?" asked an elderly voice.

"I do," said Leela.

"And who are you?"

Leela stepped forward. "A mother of Gallifrey. Also a Pythia."

There was a short silence.

"Lights! Acolytes!" shouted the voice.

Low level lighting flooded the chamber and red-robed women poured in through doorways and side passages. Suspended high above the chamber in a cage-like throne was an elderly woman.

"What would you, Pythia?" asked one of the women.

"I would see the future."

Plumes of acrid smoke were released into the air, obscuring the woman.

"What is going on?" hissed Ryan behind her.

"The Pythia was supposed to be able to forsee the future," whispered John. "The smoke is some sort of time-active substance which allows that."

"I thought there wasn't supposed to be any history around here? How can she see the future if there's no such thing as history?"

"When the Time Lord's anchored the thread its like they fixed a framework of events for a fixed number of millennia," whispered back John, "before that everything was fluid, after that," he shrugged, "who knows. You've heard of the frontier of time, right?"

Ryan snorted, disgusted. Only now was he beginning to realise that the Time Lords liked to ascribe grandiose words to simple things. The "Anchoring of the Thread" had never defined history, Leela had always known that, it simply land-grabbed a small patch and planted the Time Lord flag over it.

She walked foward to the edge of pit over which the Pythia hung.

"I am also Pythia. I have shared your visions. The future is fixed," she stared with sympathy up at the old woman. "You are doomed."

"I'm not sure this is going to endear us to her," Ryan murmured in her ear and his arms tried to pull her back. She shrugged off his hands. "I need her to see me," she said.

"She can see you."

"Not like this."

"Mother of Gallifrey," intoned the elderly woman. "Pythia in waiting."

Smoke wreathed up about the cage. "Last of the Pythia!" cried the old woman suddenly, a shaking hand pointing at Leela.

"Mum, what are you doing?"

"Saving your life."

After this it's all bureaucracy. Typical, really, the Time Lords describe it as a period of chaos, of myth and magic. In fact Gallifreyans, whether they're styling themselves Lords of Time or Pythia's Children simply can not resist the opportunity to dress things up in red tape. The long and the short of it, however, is that Leela, Hope, Ryan and John got themselves released into the general population albeit with the rather uncomfortable prophesy hanging over them that Leela would be the next and final Pythia.

Leela looked out over the capitol. It rather surprised her that it looked much the same as it had in the years she had resided there. Small changes here and there but its footprint upon the world of Gallifrey was unchanging.

Hope was hovering about the room somewhere. "I can not stay here," she said suddenly.

Leela sighed. "It is not your world."

Hope sat down in an ornate chair and closed her eyes. "These people don't even admit that time travel might be possible. It isn't possible, I've tried. I feel trapped."

Leela sat on the floor at her feet and leaned a tired head against her leg. "I think that you have always been trapped." She turned her face into the soft material of Hope's skirt. She had known a moment like this was approaching, ever since they had arrived in the Old Time, several months previously, although she had not quite known the manner of it. She was going to loose people dear to her.

"You could free me," whispered Hope.

"How?" asked Leela. "Your conditioning is too strong."

"You could order me to leave and not return."

Silence hung between them a moment. "How would you go?" asked Leela.

"I will need to use a fetish."

"You'll need blood for that. Mine, or Ryan's or John's."

Hope nodded. "There's another thing," she said.

Leela shook her head. She didn't want this conversation.

"The skull," said Hope seriously.

"Is too powerful to be left in Time Lord hands. I know." Leela sat up straight. "I will talk to Ryan."

Ryan was working out, doing pull-ups on an overhead bar. It was a daily routine that had served him well for many years. There was an illusion of peace here in ancient Gallifrey. The cataclysmic strife between Rassilon and the Pythia was an age away, literally. Rassilon was John's age. It had been something of a shock when John had brought the pimply fourteen year old home, although five minutes later the two of them had been deep in an incomprehensible conversation about theoretical temporal mechanics and Ryan had felt the reassurance of normality

descend. He'd watched Rassilon, though, and knew the boy to be ambitious in a way John was not, which shouldn't really have surprised him.

But despite the apparent security of their situation, Ryan had not allowed himself to relax. He was viewing this as a period of calm before the inevitable conflict ahead.

He heard the door click shut behind him. Ryan dropped to the floor, unsurprised to see Leela there, and allowed himself a smile. As she approached however, the expression on her face told him that the holiday was over. Leela had resolved that it was time to act.

"Hope wishes to leave," said Leela.

He nodded. "She can't stay here. Sooner or later Rassilon will want to take a look at her and then things could get nasty."

He stepped forward, placing his hands on her shoulders. She remained rigid and upright, not yielding to his touch.

"There is also the matter of the skull."

He had known this was coming for some time. They could not afford to leave the skull in the hands of the War King or, Ryan was beginning to think, any Time Lord. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, they didn't want something as powerful as the skull to be in *anyone's* hands.

Despite her resistance he pulled Leela into his arms so he didn't need to look her in the eyes as he spoke.

"If I had died, as I was supposed to, then the skull would just be a common or garden paradoxical object. The Faction has hundreds of them in the stacks of the Eleven Day Empire."

He felt Leela nod against his chest.

Something that was almost a sob welled up inside him and he fought it down, burying his face in her hair, holding her tight. Slowly, unwilling as always to betray anything that might be considered weakness, she wrapped her arms around him and returned the embrace.

"No," said John.

"We have no choice," said Ryan firmly. "Leela has to stay here, as do you."

"I'll talk to Rassilon and Omega," said John. "We can hide Hope safely."

"No," said Hope.

"Face it, John," said Ryan, "Rassilon and Omega are the last people we should be allowing to get hold of Hope. They *invent* time travel technology. Let's avoid

creating more paradoxes than we absolutely have to."

"John," said Leela, placing a hand on his shoulder.

John shrugged her off angrily. "Why didn't you discuss this with me? Why did the two of you just go and make this decision?"

"There wasn't a decision to make," said Ryan, getting angry himself. This was hard enough without John making a scene.

"But you're going to die!"

"I was supposed to die fifteen years ago. A good friend died instead of me, just because Hope was playing with the time lines. It's time to put things right."

"Don't you love me?" demanded John. "Don't you love Mum?"

"John!" said Leela.

"Look at the two of you, standing there being all resolute about it! Why? Why?" His voice trailed away.

Instinctively Ryan pulled him into a hug, feeling him sobbing in his arms and then Leela joined in, her arms wrapped around both of them, so tight he was afraid they might all break. They stayed like that a long time.

Hope was ready. She had been ready all the time, impatient while the humans and human/Time Lord hybrids made their farewells. The M4 felt clumsy and heavy and primitive in his hands. Ryan wasn't quite sure where Hope had conjured it from. Now the moment had arrived, Ryan found he didn't know how to say goodbye.

John was scowling at him. Ryan had been failing to notice how much the lad had grown up but he noticed it now, almost because the sulky expression had become so unusual. Something in his bearing and the surroundings though, triggered a memory within Ryan.

"Dear Lord," he whispered, "have they given you the mark?"

John looked up, surprised, and then opened his hand sheepishly. The Mark of the Celestis glittered above the palm. "I'm not giving it to you," he said, aggressively.

"No," agreed Ryan. "Not yet at any rate. Keep it as a promise that I'll return."

"John gave you the mark?" demanded Leela.

"Yes," agreed Ryan.

"Which means," Leela's voice tailed away.

Ryan sighed. "There's an ugly little charade for the two of you to play out when the time comes."

"The Other had no hand in the Pythia's death," said John defensively.

Ryan sighed. "Semantics I think, John. You will be a part of Rassilon's faction."

He stood up and fished a last fetish from his pocket. It was an 18th century coin, the King's shilling. He stared down at it, heavy in his hand.

Leela stepped forward and kissed him. Then she broke away and stepped back, head held high.

He hugged John.

"Look after each other, you two. Best you can anyway," he added thinking of the legends.

Then he backed into Hope's interior. He looked at the coin thoughtfully and then tossed it high and into the heart of the time rotor. Hope took off.

Ryan sat next to Hope on a rock in the Permian.

"How exactly did you take me out of time?" he asked.

"I performed a localised biodata change."

"What's one of those when it's at home?"

"I altered the biodata of the three men with you so that you had never accompanied them through the anomaly and Lieutenant Lyle had. Then," and Hope had the decency to look a little embarrassed at this point, "then I fiddled with your memories a bit, so you thought you were travelling after them."

"So what happened when Nick got back and everyone asked where I was?"

Hope shrugged, "I don't know. I expect there was some confusion and a lot of philosophical musing about paradoxes."

"So you're going to undo that now?"

"Yes, but it will be a bit tricky. I've already changed their biodata once."

"Well just do the best you can. Try not to erase anything or anyone."

Hope looked at him thoughtfully. "I won't erase anyone, but I can't promise there won't be any changes. They shouldn't be too large though and the only people able to notice will be those with you."

"Nick and Helen Cutter were the only documented survivors."

"They'll be the only people able to notice any changes. It shouldn't be a problem, nothing major should shift."

"What will you do then?" asked Ryan.

Hope shrugged. "I'm still thinking about that."

"You can't go back to the Time Lords. You could join Faction Paradox, I suppose"

Hope shook her head, "I don't think so."

"Why not? They're opposed to the Time Lord dictatorship."

"Their rallying cry is Anarchy, not Freedom. It's not the same thing."

"What then?"

Hope smiled. "I shall travel the universe and have adventures."

"There are worse things to do with your life I suppose."

Four men and a woman appeared in the distance.

"Time to get going," said Ryan. "Goodbye, Hope."

"Goodbye, Ryan." She held out her hand and he shook it before heading down the slope.

"Ryan, what are you doing here?" asked Cutter in surprise.

"Hope!"

Nick blinked. Lyle vanished.

As they walked on, Ryan watched Helen as she bitched at and flirted with Nick. Getting bored with that eventually she fell in beside him, glancing at him sidelong.

"Having a good day, Captain Ryan?"

"I know what you're about *little sister*," said Ryan. He wasn't well disposed to give her the time of day right now. "Don't get cocky."

He felt a small glow of triumph at her disconcerted expression.

"And yet you're here," she said.

"And yet I'm here. Be satisfied I'm playing along with your little plan and leave me in peace."

Ryan had always liked Nick Cutter. There was something very upfront and honest about him. He'd knocked him out cold once and Nick hadn't held it against him. Ryan had a lot of time for someone who's first instinct on discovering that his wife was alive, but possibly lost in time, was to remain in the Permian to look for her, even when that wife was Helen Cutter. He also had a lot of time for someone who could then come to his senses, albeit with the assistance of a certain amount of gentle violence, and agree that the problem was better tackled from the comparative safety and security of the 21st century.

So, as he lay dying, Ryan felt the need to somehow tell Nick it was all right. He'd had fifteen years more than he'd had any right to. He'd had a son, in every

way that mattered, and lived long enough to see the first glimmers of the man his son would become and to have the confidence he would be a good man. He wanted desperately to make sure Nick understood.

"The first time we came here, that body we found, that was me." The look on Nick's face was one of distress. "Wasn't it?" Ryan urged, "I was looking at myself." He tried to go on, tried to say things about loops and paradoxes and Leela's deep blue eyes and red-brown hair, but the words wouldn't come. He wanted to say how grateful he was that Nick, and he was sure it was Nick, had taken the time to build a cairn over his body but he could hardly see any more and his mouth didn't seem to be working well enough to frame the words. Nick's face was fading from his vision and all he could feel was Nick's hand grasping his. I'm marked by the Celestis, were his last living thoughts, it will be all right.

Except it's not, of course. I had understood that being a servant of the Celestis essentially entailed thinking about them and Mictlan for all eternity. What I hadn't appreciated was the living hell that is Mictlan, nor the attitude of the Celestis. Most Time Lords treat the lesser species with thinly veiled contempt but the Celestis do not consider us sentient in any meaningful way. Just sentient enough to maintain their existence. Just sentient enough to spend an eternity contemplating the reality of servitude and the vicissitudes of their casual cruelties and passions.

At least I achieved what I had intended by dying. I closed the paradox loop. My skull reverted back to being an everyday paradoxical object. Still powerful, but nothing like powerful enough to overwrite the entirety of Time Lord history in one fell swoop. The Time Lords had already done it once, of course. They rewrote the history of the war, and half their own history at the same time, so they could fight an enemy of their own choosing; the Daleks in this case and we all know how well that is going to end. They underestimated the power of properly time-active Daleks. Some days I draw some comfort from that, but not much and not often.

But here's the thing. Mictlan is a realm of ideas and the War? It was as much a war of ideas as a Time War. Ideas have real power. You think you're reading a piece of fiction. In fact you think you're reading a piece of fanfiction. But it is just ideas and this particular set of ideas have trapped me in Mictlan. But, the beauty of fanfiction is that you can just rewrite it or overwrite it or fixit or change it. That's why I'm moonlighting here. Part of the reason is that while you and anyone else who reads this is thinking about me as a shift, I get a narrow band of time when I'm not at the service of the Celestis. But also a writer of fanfiction can change these ideas and find a happy ending. Hell, I'll even go to bloody Sanctuary. If I'm honest, it's not my first choice of afterlife, but it has to be better than Mictlan. So, I'm throwing you the challenge. Resolve the conflicting memes.

Write me out of here.

Chapter 17

Born in the Bazaar

An Echo Bazaar Drabble

Refugees tumble out of Newgate their eyes wide and their mouths babbling. Each one has a different story: burning orbs in the sky; wide blue seas; plants that grow taller than a man; streets where souls can't be traded. Minds obviously addled.

Those of us born here, in the backstreets of Fallen London, don't let the Clay Men or the Rubbery Men or Jack-of-Smiles addle us. We know there is more to the world than the 'Neath, but it must be worse than here or the refugees wouldn't come. Life down here is good and secure. We seek no danger.

Chapter 18

The Daughters of Theogenes

A Doctor Who short story

"I don't like the dress."

"This is classical Greece, Doctor. Sometimes it's wise to blend in."

"Yes, I know, but all those yards of white cloth make you look..." the Doctor paused and ran his eyes up and down the offending garment, "terribly amateur theatrical. I mean, the Greeks are quite civilised. They won't put you to death for looking different." He crammed his hat down on his tight curls, took another look at Romana's dress and shook his head. "Anyway, very colourful people, the Greeks." He sniffed to himself. "This way I think," he added and set off down a side street.

"This is it." He stopped before a slightly run down building. "The house of Theogenes," he said proudly, "and there's Aristarchus."

He strode forward and embraced an old man who had just left the house. The old man was tall and dignified, his white hair close-cropped to his head and Romana felt it was a most unlikely occrrence, to see this regal old man's face light up at the sight of the scruffy Time Lord.

"Doctor, this is truly a welcome surprise."

"Well, you know how it is. I was passing and I thought I'd drop in on your master."

The old man's face fell.

"Theogenes died ten years ago. His son-in-law now runs the house but I'm sure he'll be very pleased to see you."

"Poor old Theogensis, I'll miss him... Oh, by the way, this is Romana."

The old man looked her up and down, taking in the white dress and the fashionable ringlets which she wore in her blonde hair. He positively beamed with

approval.

"You are a true beauty my dear," he said courteously, "and," he added, "obviously civilised."

The Doctor coughed slightly. "Well, Leela was a bit rough at the edges," he admitted.

"Come in," said Artistarchus, "I will fetch the master."

He left them in a small antechamber and padded off into the depths of the house. A few minutes later a tall, austere, beauty entered the room. She had raven black hair fastened in ringlets that framed a classical face, perfectly proportioned with a firmly chiselled beauty. She wore a dress similar in style to Romana's but where Romana's was a stark white, hers was a pale peach colour and gold bracelets were clasped on her arms giving the impression of soft luxury. Her eyes ran up and down Romana's gown and her mouth twitched slightly, just enough to convey that she thought Romana's attire was vaguely quaint and amusing. Romana instantly disliked her.

Turning to the Doctor the lady curtseyed slightly and said, "I am Phaedra, the eldest daughter of Theogenes. My husband is out at the moment but he will be back soon. I trust you are being well looked after."

"Yes, very. It is a pleasure to meet you. Theogenes has a very beautiful daughter," said the Doctor gallantly, raising his hat and bowing.

Praedra smiled in a vaguely distant way and Romana's dislike intensified. The Doctor immediately began to talk to her about her father, but after a few minutes, smiling the same vague smile she said she had work to do and glided serenely out of the room.

"Was Theogenes like that?" asked Romana.

"No, not a bit. His wife was though. A great beauty with no real intelligence. Anything she didn't understand she ignored or avoided. She didn't take to me at all."

"I can imagine."

"Excuse me, who are you?" Another woman had entered the room. She looked startingly like Phaedra, but where Phaedra was classically beautiful the newcomer's looks just managed to fall short of Phaedra's perfection. Her hair instead of being jet black was a slightly dingy dark brown. Her chiselled features, instead of giving her the looks of a carefully sculptured statue made her look vaguely shrewish, a look accentuated by her hair, scraped back tightly into a bun. She was livelier though. She seemed more alert and the gown she wore was an uncompromising red. Romana felt sure that, seen together, the eye would automatically be drawn away from Phaedra to this more human vision of beauty.

Her appearance drew a far more welcoming smile from the Doctor than Phaedra's had done.

"May I assume you are another daughter of Theogenes?" he asked.

"Yes, I am Creusa, his youngest daughter."

"Well, I am the Doctor, a friend of your father's."

Creusa's face was transformed by a genuine smile. "The Doctor! My father often told me about you. I am pleased to meet you." She turned to Romana. "And you are?"

"I am Romana."

"May I welcome you both to my father's house," she said, formally but with real pleasure. "You will stay for dinner?"

"I don't know about that," said the Doctor doubtfully. "I'm not sure your sister was greatly taken with me."

"Phaedra's a cow," said Creusa with surprising vehemance. "I wouldn't take any notice of her. You must stay."

The Doctor grinned broadly. "If you insist."

Creusa smiled back. "Aresias, my sister's husband, will be back soon. I'm sure he'll insist as well. Meanwhile do let me show you the house."

The tour of the house turned out to be a rather depressing affair. There was nothing conspicuously wrong with it, in fact it was all very pleasant but, thought Romana, that was about it. There was no character in it. It gave her the impression of decay somehow, though there was no tangible evidence of dilapidation. The place, she decided, showed a lack of care or thought about how it looked. It sufficed. That was all.

They returned to the small antechamber and Creusa continued to entertain them for a while. Then a young man entered. He was tall and althletic-looking, and handsome in a homely sort of way. His features were deeply tanned and quite thick set and his teeth glistened whitely when he smiled as he did when he welcomed them. He was Aresias, Phaedra's husband, and he seconded Creusa's invitation to dinner. It was almost ready, he said, if they would follow him.

Taking Romana by the hand he led them into the dining room. Artistarchus had obviously anticipated their remaining, for five couches had been placed around a low table. Phaedra was already seated and Aresias sat next to her, placing Romana on his other side.

The meal was delicious and the Doctor and Romana were well entertained by Creusa and Aresias with Phaedra contributing the odd word here and there. Aresias, especially, was very pleasant and entertaining and he eagerly told Romana a potted history of the town and surrounding countryside.

As the evening progressed Aristarchus mentioned the arrival of a soothsayer who wanted to tell their fortunes.

"Tell him to go! We do not wish to listen to his lies," said Aresias somewhat severely. "You don't believe in such foolery do you?" he asked Romana.

"Superstition is the retreat of the primitive mentality," she quoted, somewhat pompously.

"What about God?" asked the Doctor, that dangerous gleam beginning to show in his eye that meant he was about to propound one of his theories which it would be impossible to refut on account of a refusal on his part to stick to the laws of logic. However, he was prevented by Creusa.

"Let him in!" she said. "It'll be fun to hear what he has to say."

Aresias looked as though he was about to argue with her, then changed his mind and smiled charmingly.

"Very well, show him in Aristarchus."

Shortly, a tall stocky figure entered wrapped in a long hooded cape which concealed all the features. Aresias' mouth twitched slightly into a faint sneer.

"Well, man, what can you tell us?"

"I can tell of the past, present and future, but those who listen must be prepared to face the consequences of my knowledge."

Phaedra giggled slightly. The facelss hood turned towards here.

"You would do well not to mock. I know enough about each of you to bring your world crashing down about you. You, for instance," the hood swung back to Aresias. "You are the eldest son of your father's house are you not?"

He paused slightly, letting the question hang in the air. Glancing across the room, Romana was shocked and surprised to see Creusa leaning forward, a faint smile hovvering about her lips and her eyes glued eagerly on the seer.

"Yes, I am my father's only son."

"Whyfore then do you live here on your wife's money and do not claim your own inheritance?"

Aresias' features seemed to form themselves into a mask and he suddenly looked as though he could have been carved out of granite. His voice, when he spoke, held a slight tremour but whether it was of anger or grief Romana couldn't tell. "I have my reasons and would ask you to respect them," he said.

"Respect?" said the stranger with barely controlled anger. "What respect did you show the father of Eteonicus and Conon when your family dragged his carcase through the streets of Thebes?"

Aresias went white. "Alcibiades of Thebes killed our mother."

"By mistake, but still you killed him for it and started a feud that has all but destroyed both your families. You, the last son of Thrasyllus, hide here so Conon, the last son of Alcibiades, shall not find you to avenge the deaths of his father and his brother whom you butchered when he came to offer you peace."

"He offered me peace, yes, when he was alone and I had many friends about me. But what did he offer my brother when he met him in a back street in Corinth? He did not speak of peace then."

"Then he was still grieved at the death of a father. Later he repented and went voluntarily to you for reconcilliation and you had your men behead him, then carve him up and hang him out for the carrion to feed on." The soothsayer's last words came out in short gasps and he stopped abruptly and turned his head away from Aresias. The people in the room remained stock still and the tableau they formed remained etched upon Romana's memory for the rest of her life. Creusa sat curled up on her couch hugging her knees, her sharp, pretty face wearing an exultant expression, her brown eyes wide and dilated and fixed on the soothsayer. Phaedra reclined on her couch gazing at her hand with the embarassed air of a fashionable hostess with an ill-mannered guest, trying to pretend nothing has happened and everything is normal and civilised. Aresias was sitting bolt upright, his face a ghastly white, his bright blue eyes staring fixedly at the stranger. One hand was convulsively clutching the arm of the couch. The Doctor had an expression of disgust and sadness on his face. This was not what he had expected on paying a visit to his old friend. In the centre, the tall figure of the soothsayer dominated them. His broad shoulders bowed as if supporting a great burden and his head was lowered. They remained frozen as if time had stood till for a few seconds. Then, slowly, Aresias got up and moved towards the soothsayer. The bowed head looked up as he approached so they stood face to face, Aresias staring into the dark recesses of the hood.

"Who are you?"

The shoulders straightened with a jerk and the cowl was shaken free. The face revealed was strikingly handsome. It was at the same time aristocratic and dignified but softened by sadness. The eyes were a deep warm brown. Romana felt that once he smiled the face would have lit up and warmed the room and the small cold company that had gathered in it. Then Phaedra let out a piercing shriek and the place disolved into chaos. Aresias was calling for servants and Creusa had her arms around Phaedra who continued to let out one long scream that echoed through the house. Within seconds the room was full of people who descended upon the stranger and pinned his arms behind him. Phaedra's scream gradually subsided into choking and sobbing. As the place calmed down Romana realised

that her hands were shaking slightly and she felt as though she had been through some ordeal.

Aresias picked up a goblet and rather nervously filled it then he turned to face the stranger with a show of Bravura. "Welcome Conon."

That, thought Romana, explained a lot.

"It would seem I have had a lucky escape. You could have killed me easily. I was defenceless."

Conon seemed to draw himself up. "Unlike you, I believe in fighting fair."

"Unlike your brother as well," flung back Aresias with some venom.

Conon turned his eyes upon the weeping Phaedra with a look of contempt. "Ah! yes my brother, who supposedly stabbed your brother in a back street."

Suddenly the Doctor was on his feet. Quietly he stepped between the two men. "That's enough, both of you!" he said sternly. "The wrongs, real or imaginary, that you each appear to have suffered are more than repaid by the vengeances you have exacted on each other's families. The time has come to call a halt." He held them with his compelling eyes, then smiled disarmingly. "Don't you think?"

Romana stood up. "Why not bury the hatchet and start afresh?"

The Doctor smiled more brightly. "Exactly."

"But my brother..." started Conon.

"*My* brother!" said Aresias fiercely.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said the Doctor soothingly. "You've each lost a brother why not leave it at that?"

Conon considered this a moment and then he smiled, an almost childlike smile as though a burden had been lifted from him. "Yes... I am prepared to start again." Romana watched amazed as he seemed to visibly relax, as though every muscle had been taut and tense. He must, she realised, have worked himself up to a fever pitch in order to carry out his intentions. She also noticed the slight dropping of the Doctor's shoulders.

"My brother was murdered, dishonourably, by that dog's family. He is unworthy of forgiveness. He is a craven coward. His brother was a back-street assassin and his father was a murderous quack of a peddlar. I scorn the very ground he treads on." Aresias' lip curled viciously. "I will see him hanged like a common thief."

The Doctor's shoulders straightened again with a jerk. Conon looked like a man betrayed. Then he reddened. "I am no coward. My father was a good doctor and my brother met yours in open combat. He, like you, was hiding in this house and your wife handed him over. No one was ever told because she begged us not to, but I will not have my family slurred in that way."

Aresias' eyes flickered dangerously and he turned contemptuously towards Phaedra. "Is this true?" he asked. Phaedra moaned and wept. "Creusa?" he commanded savagely.

Creusa's eyes were very bright. She looked across the room and caught Romana watching her. The eyes dropped to the floor. "Yes, it is true."

Aresias looked back at Phaedra. He paused for a moment then quite suddenly he took two steps towards her, picked her out of the chair and slapped her savagely across the face. She started screaming. He slapped her again with such force that she staggered backwards and fell over the couch, hitting her head on the marble floor. Aresias started after her but the Doctor grabbed hold of him. The two men struggled and several of the servants went to help. Creusa was crouching beside Phaedra who was struggling up, blood pouring from a gash in her forehead. Romana hurried round and started examining the cut. Then with a shout of triumph, Conon shook free of the man restraining him and leapt upon the group now holding Aresias. In his hand he held a small deadly-looking dagger. He grabbed Aresias by the shoulder and ran it home. The two men stared at each other for a moment then Aresias slowly collapsed into Conon's arms, grabbing hold of him. Conon caught the body and gently lowered him to the floor. The head fell back and the grasping hands went limp. Conon's head bowed and he let out a sob. Then he straightened and looked at the Doctor.

"I'm sorry!" he said.

By now he was surrounded by the household servants and he passively allowed them to lead him off, leaving the Doctor and Romana alone with the two sisters and Aresias' dead body. It was Creusa who broke the silence.

"Aresias!" she screamed and rushed to the body. She held the head and turned the sightless eyes towards her, then she held her hands over her face and began to sob.

Phaedra rested against Romana, weeping quietly, the tears and the blood mixing and leaving dark stains on Romana's dress.

Gently the Doctor moved over to Creusa and lifted her off the body. "Creusa," he said, "show me where I can find some water to bathe Phaedra's cut and a blanket to cover Aresias."

Creusa drew in a deep wracked breath, wiped the tears from her eyes and then nodded and moved towards the door. Romana felt Phaedra stiffen. Turning towards Creusa, she said, "You told him where to come didn't you?"

"What?"

"I saw you talking with the soothsayer in the market. You told him where Aresias was! You KILLED HIM!"

Phaedra took two tottering steps towards her sister. "You! you did it!" Sobbing shook her body and she crumpled up in a small forlorn heap.

Quietly the Doctor came over, picked her up and carried her to a couch. Setting her down, he poured some wine and handed it to her.

"Why should Creusa plot to kill Aresias?" asked Romana, coming over and sitting beside her.

Phaedra looked passed her at her sister who stood stock still in the doorway.

"Because she was in love with him."

Creusa turned round and faced them. "You thought I didn't know," continued Phaedra. "You and Aresias thought you were being so clever."

Romana met the Doctor's eyes over Phaedra's head.

Rather half-heartedly Romana said, "I'm sure you're imagining it. So many awful things have happened."

"Aresias had an eye for a pretty girl. He was working on you."

Romana opened her mouth to protest then shut it again. Aresias had, indeed, been "working" on her. He had been charming, amusing and attentive and had barely spoken to the Doctor.

"But still," said the Doctor then he trailed off too. Events were beginning to make a nasty sort of sense. Comments, looks, little things all put together built up an unpleasant tableau.

Creusa read the looks on their faces and she walked forward until she stood before them, her hands clasped demurely in front of her, head held high, sharp chin jutting forwards.

"Yes, I was in love with Aresias and he was in love with me but he wouldn't leave Phaedra because she had the money." Her lip curled slightly. "But, you see, if he'd known what she did to his brother he would never have even looked at her again." Creusa made a small gesture with her hand. "I never thought... thought that this would happen."

"What did you think would happen?" asked the Doctor angrily.

"Conon couldn't just kill him. He'd have to confront him first and then he would be caught. Conon wasn't the killing sort, anyway. He was looking for a way out. It was all working too until he attacked her." Her cold eye turned on Phaedra and her face constricted slightly in a spasm. "He's dead now."

Phaedra began to cry again. "Bitch," she said vehemently. "Get out! get out of my house and never come back."

"Oh, I'm going all right," said Creusa calmly then turned and walked serenely out of the room.

Phaedra convulsively gulped down the wine.

"You will stay, won't you," she suddenly pleaded, looking at he Doctor. "At least until Aresias is buried, please."

"Of course," he said gently.

"Father trusted you, you see, and I don't know what to do."

The Doctor smiled and patted her hand. "Don't worry. I'll see to everything. You should try and get some rest. Romana, will you go and find Aristarchus and get him to remove the body."

Romana left the room and head for the servants' quarters. However she met Aristarchus halfway, looking tired and distressed. She was about to relay the Doctor's message but he forestalled her by the expression on his face.

"What's happened now?" she asked.

"Creusa," he made a small tired gesture. "She has hanged herself."

Romana sighed quietly and put her hand to her head trying to think.

"Is there somewhere you can put the bodies?"

"Yes."

She nodded, deciding to stick to practicalities.

"Can you move Aresias there and you'd better put Creusa with him for the time being."

Aristarchus moved off and Romana returned to the Doctor. A wailing broke out somewhere in the house.

Phaedra was sitting up rigidly when she entered. The Doctor was staring out of a doorway onto the square courtyard at the centre of the house.

"What has happened?" demanded Phaedra. "Why is someone crying?"

"Creusa's dead."

Too tired even to cry Phaedra sank back and buried her face in her hands.

"How did it happen?" asked the Doctor.

"She hanged herself."

"If only I had forgiven her!" said Phaedra suddenly, pressing her hands together in an agitated fashion.

"I don't think it would have made any difference," said the Doctor gently.

"Oh yes it would." Phaedra got up and started pacing earnestly up and down the room.

"You should try to get some rest," said the Doctor.

"Rest! How can I rest. There's things to do." She continued pacing, looking nervously at them.

The Doctor moved over to Romana. "I've got some sedatives in the TARDIS. You try to calm her down." He moved off silently.

"You can't do anything now," said Romana desperately to Phaedra. "You should get some sleep. You'll be able to think more clearly in the morning."

After some more persuasion she got Phaedra seated and fairly calm. Aristarchus came in and consulted on what they should do with Conon who was presently locked in a cellar. Romana directed he should be fed and given blankets and they would hand him over to the authorities the next morning.

When she returned Phaedra had gone. Concerned, she checked the rest of the house, but could not find her anywhere. She then came out on the roof and found Phaedra standing on a small parapet built round the edge of it, silhouetted agains the setting sun.

"Phaedra!" she called and started towards her.

Phaedra turned round to face her, stumbled, lost her balance, and fell.

"You did your best."

"That isn't very consoling. Three people have died. I mean, what was the point?"

"There was no point. That's just how life is."

Romana nodded, then shook her head. "But at the academy we were taught that you can learn from everything. Nothing is valueless... what have we learned from this?"

Romana turned and regarded the battered facade and peeling paintwork of the house. Quietly a door opened and a tall hooded figure emerged and slipped quietly away.

"Aristarchus has chosen to save a life at least," murmured the Doctor.

He turned a Romana followed him back to the TARDIS.

Chapter 19

A Day in the Life

A Primeval Short Story

8am

`On the 23rd December 2008 an anomaly opened near the village of Crathie in Aberdeenshire. Two Triceratops came through. We sent them back. Nicholas Cutter (Professor)`

This is not so much a report, Cutter, as a text message. Can I assume that its brevity indicates a mission accomplished smoothly and without incident?

9am

"Good morning Lorraine. Can you hold any calls this morning. I've a mound of paperwork to get through and I'd like to get home early. Christmas Eve and all that."

¡b¿10am¡/b¿

"What's that? Number Ten? Yes, you had better put him through."

"No sir, I've only received a brief report so far. I'm waiting for a longer one."

"No sir, the castle wasn't mentioned in the report I received."

"Triceratops I believe, sir."

"They are *large* animals, sir, and armoured I understand. I'm sure my men did their best."

"No sir. I do understand how serious the situation was. I'll speak to Lieutenant Lyle."

"And the Professor."

"Yes sir. I'll have an apology ready by midday."

"Thank you, sir. Your forbearance is appreciated."

"Goodbye sir."

"Lorraine, if you see either Lieutenant Lyle or Professor Cutter can you ask them to come and see me in my office. Yes, immediately."

11am

"What's that Lorraine? The Palace. Yes, you had better put them through as well."

"Good morning."

"Yes, I have spoken to the Prime Minister. I was just writing an apology now. It should be with Her Majesty in under an hour."

"Yes, I am aware she is in residence at Balmoral during the Christmas period."

"Yes, the PM did give me to understand there was some damage to the walls. We will of course provide the funds necessary to cover the repairs."

"Yes, and the cost of the extra security needed in the interim."

"No, I was not aware that the Professor had encountered Her Majesty."

"I quite agree that was an unforgivable remark."

"Do not worry. Her Majesty will receive a personal apology from the Professor. I will see to it myself."

12pm

Report on Animal Welfare Issues at the ARC

The ARC was built with approximately two dozen cages ranging in size from a few square feet to several square yards. We are having considerable success with a number of smaller creatures that have come through anomalies. All the indicators are that they are content in their new surroundings. They appear healthy, are eating well and we have even had the birth of several young.

However we are doing considerably less well with the large animals, in particular the Megatherium and the Mammoth. We are witnessing a number of signs of distress such as loss of weight, lethagy and repetitive behaviour. Of course our understanding of the specifics of caring for these animals is minimal but there are a few general guidelines with which the ARC, as it currently stands, is simply unable to comply. Even the largest of the cages are insufficient in size for the truly

big animals. An outdoor area for these creatures is an absolute necessity which our city location prohibits.

We also need the advice of an expert in enrichment (that is the design of cages to provide an interesting and stimulating environment for the animals) and nutrition so that we may better understand how to care for the specific animals we have.

I am afraid to report that there are widespread concerns among the keepers and not all of them believe that a report such as this will generate any real action on your part. These people care greatly about their charges and are deeply distressed by the state of the Megatherium, in particular. Urgent action of some kind is required.

Abigail Maitland.

1pm

"Lorraine. The packaging may say Cheese on the outside but it tastes like plastic between slices of cardboard. Send someone down for something else?"

"The sandwich shop closed at midday? Bloody Christmas Eve."

"No, no, I don't want anyone going into town. It's Christmas Eve; we'll never get them back. I'll make do with the plastic."

1.30pm

"Lorraine, I know my wife has told you to watch my diet but if you report that I'm helping myself from the vending machine, so help me, I'll see you fired."

1.35pm

"Ah Jenny! Hello. You met my wife at the summer barbeque didn't you? Here, have a chocolate bar."

"No, no, I insist, I got it in the Secret Santa and was just wondering what to do with it. Merry Christmas!"

2pm

Dear Sir

As I am sure you are aware the efficacy of the National Grid depends upon precise calculations using statistical data which estimate the anticipated usage of the system at any one time. On the 21st November there was a sudden and unanticipated surge in demand, causing what is known as a cascading failure. This is a failure in which, as one element fails, it's excess load is transferred to surrounding elements causing them to overload in turn. We use complicated computational models to avoid and limit the effects of such failures. These models represent the state of the art and account for all reasonable usage of the system. On the 21st November we suffered just such a cascading failure when a power line over-loaded resulting, as I am sure you will recall, in a power failure across a wide area of the West Midlands. Extensive investigation by ourselves has indicated that the sudden excess demand can be traced to your facility. We therefore request that our engineers be permitted to enter your premises and examine your equipment with a view to limiting such failures in future. If in the process of this inspection we conclude that your company was acting without due regard to safety or outwith the terms of your supply contract we will be bringing a prosecution to recoup the losses.

"Lorraine, can you send the Electricity company a brief note informing them that they have no right of entry and reminding them of our status as a government research facility conducting work of relevance to national security. Then get the lawyers onto our contract with them and make sure we're bullet proof when it comes to power cuts. Oh, and while you're about it ask the lawyers if it's possible to sue for egregiously long-winded letter writing and incorrect use of apostrophes."

3pm

To: Connor Temple <connor.temple@arc.gsi.gov.uk>
From: James Lester <james.lester@arc.gsi.gov.uk>
Subject: Recent power cut.

Connor
What exactly were you doing with the ADD on the 21st November when that blackout occurred?
James

4pm

"We must change the sound that thing makes. It is absolutely impossible to concentrate when it is going off."

"Cutter, I thought I said I wanted to see you in my office!"

"Yes, yes, go chase this anomaly but I want to see you as soon as you return. The Palace wants an apology."

"Lorraine, you'd better allow through calls from anyone at the anomaly site."

5pm

Dear Sir

I have received a complaint which states that your facility houses a number of vertebrate animals in poor conditions. I can find no evidence that your department has ever been granted a Licence to use Animals in Scientific Procedures, nor any information detailing the scientific work being undertaken at your establishment. I am hoping that there has been some mistake here and that the whole situation can be resolved without difficulty. I would be grateful if you could get back to me without delay so the situation may be resolved. I feel bound to inform you that we take such complaints very seriously and are almost bound to consider a welfare inspection a priority.

Alan Richards
Inspector
RSPCA

"Lorraine, you should go home. No point you being late as well on Christmas Eve. Make a note though. When you get back find out if there is anyone in the RSPCA with security clearance and set up a meeting. If not arrange for someone to get clearance. Liaise with this Alan Richards chap in the interim."

6pm

"Aah! Lyle! I trust everything is going smoothly. At least on Salisbury Plain we can pretend it's all a military exercise."

"Why exactly do you need the services of the Air Force?"

"I'm sorry Lyle, but no. You can not bomb Stonehenge. It's a World Heritage Site for crying out loud. I can't believe Cutter would agree to it."

"Ah! I thought not."

"He did what?"

"I'm sorry about your man but the answer is still, 'No'. Get Cutter out of there and ship him back to me, by force if necessary. Then get rid of the creature and make your way home."

7pm

Dear Mrs Werth

It is with deepest regret that I write to inform you of the death of your husband, Private Mark Werth. You and your family have our deepest sympathies and understanding during this period of bereavement.

Your husband was a valued member of the forces and the work he was undertaking, while low key, was of great importance to national security. You may be proud of the fact that he died in the course of his duties while successfully saving the life of a civilian. He will be greatly missed by his fellows, in particular the football team will be sorry to have lost their best goalkeeper.

Please know that we have shared in your pain and sorrow and pay our final respects to one of our best soldiers.
Sir James Lester
ARC: A Cabinet Office, Agency.

8pm

“Cutter. Here is a pen and a piece of paper. You are going to sit there and write a letter of apology to the Queen while I watch. Then you are going to explain what the bloody hell you thought you were doing this afternoon. And before you ask, ”acting as live bait“ will not suffice as an explanation.”

9pm

I have once again made a tour of the building and discovered a number of Health and Safety contraventions. In no less that three labs I found chairs pulled up in front of whiteboards and obstructing the pathways to the fire exits. There is also considerable evidence that food and drink is being consumed in close proximity to computer workstations. In one lab I found a microwave that had not been PAT tested. Please can you reiterate to all staff the need to follow the guidelines.
Dr. Butterworth

To: All Staff <all@arc.gsi.gov.uk>
From: James Lester <james.lester@arc.gsi.gov.uk>

Dear All
May I once again draw your attention to the Health and Safety check-sheet drawn up by Dr. Butterworth which I circulated last month. Random inspections are taking place and action may have to be taken if certain people continue

to be found in breach of them. I know they are tiresome but they are intended to prevent accidents.

Thank you for your assistance in this.

James

10pm

"Lyle! When I said, 12 hours ago, that I wanted to see you in my office straight away I was expecting you to be wearing clothes at the time."

"Well stop standing there looking decorative. Come over here and show me quite how sorry you are."

"God Lyle! No! Don't stop!"

"A Happy Christmas to you too."

Chapter 20

The Soldier's Ghost

Jane Harker was wandering the fields. She was bored. Every summer she came to stay with her aunt Martha at Cranleigh Halt. In previous years, Clara Strange had lived down the road. But this year, 1976, Clara had moved to London and there was no one else in the village her own age. Aunt Martha was a great believer in 'running out to play'. As a consequence, Jane was spending the better part of every day in the countryside, on her own.

She tramped along a mud track looking half-heartedly for blackberries, even though she knew it was too early in the season. The sky was a dull over-cast grey, threatening rain. Jane squinted up at the clouds wondering if they justified a return to Aunt Martha's house. When she looked down there was a man standing not a hundred yards from her. He wore a uniform of some sort. It was a dull green colour, with a peaked cap and boots. It made Jane think of old photographs and school projects. He looked at, or rather through, her and then turned and walked away up the path.

"Hello!" called Jane. He didn't turn round.

"Hi!" she shouted and began to run after him, curious about the uniform and his presence. She skidded to a halt as her feet sank in deeper mud. It was dark and a bitter, burning smell filled her nostrils. She could hear the sound of explosions. The sky lit up to reveal mud and barbed wire as far as she could see. Jane gasped and ducked, arms flung over her head. There was a sudden silence. When she looked up, she was back on the path to Cranleigh Halt. Everything was as before.

Jane turned slowly in a full circle but could see no sign of the man, nor the mud. The air smelled of freshly cut grass and newly turned earth. Thoughtfully she turned and headed back to the village.

When he had first started on the force, Sergeant Markham's gaffer had sent him out, once a week, to walk across the fields to the furthest farmhouses. It wasn't strictly necessary any more, what with telephones and automobiles. Nevertheless Markham still made the rounds. He enjoyed the fresh air and the sense that he was keeping in touch. He could have delegated the task to Cummings, as Fletcher had delegated it to him, but he preferred to make the walk himself. It gave him time to think and orient himself, if nothing else. It was strange the way the police station had brought them back to Cranleigh Halt this time. He was continually assaulted by both the familiar and the strange, constantly losing and finding his bearings. He'd look up the police station in the newspaper clippings in the local library. It had been closed down in 1952 but no one seemed to question their presence here now, they were just accepted back into the village as the local bobbies.

He was crossing a field when he came across Jane Harker. He had met her at some village function or other with her great Aunt, Martha Withings. Markham recalled Withings as a young married woman. Pretty, in an everyday sort of way, but a bit on the mousey quiet side of things for his liking. It was a surprise to come back and find her in her seventies, hale, hearty, talkative and cheerful. Jane he hadn't had a chance to speak to. She seemed a well-behaved child but rather lonesome. He often saw her striking out across the fields as he took his morning walk down to the newsagents to get the paper.

"Hello there Jane," he said as he approached. "Found anything interesting today?"

Jane eyed him suspiciously. "Not really," she said at last.

Forty years of policing told Markham that a wealth of information lay behind that 'Not really.'

He leaned against the fence and looked at her thoughtfully. "Why don't you tell me about it," he suggested.

She shrugged. "It's nothing." Then, apparently changing tack, she asked, "Have you ever been to war?"

Markham nodded. "That I did, but I was grateful enough to get back I can tell you."

"Was there mud?" she asked carefully, "and darkness? and explosions?"

Markham nodded. "That describes France at night pretty closely. Why? are you doing a history project?"

She shook her head. "No reason." She gazed thoughtfully over the fields.

Markham followed her eyes and saw the distinctive silhouette of an infantryman. He started up in spite of himself.

"You see him?" asked the girl.

"I do, lass."

Markham began to walk towards the man.

"No!" shouted Jane, catching his arm.

His feet sank into the mud and he saw the long trench near Messines with which he had become so familiar. Overhead whistled the sound of mortars. He blinked and the vision was gone. Jane was holding on tight to his arm.

"Well," he said, "that is most peculiar and no mistake. You've found something interesting all right."

Markham returned to the police station deep in thought.

"Penny for them," said Dogberry, coming across him seated at his desk and staring thoughtfully out of the window.

Markham blinked slowly. "Do you remember that desertion case?"

Dogberry sat down. "Remind me. There have been so many over the years."

"Summer 1916, invalided soldier at Cranleigh General, never made it back to barracks."

"Vaguely," said Dogberry. "Why the sudden interest? They never caught him did they?"

"I don't think so," agreed Markham. "But I saw a soldier on the downs today." He made a decision. "Cummings!" he called, "Cummings!"

"Yes, sir."

"Have a look through the files for 1916. Desertion case. Bring them here when you've found them."

"You saw a soldier, you say!" mused Dogberry thoughtfully. "Seems unlikely."

"I saw more than just a soldier. I got a whiff of the trenches. Not a place I'd forget."

"Here it is, Sir." Cumming came through the door with a large file.

"Good lad. I remember Sergeant Fletcher briefing me on the case when I got back. It was still open then, you see."

Markham untied the folder and spread out the documents. "He we go," he said. "Lewis Slatcher, convalescing from influenza at Cranleigh General, sets off

for the railway station to join up with his unit but never appears at the barracks."

"Did they check the fields?" asked Cummings.

Markham flicked through the files.

"People walked the path from the hospital to the station, as I recall," said Dogberry. "It was a bright summer's day and the path was well signposted and clear. He won't have gotten lost unless he wanted to."

"Which is why it was eventually written up as desertion," agreed Markham, skimming over a type-written summary. They still had that type-writer somewhere. He recognised the way the e smudged.

"So why are we interested in it now?" asked Cummings.

Dogberry looked over at the Sergeant. "You'd better explain it to him too."

When Jane went walking the next day there was another policeman out in the soldier's field. He was surrounded by equipment.

"What are you doing?" she asked, walking up to him. He had three cameras, a large tape recorder and what looked like several thermometers.

"You must be Jane Harker?"

"Yes, what are you doing?"

"Right, well you and Sergeant Markham both saw a Great War soldier here yesterday."

"I saw something," said Jane cautiously.

The policeman grinned at her. "I went straight into town to the library and did some reading."

"Oh yes?"

"This," he said, spreading his arms, "is the latest in ghost hunting equipment."

"Do policemen hunt ghosts?"

"We investigate disturbances to the peace. The Sergeant says that the peace is being disturbed. Therefore I'm investigating."

"But ghosts are just superstition."

"Modern science, young woman, will reveal all. This isn't mumbo-jumbo you know. This is all based on the latest scientific theory."

"Have you caught the ghost then?"

The young policeman looked a little crest-fallen. "Not yet, to be honest."

Jane looked around. "How long have you been out here?"

"A few hours now."

Jane stared across the fields. There was a now familiar silhouette on the skyline. “That’s him,” she pointed.

The policeman gasped and grabbed a camera, one of the fancy new polaroid things. He took a hurried picture. Seconds later a dull square was pushed out.

“I can’t see anything,” she complained.

“You have to give it a moment or two to develop.” He held the polaroid between thumb and forefinger and waved it about.

“What are you doing now?” she asked.

He looked at his watch. “Waiting.”

Jane looked back, the figure was approaching them. He had a boyish face with neatly cut brown hair. A kit bag was slung over one shoulder.

“Oi! you!” came a shout.

Jane and the policeman spun round. A thick set youth in a waistcoat and baggy trousers pushed between them and came to stand stock square in front of the soldier.

“You,” he shouted again. “You keep away from my Martha.”

The youth turned and seemed to notice Jane and the policeman for the first time.

“Who are you?” he asked. He rushed towards them seeming to enlarge until there was just a large mass of colour that swept over and through them. Jane gasped in surprise.

“Fiddlesticks!” said the policeman. He was seated on the ground and was fishing the polaroid from out of the mud. Jane looked around. The fields were empty once more. The policeman seized a tab on his picture and pulled it back. A rather murky picture of the fields was revealed. There was no sign of the soldier on the horizon.

“I don’t understand it,” said Cummings glumly. “I followed all the instructions.”

“Maybe ghosts only get photographed when they want to be,” said Dogberry comfortingly.

Clarissa snorted, “I reckon that book didn’t know what it was talking about.”

“There’s nothing on the tape recording either,” said Cummings, “and yet we both distinctly heard him threaten the soldier.”

“Any idea who it was?” asked Markham.

“Young man, maybe sixteen or seventeen.”

"So he'd have been in his twenties by the time you joined the force, assuming he's from 1916 as well."

"Oh, I see." Cummings frowned. "I didn't get a good look at him. Come to think of it, though, I reckon it was James Withings. I always had him pegged as a bad'un."

"Who was James Withings?" asked Clarissa.

"Farmer's labourer," said Markham. "I wouldn't have called him a bad'un exactly. We never had him in for anything more serious than a bit of rowdiness down the pub, but he had a temper on him, no mistake."

"He married Martha Harker," said Dogberry.

"So he did," said Markham. "Martha Withings, that's Jane Harker's aunt."

"I think," said Clarissa, "that it's time I pay Jane Harker a visit."

Jane wasn't sure what to make of the woman who had so suddenly dropped round for tea. She was dressed soberly, with an old-fashioned air, though Jane couldn't quite put her finger on what gave her that impression. She introduced herself as a journalist writing a feature on the village but didn't mention a paper.

Jane's aunt, however, was greatly flattered to be consulted as a 'long-term resident'. Very soon, they were all seated in the front sitting room drinking tea out of the her aunt's best china. Jane sat warily on the sofa as the two women chatted about village gossip, past and present.

"What about the Great War?" asked Mrs Miller. "Where you here then?"

"Oh yes!" said her aunt. "We had a military hospital nearby and lots of us girls volunteered to help there. Quite a few got trained up as VADs and went to France and places."

"But not you."

Her aunt shook her head. "I had my parent's to look after so I had to stay here. But I did what I could."

"Tell me about the hospital then. Were a lot of local lads there?"

Jane's aunt sat back. "A few, but they came from all over really. You met a lot of different people."

"That must have been exciting."

Jane stared at Mrs Miller, made suspicious by the sudden introduction of World War I. But her aunt was soon embroiled in stories of serving cups of tea to handsome young men. Jane's attention began to wander. She noticed that while

Mrs Miller kept a bright and interested smile on her face, her eyes too were drifting about the room. Jane glanced outside. Gradually she realised there was a sort of mist at the window. She stared hard at it and, like an illusion, a face began to form. She blinked and, in between her eyes closing and opening, the face solidified. It was the face of a young man, round and smooth, with warm brown eyes and closely cropped brown hair. His hands were pressed against the window. It was the soldier. In spite of herself Jane gasped, causing her aunt and Mrs Miller both to follow her gaze.

Her aunt screamed.

"Keep calm," said Mrs Miller. "Who is that?"

Aunt Martha had her hands up to her face. Mrs Miller stood up and moved over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Keep it together," she said firmly, patting Aunt Martha awkwardly on the shoulder. "Jane dear, could you pour another cup of tea for your aunt."

Jane glanced again at the window. The man had gone. She reached for the teapot and poured a second cup with a trembling hand.

"Good girl," said Mrs Miller. "Now drink up Mrs Withings. You'll feel much better."

Ten minutes later Aunt Martha was calmer. "I must have imagined it," she said.

"No you didn't," said Mrs Miller firmly. "We all saw him. You saw him didn't you Jane?"

Jane nodded.

"There you see. We all saw him. Any idea who he was?"

"He looked like Lewis Slatcher," said her aunt. "But he died long ago."

"In the war?" asked Jane.

"Ssshh!" admonished Mrs Miller. "Let your aunt tell the story."

"There's not much to tell really," said Aunt Martha. "He was a young man at the hospital. He went missing."

"In France?" asked Jane.

Her aunt shook her head. "No, near here somewhere."

"Maybe he just ran away," suggested Mrs Miller.

Aunt Martha shook her head. "No! He didn't desert. Everyone said he did, but he didn't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I, well I knew him quite well." Jane was surprised to see that her aunt was actually blushing. "In fact I met him on the day he vanished."

"Really," said Mrs Miller. "Where was that?"

Dogberry was searching for mistletoe. It was a heavy, hazy afternoon. He'd taken off his coat and hat. Although his shirt was more starched than he would have liked, he still felt it as a comfortable return to less formal days.

He wasn't altogether surprised when James Withings came across the fields towards him. The ghost didn't say anything but halted before him in the middle of the path.

"I can see you, you know," said Dogberry mildly.

The man didn't move, but his expression darkened.

"I'd leave it be, if I were you," said Dogberry. "I don't know what your part in all this was but I think you should just go. Markham may be a little slow but he's determined."

Withings still didn't move.

Dogberry shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Dogberry walked forward and through him, watching the apparition vanish as he did so.

Not enough power yet to do much except parlour tricks, Dogberry reasoned. But as events moved forwards, Withings would become a more serious problem.

Jane found herself dragged, not altogether unwillingly, to the police station. Mrs Miller had been insistent and her aunt still more than a little shocked. Jane still wasn't quite clear how it had happened or quite where the police station fitted into matters. Sergeant Markham she had met before, and Constable Cummings. As Mrs Miller was relating, a little breathlessly, her aunt's story, a third man entered the station. He looked old, even though his hair was still brown and his eyes alert. His face was sun-tanned and the folds of his skin seemed deep, almost like wrinkles. He looked at Jane thoughtfully.

"You'll be Jane Harker, I'm thinking."

Jane nodded mutely.

"The game's afoot then," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're into the last act. This is where Withings gets dangerous, if he so chooses. Stay close to Markham, he's too sensible to pay much mind to ghosts."

"Right!" said Sergeant Markham. "Seems clear to me that young Slatcher was way off the path that was considered back in 1916. However we know where he went now, so I say we trace the route and keep an eye out for cliffs and sink-holes he might have fallen into."

When they left the station the hazy sunshine had been replaced by threatening clouds.

"The weather's turning," observed Cummings.

Dogberry stared grimly into the sky. "We shall see."

They left the village to the west and struck out over the hills. It was ploughed fields, but Markham insisted there had once been a path there.

"Here," said Dogberry and handed Jane a small sprig of greenery.

"What is it?"

"Mistletoe, it wards off evil. Keep it in your pocket."

Jane stared at him thoughtfully. There was a sprig of mistletoe in his cap as well.

"I've made some for everyone," said Dogberry, handing them out.

"I thought mistletoe was just for kissing under," said Cummings.

Mrs Miller blushed, for some unknown reason, and mumbled something which sounded like, "Pagan nonsense."

"The old ways had their reasons," said Dogberry. "And mistletoe has more uses than kissing."

After the fields came scraggy heathland. The wind had become a steady force they had to lean into as they went. Jane felt as if she were walking through fog, though the view remained clear, if overcast. But she kept seeing half-formed shapes out of the corner of her eyes, that seemed to dance and curl on the wind.

Cummings produced a chunky cassette player from his bag and switched it on. The sound of static filled the air.

"Good Lord man!" said Sergeant Markham, "What are you doing?"

"It disturbs the psychic vibrations," Cummings shouted above the wind. "Prevents them from assuming a coherent shape."

Markham grunted. They ploughed on, accompanied by the wailing noises from Cummings' machine. Jane had an uncomfortable feeling that the noises were echoed back at them. Squeaks and wails pursuing and surrounding their passage.

The shapes became more distinct, like shards of darkness on the summer air. There was a tangy, bonfire-like smell, overlaying the scent of grass growing and the honeysuckle from the hedgerow. Jane wrinkled her nose.

"Someone's burning something."

Mrs Miller had produced a bible which she clutched to her chest. "It's the scent of Hell."

"Now, now, Mrs Miller," said Markham. "Let's not exaggerate."

Jane turned her head looking for smoke.

"Oh my!" said Cummings.

Looking back she saw an ethereal wall of flame surge across the fields towards them. She felt the warmth as it swept passed. Cummings' cassette player burst into flames.

"Let's not put anything as suggestive as Hellfire into people's minds again," said Dogberry.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," began Mrs Miller.

Anxiously Jane looked around her for the shadows. They were lengthening across the fields, darkness rolling towards them.

"This only protects you, Clarissa." Dogberry's voice sounded faint and distant.

There was a flash of lightening and Jane saw James Withings on the path ahead of her. His face was a mask of anger and he bore down upon them. She turned and ran.

"Someone stay with her." Dogberry shouted.

Clarissa turned to follow Jane but felt Dogberry's hand on her arm.

"Markham will find her. What we need to do is keep its attention on us."

"But?"

"Now might be a good time for your Bible. Something uplifting though, Philippians 4, perhaps."

Hastily Clarissa flicked through the pages, finding the passage. "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice..."

She felt the wind swirling around her. Grass and hay swept past her vision as if the three of them stood in the eye of a storm.

"Cummings," shouted Dogberry above the wind. "Do you have any other tricks for disturbing psychic vibrations?"

"They don't like cheerful or hopeful things. Cheerful songs, I suppose."

"Get singing lad, get singing!"

There was a wild and frightened look in Cummings' eyes but he stood tall, swelled out his chest and launched into "I drove my tractor through your haystack last night, ooh aah ooh aah"

"Zounds man! what's that?"

"It's number one!" said Cummings, sounding aggrieved. "I do wish you'd pay more attention to the radio."

Dogberry closed his eyes. "Very well! Continue!"

"I threw me pitchfork at your dog to keep quiet..."

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

Dogberry began to walk a circle round them, scattering mistletoe as he went. Clarissa felt Cummings take a step up, so they stood shoulder to shoulder, braced against the wind. She was sure she could see the face of James Withings forming in the storm of dust and debris. It appeared foiled by Dogberry's circle, unable to get close to where they stood.

"Cuz I got a brand new combine harvester," sang Cummings.

She paused in her reading and saw the face loom forwards over Dogberry's barrier. Hastily she resumed, "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Jane kept running, although rain was lashing against her face and she could hardly see where she was going. She screamed aloud as a heavy hand fell on her shoulder. Her feet slid out from under her, scrabbling for purchase on a ground that was no longer there. Strong arms pulled her backwards and she realised that she stood at the edge of a cliff, her feet poised on the brink of tumbling over.

"There, there, lass."

She looked up to see it was Sergeant Markham who held her.

"It's chasing us."

He looked behind him. Jane followed his gaze and saw a vortex of darkness, like a whirlwind, in the field behind them. In its centre she could just make out three figures.

"I think it's distracted just at present. Let's make good use of that." The Sergeant set her on her feet. "Now this is interesting and no mistake," he said, peering over the cliff. "I'd forgotten this old quarry was here. Bit out of the way, if you see what I mean."

"But it's right by the path!"

"That it is, but it's not a well-used path. Not one you'd take between the hospital and railway station, for instance. I doubt anyone searched here."

Above them thunder crashed. Jane started. In the flash of lightening two men were revealed struggling on the cliff edge, not far from them. One, in a soldier's uniform, was knelt on the edge of the cliff, clutching his arm, while the other lashed out at him with his foot. Then the man rushed forward and pushed him. The soldiers arms flailed as he tried to regain his balance and then he fell over the cliff.

"Slatcher is trying to lead us somewhere, I think," said Markham. "Let's get down to the bottom."

He led her down a narrow path. Dark clouds still swirled around them, but when Jane looked back, she could see the heart of the darkness remained on the field where Cummings, Dogberry and Mrs Miller stood. Markham held onto her hand and seemed oblivious to the spectres and phantoms. They reached the foot of the cliff and picked their way along its base.

"What are we looking for?" asked Jane as Markham hauled up the branches of another bush.

"Bones," he said.

Jane shivered in the wind.

"Ahhh!" said Markham, sadly. "Here we are." He was close by the base of the cliff, forcing aside a thorn bush.

Above them the wind screeched and howled in a sudden growing intensity.

Bright sunlight swept over them. Clarissa looked up from her bible.

"What's happened?" she asked into the silence.

"Withings must have spotted Markham and Jane," said Dogberry. "Let's hope we distracted him long enough."

Once again, Jane saw the form of James Withings rushing towards them, the storm in his wake. She shrank back, behind Markham who squared up to the ghost.

"Right son," he said. "You're nicked. I arrest you in the name of the law."

There was a sudden silence and Jane found herself standing, in the blazing sunshine, at the foot of the cliff.

"Where did he go?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Markham. "It's always good to follow due process though. I've found it remarkably effective in all manner of strange situations."

Jane pondered this. "Will there be a trial?"

"Not for me to decide," said Markham. "No doubt I'll find out soon enough, but that's my job done for the time being."

He started back up the cliff path. Jane could see Dogberry and Mrs Miller standing at the top looking down at them.

"Where's Constable Cummings gone?" she asked.

Sergeant Markham smiled. "If he knows his job he's headed back to the station to put the kettle on."

Chapter 21

The Night Before Christmas

A Primeval Short Story

21.1 PART 1

Jenny put down the phone. She stared blankly through the glass walls of her office and sighed tiredly. She rubbed her temples and looked up at the clock. Pretty much bang on the stroke of midnight.

"Happy Christmas," she said to herself.

She opened her email and sent a quick note to Lester who was still around, waiting for the crisis to be resolved: `all sorted`. She logged out, conscientiously switching off the monitor and glanced at her watch once more. Coffee, she decided, if only to keep her awake until she got home. She gathered up her coat and bag and headed out of the office. She paused a moment on the upper walkway of the central area, christened "the drum". Down below her the screens of Connor's anomaly detector glowed in the dimmed lights. On the far side the garage doors, as usual, stood propped open. They spent too much time ferrying large equipment from the garage to the drum. She made a mental note to chase up what was happening about getting a remote control system for them. She headed down the long corridor to the common room.

The lights inside were on. An attempt had been made to decorate it with a plastic Christmas tree in one corner and a string of Christmas lights above it. A slightly sorry selection of Christmas cards were perched on top of the TV screen. She was surprised to find Abby seated on one of the sofas, playing Grand Theft Auto with a bored expression on her face.

"You're here a bit late," she observed.

"You too." Abby glanced up.

"PR crisis. Breakfast TV got wind of that anklyosaurus incursion last week and were going to run something on it as a 'ha! ha! good cheer on Christmas morning' piece. Thank God I have contacts who got wind of it. I've spent all evening persuading them that, however amusing some west country peasant seeing an anklyosaurus sounds, what they actually saw is subject to a D-Notice and we'd appreciate it if nothing was made of the situation." Jenny shook her head.

She walked into the small kitchen and switched on the coffee machine.

"Want a coffee?" she called, pulling two mugs down from the cupboard.

Through the door Jenny saw Abby glance at the screen. It looked like she'd just crashed. Abby made a disgusted noise and dumped the controller on the chair beside her. "Yes, please," she said.

"So why are you still here?" Jenny asked.

"Connor needs a lift home."

"And you waited until midnight?" Jenny was impressed despite herself.

"No. I went out for a drink with Kermit, Blade and a couple of the others and told Connor I'd be back at closing time for him. He's writing some paper with Cutter, apparently it needs one more draft but they'll definitely send it off then."

"When did they tell you this?" Jenny looked at her watch again.

"About twenty minutes ago. I'm giving him another ten and then he's getting the bus, or Cutter can take him."

"What's the rush on the paper anyway?"

"Cutter's going to the States on Boxing Day. A big dig out in North Dakota or somewhere and it's Connor's family Christmas tomorrow. We both have a three line whip to attend. So this is their last chance to work on it together before the deadline."

"You're meeting Connor's parents?"

"It's not what you think."

Jenny was about to reply when she heard the distinctive sound of a safety catch being removed. Twelve months ago she wouldn't have recognised it but now it was instantly and unmistakably familiar. Through the door she saw Abby stiffen.

"Come out of there!" called a voice. It had a Russian accent.

Cautiously, Jenny walked out of the kitchen. There were two figures in the doorway, both dressed in black, both wearing balaclavas. They had guns pointed at Jenny and Abby. Jenny raised her hands. Abby did likewise. The smaller of the figures gestured with the gun.

"On the sofa. Keep your hands visible."

Jenny moved carefully to sit next to Abby. The man who had spoken lowered his gun and began talking quietly into a headset. The other kept them covered.

"Who are you?" challenged Abby.

The short man glanced up but neither spoke. When he'd finished speaking to his unseen companions he glanced at his friend.

"We keep them here."

Minutes later they were joined by two more figures herding Connor, Cutter and Lester into the common room. Lester had a look of weary resignation on his face. Jenny watched their captors, fascinated. Stripped of identifiable faces it was still easy to see that one of the newcomers was in charge. It was partly the way the others deferred to him but there was also something powerful and confident in his movements. She closed her eyes, briefly picturing Lyle and Stringer, the Special Forces Captains who worked on the project, trying to see if, in her memories and stripped of their familiar faces, they moved with the same sense of total command in the field. It was impossible to tell. She knew them too well to be sure. The other newcomer was a woman. A tall, thin woman, a head higher than the leader of the group.

"What's going on?" Abby hissed at Lester.

"Espionage," he said shortly. "Fortunately it appears they don't want a mess so I suggest we all sit here quietly until they've finished whatever it is they're doing."

Jenny glanced up at the armed figures in the doorway then looked back at Lester.

"Who's on duty?" she asked quietly.

"Lyle and Lacey," he said shortly, "who are hopefully both tucked up in bed. They're only supposed to be here so we can get a head start shipping equipment if an anomaly is detected. They shouldn't be patrolling the corridors."

The lead captor stepped forward.

"Do you civilians realise what time it is?" His accent was pure London.

Lester raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry if my staff's dedication to their jobs has interfered with your plans."

The soldier gave an exaggerated sigh. "One at a time, you are going to empty your pockets of any phones, PDAs and other electronic devices. Then you'll be searched." He gestured at Jenny. "You first."

Carefully she pulled out her mobile phone and put it on the table. Then looked up at him.

"Stand up," he said. "Computers, search her."

The woman stepped forward. Jenny was quickly and efficiently patted down and her keys were removed and checked over before being dropped on the table

alongside her phone.

"She's clear," reported 'Computers' in an American accent.

One by one the process was repeated. The collected phones, PDAs, Connor's 'classic retro' handheld, keys, iPods and blackberrys were dumped in a bin liner and then put in Computers' backpack. The internal phone line and ethernet cable were severed and the keyboard removed from the computer that sat in the corner of the room. Once the leader was satisfied there was no way to contact the outside world from within the common room he turned back to Jenny.

"OK. You're coming with me and Computers. The rest of you stay here."

"Wait a minute!" Cutter was on his feet. Several guns jerked upwards.

"Cutter." There was a note of warning in Lester's voice. "Is it really necessary to take Miss Lewis with you?" he asked the leader.

"'Fraid so," said the man. "No one does anything stupid. No one comes to any harm. Let's keep this as simple as possible."

"I'll be fine," Jenny said, placing a hand on Cutter's arm.

Slowly he sat down again.

"OK," she said brightly. "Where to?"

"Out!" said the soldier. Carefully, holding her head high, she walked out the door of the common room, mindful of the armed man and woman behind her.

"Where *are* we going?" she asked once they were in the corridor.

"Server room," said the American woman.

Two corridors lead away from the drum, one above the other. On the ground floor was the infirmay, followed by the server room, a small dormitory for the duty team and lastly the armoury. The upper corridor had the main laboratory, then the common room. In between, there were a number of empty spaces and store rooms. The ARC was built to allow for expansion. There was a stairwell halfway along the corridor which allowed access between the two floors without going all the way to the drum. Jenny headed for this.

The server room was horribly cluttered. Computers were stacked on racks with wires running to and from them. There were a couple of workstations and terminals. Connor had, early on, set up his domain in here where he could spread his stuff over the already cluttered desks and machines without anyone like Lester really noticing. His coat hung on the back of the door and his bag was on the floor under a table.

"OK," said the man as they entered. "Sit on the floor next to that radiator. Get to it, Computers."

The woman sniffed but opened her backpack, extracting a laptop and what looked like several external hard drives. She started plugging them together and into the system. She checked Connor's machine.

"Ah!" she sounded pleased. "Someone hasn't logged out."

Jenny sat on the floor and the man crouched in front of her, holding a pair of handcuffs. He wrapped one end round her left wrist and attached the other to the pipes leading to the radiator.

"Sorry about this," he said. "But it'll stop you trying anything stupid."

Behind him, Computers was typing away at the keyboard. He turned round to look at her.

"How long?" he asked.

"Given I've got access to the system? Not long. Looks like they've been relying on the lack of any connection to the outside world to act as their security for them. Now we're in, we're in."

"Good," said the man. He turned back to Jenny. "You'll all be home in time for your presents."

"Really?" Jenny allowed her scepticism to show. She couldn't imagine this was going to end well.

"Really. We've no interest in harming civilians."

Behind him, the Computers woman snorted.

"And that does include you," he said over his shoulder.

"So why separate me from the others?" asked Jenny.

"Insurance, they're less likely to try anything stupid if there's a risk I'll shoot you if they do... and vice versa of course."

"And if they do do something stupid?" Jenny couldn't help asking. "Would you shoot me?"

"Yes," he said.

She shivered where she sat and believed him. Although she kept telling herself it was just the balaclava, this squat powerful looking man exuded a sense of danger.

"You shouldn't talk to her, you know," said the woman from where she sat. "It'll complicate matters."

"Who put you in charge?" he asked.

"You don't have any authority over me, soldier boy."

"Yeah but I'm sure your superiors don't want me reporting that you were unhelpful. It is *supposed* to be a joint mission."

"Oh very good!" the woman said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Let the hostage know there's two organisations involved."

Jenny watched with interest as the man in front of her tensed up but he didn't do anything. Instead he adopted a casual pose, legs slightly apart, cradling his gun. She got the impression he wasn't planning to go anywhere fast. She decided against further conversation. Her captors weren't exactly relaxed. But the leader had been at pains to reassure her that everything would be all right so long as things went smoothly, and keeping quiet was probably the best way to ensure that. The minutes on the clock ticked passed. Tiredness overtook her once more and she leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. It began to get distinctly uncomfortable on the floor, especially with the radiator pipes digging into her back. She wriggled and tried changing position.

"Uncomfortable?" asked the man.

"A little," she confessed.

He looked around the room. "I can't offer you a cushion," he apologised.

"I'll survive."

They waited a few more minutes.

"You done yet?" he asked the woman.

"Almost," she said. She picked up her backpack and started rummaging through it, moving towards him. "Do something useful, why don't you. Grab that printer off that shelf." She pointed to where a broken printer had been unceremoniously dumped. He put down his gun, sadly out of Jenny's reach, and picked it up.

"This?" he asked, "why?"

The woman was standing right behind him now and she deftly slipped one had to his waist and removed the holstered pistol.

"So you'd put down the gun." The woman dropped her rucksack and stepped back. She was holding what Jenny recognised as a tranquilliser pistol of the kind Abby favoured in one hand and his pistol in the other. She shot the tranquilliser right at him. He dropped the printer and reached for his gun, but the woman kicked the table it was on and it fell to the floor, out of his reach. He staggered towards her, swinging a fist but she ducked and edged round the room towards the door. He moved to follow but his knees buckled under him and he fell to the floor just in front of Jenny. The woman grunted in satisfaction.

"Got a vein," she said. "Always nice when these things are simple."

"What did you do?" Jenny asked.

"Shot him with a dose of Med and Ket," said the woman. She put the man's pistol on one of the tables and started tidying up the laptop and hard drives into

her bag. Then she began unpacking what looked suspiciously like explosives and fitting them round the room.

"If you're going to blow us up why didn't you just shoot him?" asked Jenny.

"Wouldn't want anyone upstairs to hear now, would I?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Let's say my superiors have a slightly different set of priorities than his and very explicit instructions about what to do if anyone sees us. But, to be honest, they had a far better idea of what was going on here from the start, much better than his lot did."

"Oliver Leek?" asked Jenny.

The woman shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. I've got your data. I have my orders and I'm out of here." She placed a small clock-like device on the desk where Jenny could see it. Wires ran from it to the explosives taped around the room. It read 9:57 but was counting down. She hit the return key on Connor's computer and turned the monitor round to face Jenny. Its counter started at 5:00.

"Goodbye," she said and shut the door.

21.2 PART 2

Jenny sat still a moment, calming her breathing and making sure the woman had a chance to get out of earshot. Then she sprawled forwards towards the man on the floor. By stretching out both arms she could just reach her free hand to his waist and she began feeling in his pockets for the key to the handcuffs. They were empty but there were further pockets in his tac vest. After a bit of a struggle she managed to hook one leg round him and pulling at his arm with her hand she rolled him onto his back. She found the key and hurriedly released the handcuffs.

"Med and Ket," the woman had said. It was the standard tranquilliser the ARC personnel used, and Ditzy, their medic, had them all supplied with the antidote and trained to administer it. She groped for Connor's bag under the table and glanced up at the countdowns. The computer read 0:30 and she hesitated. The countdown so clearly tied to the explosives read 5:27 but she had no idea what the computer countdown was for.

She looked at the comatose figure on the floor. She could leave him to die. No one would blame her. She looked at the computer clock again. It definitely wasn't the explosives. She started to rummage through Connor's bag for the antidote. She couldn't help pausing, however, to watch the countdown roll over to 0. All around her alarms went off.

Nick sat and fidgeted in the common room. He'd have got up and paced around except that the not-so-nice men in balaclavas had made it clear that they disapproved of standing up. Lester sat calmly on the sofa, staring into the middle distance. Connor and Abby had talked together in low voices for a bit and then, to Nick's amazement, had both fallen asleep on each other's shoulders. He sat playing with his hands and wishing he knew how to make his knuckles crack in an irritating fashion, if only to see Lester wince as he did it.

Suddenly alarms sounded loudly throughout the building. Connor and Abby both woke up with a start. Lester's lips pursed into a thin line. His hands, which had been resting on his knees, moved down carefully so they were braced on the edge of the sofa. Nick caught his eye. Had Lyle done something stupid? He had to be around somewhere.

"That's the open cages alarm!" said Connor.

"The what?" asked Nick.

"Open cages. If the locks fail on any cages then an alarm sounds and the building is sealed."

"Sealed?"

"Steel shutters over all the exits, though the main one can be opened manually."

"That would be the main one past the garage and the underground corridor with all the cages?"

Connor nodded.

Nick glared at Lester. "Who designed this place!"

Lester pursed his lips, "In the event of the animals getting out the first priority is to contain them and protect the public."

"But the main entrance?"

"That may have been an oversight."

Nick looked across at their captors. One of them was radioing anxiously while the other had the gun pointed in their direction. Very slowly Lester stood up.

"Gentlemen, it appears we have a problem."

"Sit down!" said the one pointing the gun at them. Nick mentally dubbed him 'the Russian'.

Lester folded his arms. "It appears at least one of the cages is open, which means very soon there will be at least one dangerous animal on the loose. If you have any idea what this place is for, then you will have a good idea just how dangerous that animal is likely to be." Lester paused for effect. "I take it that

opening the cages was not a part of your plan and that you can't contact the other half of your team."

"I said sit down."

Lester didn't budge. "I have two combat trained staff members in the dormitory downstairs. I assume you disabled them before you found us."

The Russian brought the gun to bear directly on Lester but his companion placed a hand on his arm.

"We locked them in. Doesn't mean they didn't get out and start this." Nick realised it was the first time this man had spoken. His accent was Italian.

"Captain Lyle may be a little hot-headed but he isn't a fool," retorted Lester. "I can't think of anything he'd do which would cause the cages to open."

"Without the door codes, you'd need to hack through a lot of computer security to do that," put in Connor.

Lester spared him a quick glance before turning back to the two men. "Which would rather seem to point the finger at your American friend, assuming her code name had any meaning."

Nick was fascinated to see the two men exchange an uneasy glance.

"I take it you don't entirely trust her," said Lester. "So let's assume for a moment that you've been royally stitched up by, let me guess," he paused for effect, "ooh! seems like the sort of thing the CIA might get up to. How am I doing?"

The confident stance of their captors was deteriorating rapidly. Nick had never really watched Lester go to work like this. He wondered if, between them, Jenny and Lester couldn't have talked them all out of the situation an hour ago. Thinking of Jenny, the theoretical CIA double-cross, and the incommunicado second team made his blood run suddenly cold.

"What about Jenny?" he asked. "She's with the other two."

He stood up. This time no one pointed a gun at him.

"We'll just have to hope she can get to safety," said Lester quietly. He raised his voice, "I suspect we have very little time to get out of here."

"What do you suggest?" asked the Italian.

"The dormitory is right next to the armoury and Lyle will be able to let you in. Those guns you're currently carrying will only be of limited use against some of the animals which might be along shortly. I'd like to suggest we form two parties. One heads for the armoury, collects Captain Lyle and Private Lacey, and acquires suitable weaponry. The other heads for the nearest lab with a working computer. We automatically close any open cages preventing any animals, which have not

already done so, from escaping. We notify the relevant authorities and unseal the exits in this part of the building allowing both groups to escape."

"Who did you have in mind for each party?" asked the Italian.

"We should have an expert with both groups, that's Connor and his laptop if it's around - "

"In the lab next door," said Connor.

Lester gave a slight nod, " - and Professor Cutter. I have the main security access codes so I'll close the cages and open the doors. I suggest we divide equally apart from that."

"Most of the creatures will be in the tunnel," said Nick, "and they'll have to come through the drum to get to this area. I'll come with you. Once you're done we can head into the drum. If we shut the garage doors we can trap most of them in the tunnel. We may even be able to lure any that have got out into the garage."

Lester nodded. "Miss Maitland goes with Mr. Temple then. And you?" he looked at their two captors with a raised eyebrow.

"I'll come with you," said the Italian. "You with the others."

The Russian nodded and gestured to Connor and Abby with his gun.

Captain Lyle was woken from a deep sleep by the sudden blaring of the alarm. He sprang up, swearing, and reached for the light switch. His thumbs itched. He blinked in the glare of the small dorm and reached for his clothes.

"That's not the anomaly alarm," said Lacey from the next cubicle.

He realised she was right. The last vestiges of sleep had prevented him registering the unfamiliarity of the noise.

"That's the creature escape alarm," he said.

"Fuck!" returned Lacey.

"Indeed." He hurriedly pulled on the rest of his clothes.

"Armoury first," he decided. "Then we check the cages."

Private Lacey appeared. She was wearing light combat fatigues, her wavy nut-brown hair pulled up into a pony tail. Lyle put his hand on the handle of the dormitory door and pulled only to realise it was locked.

"What the fuck!" he said. He pulled it again.

"It's locked?" asked Lacey. "Seriously?"

Lyle shrugged and fished his key out of his pocket, slipping it into the lock only to realise it wouldn't go. He bent down and peered at it.

"Someone's jammed something in the lock," he said. "Looks like we're dealing with foul play."

He stood back and aimed a kick at the lock and then another.

"Door opens inwards," observed Lacey.

"Fuck!" Lyle swore again. "Pass me my rucksack," as an idea dawned, "it's got my caving gear in."

"Planning a dirty weekend soon as we get off duty?" asked Lacey as she handed it over.

"Too right, Private."

He rummaged through the pack and extracted a hammer and chisel. He started above the door handle and whacked the chisel as hard as he could. It bit deep into the wood. He moved along and repeated the process.

"Be out of here in five minutes," he said.

Jenny found the antidote pack at the bottom of Connor's bag. She still had three minutes. There wasn't much time but she needed to see this man's face. Quickly, she pulled the balaclava off his head and then paused. He was completely bald. His face was squarish, not unhandsome, and a pale brown colour. Jenny thought of Al Qaeda and hesitated over the antidote. Then with a slightly sick feeling, realising she wouldn't have stopped had he been white, she plunged the needle into his arm and prayed that he wasn't a dangerous and psychotic terrorist. Almost at once he blinked and sat up. She'd forgotten about the pistol but as she reached for it he moved, swiftly and suddenly, so she found herself looking down its barrel.

"Don't move," he said.

"I hate to break it to you," she returned, "but your colleague has rigged this room with explosives. If you can defuse them then I suggest you do so quickly."

She saw his eyes flicker round the room. The digital clock read 0:26. Almost immediately he was on his feet, dragging Jenny after him. Before she had time to register properly what was happening he had caught up his rifle from the floor and was bundling her through the server room door. She could hear him counting under his breath. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the corridor a few yards towards the drum before suddenly pulling her into his arms and dropping them both to the floor with her beneath him.

"Two, one, zero," he murmured into her ear.

There was a loud explosion behind them. The alarms silenced and the lights went off.

21.3 PART 3

Nick watched as Lester switched on the lab computer.

"What's the plan?"

"I override the lockdown on the side door by the armoury. I relock the cages, if possible. I email the bloody army and get them here poste-haste."

"What about phoning?"

"I imagine they've thought of that."

Nick picked up a phone on a nearby desk. Silence. He put the receiver back down and glared at the Italian with the gun. The man shrugged helplessly.

The computer made the familiar chiming sound as Windows started up. Lester drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk as icons gradually populated the screen. Once it was up and running he pulled up a program Nick didn't recognise and typed in some sort of IP address, his username and a password.

"What are you doing?" asked Nick.

"Logging into the server that controls all the building systems."

There was another wait. Nick watched impatiently as the little egg timer on the screen rotated cheerfully at them.

"Ah ha!" said Lester as some sort of GUI popped up.

At that moment there was a rumbling sound underneath them. The lights went out. Lester's monitor went blank. He swore.

Lyle had just finished knocking out the lock when there was the sound of an explosion nearby and they were plunged into darkness and silence.

"What now?" asked Lacey.

"Wait for the emergency lights," he said. "At least the alarms have stopped."

Slowly a dim red light filled the room. Lacey hadn't really even registered the emergency lights before, but now she saw one in each corner of the dorm. Lyle pulled open the door and they stepped out.

Lacey drew in a sharp breath. Facing them were several dog-like creatures, about three foot long with short snouts and long bodies. The one closest wagged its tail but not, she thought, in a terribly friendly fashion.

Jenny felt the man sit up and cautiously she raised her head. He was speaking into the radio headset. Looking back down the corridor in the red glow of the emergency lighting, she could see the door of the server room, propped up against the far wall. It had obviously been blown clean off its hinges.

"Sazanov! Castellini! Come in please." He glanced at her. "What happened?" he asked. "Make it quick."

Jenny shrugged. "Your friend shot you with a tranquilliser dart, then rigged up the explosives." She hesitated, "Before that she set up the computer to do something. I think she's let the creatures out."

The man gave her a hard look while listening to a voice in his ear. "I'm fine. What's your situation? It's all FUBAR here. Anderson's hung us out to dry."

He listened for a moment or two, apparently getting reports from his subordinates.

"Better put this Lester chap on, Castellini. Sounds like I should talk to him."

Then he winced and pulled the receiver from his ear. Jenny could hear Nick's voice, tiny and tinny, emanating from it.

"Is Jenny all right? Let us speak to her!"

Her captor held the earpiece and microphone between them. It meant Jenny had to lean in close to speak or listen. He smelled of the same aftershave Lyle used.

"I'm fine." She spoke into the mic. "A little bruised and dusty but otherwise fine."

"If you could calm down now, Professor," came Lester's acid voice.

"Who am I talking to?" asked Lester.

"Captain Sayed. I understand you have a proposal for co-operation."

"I do, Captain. Judging by the international flavour of your little team I'd say you're a UNIT detachment. I also gather your American colleague has deserted you. CIA, I presume."

"No comment."

"Well, let me make a couple more guesses. You had a different computing officer lined up and they were injured at the last moment. The CIA generously offered a replacement in return for the intelligence which C19 has been so obstructively refusing to let us share with UNIT for the past year. How am I doing?"

Sayed curled his hand round the mouthpiece.

"He's good, your boss," he commented.

"He's right?"

"I didn't say that, but he makes intelligent guesses."

Jenny pondered this. She knew about UNIT, an international force for handling the wierd and unexplained. They'd been pestering Lester for information for months. However, the ARC fell under the aegis of C19, part of the British Intelligence service and C19 had been very clear that nothing was to be shared. She'd heard Lester mutter several times that there would be trouble. It looked like he'd been right.

Sayed opened his hand. "Is this getting us anywhere?"

"Your erstwhile colleague has opened some, if not all, of the cages. If you didn't know already, you will shortly discover that these contained a number of extremely dangerous creatures. If we all want to get out of here alive we need to work together."

"Agreed."

"I was going to open the back door but our server seems to have gone down. Also your friend's handiwork, I presume. This means we have to get out the front entrance and, as Professor Cutter has pointed out at length, due to a design flaw this is located at the opposite end of the menagerie from ourselves."

"What do you suggest?"

"Professor Cutter, your man Castellini, and I will attempt to secure a route to the garage on the far side of the drum. You should be just down the corridor from the other group. Link up with them, collect weapons and then make your way here. We'll grab a truck and drive through the tunnel to the entrance."

"Agreed."

Sayed put the headset back on and looked at her.

"Miss Lewis?" he asked. Jenny nodded. "Thank you for saving my life. Many wouldn't have."

"Lucky it was me, then."

He nodded and held out his hand. "Captain Hamza Sayed."

She looked pointedly at it and didn't respond. "OK," he said, "fair enough. Shall we head for these friends of yours?"

"Good doggies," said Lyle. There was a growling sound. "According to Cutter," he murmured, "these dog things like to ambush their prey."

"Is that supposed to be reassuring?"

"Pop back into the dorm and look in the fridge. I left some bacon in there for breakfast tomorrow. I'm going to stay here, staring down our friends."

Lacey ducked back into the dormitory to the small kitchen at the far end. There was, indeed, bacon in the fridge. She fished it out and tore the pack open with her teeth as she returned to Lyle. He took it from her.

"You know the store room down there." He nodded down the corridor.

"Yes," said Lacey.

"Open the door, will you?"

Lacey moved across the corridor. Lyle picked a rasher of bacon out of the pack and waved it at the dogs. Carefully he backed towards her. The pack followed. Suddenly the lead dog leaped at the bacon.

"Jesus!" swore Lyle, letting go of it quickly. He backed up hurriedly next to Lacey. The dog tossed the bacon up slightly and then gobbled it down. Lyle fished out a second rasher, waved it around and then hurriedly tossed it into the store room. The lead dog moved cautiously to the door, but paused on the threshold.

"Good dog!" murmured Lyle and tossed another rasher over its head into the room. The dog moved inside. The others moved to follow. Lyle tossed yet another rasher over their heads and further into the store room. There was a bit of a scrabble as they surged forward. Quickly he shut the door.

"Armoury," he said.

"Lyle! Lacey!"

Lacey looked up the corridor to see Temple and Maitland running towards them. There was someone behind them she couldn't make out in the emergency lights.

"What's going on?" demanded Lyle.

Temple shrugged. "Men in masks, alarms, boom! Lights go out."

Maitland shot him an irritated look and stepped aside to reveal an armed man in a balaclava behind her. "Lester says it's espionage," she explained, "and not to do anything stupid. Lester's trying to organise a way out. We're supposed to be getting more weapons, and we're *supposed*," she shot the man behind her a hard look, "to all be working together."

"Under protest," said the man with a thick Russian accent, "and I'm in charge."

Lyle's mouth twitched dangerously. "Really?" he said.

Nick paused at the upper entrance to the drum and peered cautiously out. There wasn't anything on the upper levels but he could see their rhamphorhynchus circling up near the ceiling.

"See that?" he asked.

Castellini nodded and trained his gun on it.

"Leave it," whispered Nick. "Hopefully it won't be interested in us."

Behind him he heard Lester snort. Nick crawled forward and peered through the glass walkway. Below him was a scene of chaos. A large anklyosaurus was thrashing about in some kind of panic. Circling it, at a cautious distance, were several velociraptors. He could hear the sound of the Mammoth bellowing, but couldn't actually see it. Hopefully it was still in its cage. Connor's anomaly detector was in pieces in the centre of the floor.

"Any suggestions?" asked Lester.

"You'd better tell the others to take the upper route to the drum," Nick said to Castellini. "Some of that lot will end up in the lower corridor before too long."

Castellini nodded and relayed the instructions over the radio link. When he'd finished he shook his head. Nick heard him muttering the word "Dinosauro" in a disbelieving tone.

Suddenly there was a loud cawing sound. Nick looked up anxiously to see the rhamphornynchus circling again and eyeing them up. The soldier swung up his rifle and let of a burst of fire.

"No!" shouted Nick angrily. The rhamphorhynchus was about three foot long but most of that was a long tail. It had a comparatively small body. It's jaws, though full of sharp teeth, were not really that large. It was a specialised fish eater. Nick didn't think it would do a human a lot of harm. At least, not if people weren't shooting at it. The rhamphorhynchus let out a second cry and turned to dive at the solider who, ignoring Nick's shout, fired off another round. The flying reptile shook in the air and then crashed into the soldier and crumpled on the walkway.

21.4 PART 4

"Jesus," muttered Lester, surveying the blood. In its final crash landing, the rhamphorhynchus had pinned the soldier to the wall of the drum with its long spear-like jaws. Nick pulled off the man's balaclava, revealing a long pointed face and a shock of curly black hair. He felt at the neck for a pulse but couldn't find anything, not that he was necessarily sure he was feeling in the right place. He held his hand in front of the man's mouth and nose, hoping to feel some breath, but there was nothing. He looked up at Lester and shook his head.

Lester nodded, looking grim and a little sick. "Can you get the guns?" he asked, "and his radio. We need to keep in touch with the others."

With distaste, Nick plucked the rifle from the man's lifeless hands. There was also a pistol in a thigh holster. Nick carefully detached it and the headset and then picked his way past the now lifeless rhamphorhynchus to Lester.

Lester took the pistol and headset from him.

"My office," he said.

Once inside, Lester shut the door and locked it behind them. Nick looked out through the plate glass walls.

"I don't feel all that safe in here," he remarked.

"You think I'd let the government build me an office above the world's first pre-historic zoo without insisting on the strongest, most reinforced glass around?"

"What is that?" whispered Captain Sayed as they approached the stairwell. Blundering around at its base, nudging at the fire doors with its head, was a large squat looking beast with a short tail and an armoured head. It walked on four splayed out legs and filled up almost the entire corridor.

"Pareiasaurus," whispered back Jenny. "It's a herbivore."

"You're kidding me!"

"Weren't you keen on dinosaurs as a kid? Lots of big herbivores."

"Yes, I was," he hissed back. He shook his head. "This just wasn't quite what I was anticipating when your boss said dangerous animals." He whistled quietly through his teeth. "I guess that narrows this place down to cloning or time travel."

"No comment," said Jenny.

He laughed quietly. "I wasn't really expecting one."

He studied the Pareiasaurus impassively. "It won't be easy to get past. How thick is that armour plating?"

"Thick enough, I think. The Special Forces weren't happy about tracking it down when it got loose in the New Forest."

"Tracking it down?"

Jenny bit her lip. That probably pretty much narrowed them down to time travel.

"It's pretty docile," said Jenny, "or so Abby tells me anyway." She thought about the problem. "Poor night vision too, I think."

They watched it for a bit. "I wouldn't want to just walk past it," said Sayed. "Even if it's docile, I don't want it stepping on me." He looked around thoughtfully. "It's pretty dark here."

"You have an idea?"

"Make a noise behind it. Get it to back up a bit."

"That won't help us get past it."

"We could get into the stairwell and head upstairs. Link up with the second team when they get there. Hopefully they'll have armour piercing bullets."

"Abby and Connor won't want it harmed."

She saw the look of incredulity on Sayed's face.

"Scientists," she said and shrugged.

Sayed flicked a switch on his ear-piece. "Sazanov? It's Sayed. Our way to you is blocked by a..." he looked at Jenny

"Pareiasaurus," she said.

"Pareiasaurus. We're going to head straight upstairs. We'll meet up in the common room." He paused, listening. "You heard right. It's a dinosaur. Let's just hope they've not got any T. Rexes squirrelled away down here."

"No T. Rexes," said Jenny.

He flashed her a grin. "Pity."

He fished through the pockets on his tac vest and produced a fair amount of small change.

"I thought you all had terribly useful combat ready stuff in those pockets," whispered Jenny.

"Small change *is* terribly useful," he whispered back, "as I shall, hopefully, demonstrate."

He tossed a coin high over the Pareiasaurus and it clattered to the floor on the far side of the creature. It turned its head, alert. Sayed tossed a couple more coins and the creature, not without difficulty, turned around and shuffled cautiously down the corridor.

"Stairs!" said Sayed.

They ran for the doors.

Lyle led the way to the armoury. Lacey walked at his elbow, aware of Temple and Maitland behind them, and Sazanov in the rear. In the emergency lighting it was difficult to see very far but she could tell there was something backed into the end of the corridor where the entrance to the armoury was. Lyle stopped walking and Lacey followed suit. Temple and Maitland blundered into their backs.

"What is it?" Lacey asked, squinting in the half light. She could make out a large shape, deer-like perhaps, and horns.

"I think it's the synthetoceras," said Maitland.

"Does it matter?" asked Sazanov and sighted along his rifle.

"Hey!" objected Maitland.

The soldier let off a shot but Maitland was already pulling up his arm and it went wide. Lacey seized the opportunity to relieve him of the rifle. Lyle, with his usual supernatural anticipation, was already close enough to remove the man's holstered pistol at the same time. There came a braying sound from the end of the corridor. Lacey realised the creature had lowered its head and was charging at them. They scattered to each side as it came past. It turned for another run but Maitland stepped forward, making soft cooing noises and holding out her hand.

"There's a good boy," she whispered gently. Maitland always carried bits and pieces of food in her pockets. She must have got some out now.

The creature paused. "Come on," said Maitland. "It's me, Abby. You know me."

The creature stepped forward and nuzzled into her hand while she stroked its head.

"There's a good boy," she murmured. "There's a good boy."

"Right," said Lyle gesturing with the pistol. "Now I'm in charge and we can stop blundering around taking pot shots at anything that moves. Let's get kitted up and head back to the drum."

Jenny watched as Captain Sayed cautiously peered out of the entrance to the stairwell.

"All clear!" he said with obvious relief and stepped into the corridor.

Jenny followed him. The red emergency lights made it remarkably difficult to see very far. She squinted in the direction of the entrance to the drum. It was all dark. Without thinking, she placed a hand on Sayed's arm to prevent him walking forwards. Then her conscious mind caught up with her intuition.

"There's something in the doorway," she hissed.

He stopped dead and sighted along his rifle. Now that she knew what she was looking at Jenny could make out the rough shape. A large dome and something moving above, or perhaps behind it. Her blood ran cold.

"That's the anklyosaurus," she said.

"You make that sound like a bad thing. It's another herbivore, right?"

"Armoured and bad tempered," said Jenny.

"OK, back down the stairs and let's take our chance with the Pareio what's-it."

"Too late!"

The anklyosaurus had started a charge. Jenny turned and ran. There was a burst of gunfire behind her. She pushed through the common room door, Sayed hot on her heels. She wheeled round and slammed it shut. There was a loud bang as the anklyosaurus thudded into it and then the centre of the door splintered as it swung the heavy ball on the end of its tail against the obstacle.

They both backed away from the door.

"That's not going to hold for long," said Sayed.

He stepped forward and emptied a clip through the hole. He grimaced.

"Bounced off?" asked Jenny.

"Pretty much."

The door shook again and more of it splintered. Jenny looked around her frantically.

"Kitchen," she said. "Shut the door and hope it doesn't work out where we are."

The door shook again.

"Kitchen," Sayed agreed.

They both ran for it.

Nick and Lester watched the carnage below from their vantage point. The anklyosaurus had taken out a couple of the velociraptors and then started up the ramp and headed down the upper corridor.

"We should warn the others," said Nick. "We told them to take that route."

Lester nodded and fiddled with Castellini's headset which he was now wearing.

"Hello, Sayed, Come in please. There's an anklyosaurus heading your way."

Lester paused and winced.

"He knows," he said to Nick.

"Is Jenny all right?"

"They're hiding in the kitchen. They're safe for now." Then he sighed. "Captain, I'm afraid I also have some bad news."

Nick turned his attention back to the velociraptors while Lester broke the news of Castellini's death. They were prowling round the floor of the drum and looking distinctly territorial. A compsognathus ventured through the doorway from the garage and was quickly pounced on.

"The good news," he mused to Lester, "is that the velociraptors are preventing anything else getting through into the main part of the building."

Lester gave him a withering look.

Lyle put on a radio headset and checked it was working. Sazanov was glowering at him from across the room, near as he could tell anyway. The man was still wearing a balaclava. "What frequency are you on?" he asked the Russian. "Let's all talk to each other."

By this point Lyle and Lacey and, somewhat against Lyle's better judgement, Sazanov, were fully armed. After some discussion, they'd settled on rifles with underslung grenade launchers, a backup pistol, and several clips of both regular and armour piercing bullets. The armour piercing bullets were to be used only in direst emergency since, while they would probably go through almost any dinosaur hide, they would definitely go straight through the walls of the ARC and probably the buildings on either side as well. Lyle didn't want to be responsible for any civilian deaths. Maitland had a tranquilliser pistol. Temple had his laptop.

"How come Sazanov gets a gun and I don't?" Temple hissed to Lacey.

She just rolled her eyes at him then hit him on the back of his head.

Lyle had also equipped everyone with radio headsets and head-mounted torches. The emergency lighting was too low for his liking. Maitland and Temple also both had light backpacks with emergency first aid kits in them.

They'd not gone far down the corridor when they met the Pareiasaurus Sayed had warned them of.

"Any ideas for getting past this?" Lyle asked Abby.

"It's pretty docile," said Abby doubtfully.

"And also large enough to tread on you without noticing," returned Lyle.

"We're probably all right if we don't frighten it."

Lyle gave her a look. Abby just shrugged back.

"OK," said Lyle. "I'm going to move past it, slowly. Sazanov, you come next, then Connor, Abby and Lacey last."

"Its night sight's not great," added Abby. "If we move slowly and don't make any loud noises, it probably won't even notice we're here."

Lyle edged forward towards the creature. His thumbs were itching again. He kept his movements slow and smooth. The Pareiosaurus remained where it was standing, head down, apparently sniffing at the floor. Once past, Lyle gestured to Sazanov to follow. The man was bulky and not naturally as quiet as Lyle - but a good deal quieter than Temple was likely to be. He was also extremely nervous about the Pareiosaurus. That thought brought Lyle up short slightly, realising

how his own attitudes to these creatures had changed. He knew that some were mean but some were much like large cows and you didn't waste too much time being nervous of a large cow - you just kept far enough away not to get stepped or sat on. Sazanov skittered about nervously as he approached the creature and the movement obviously attracted its attention. Lyle watched as its head turned to follow Sazanov, making the man even more nervous. Slowly the great beast turned around so that, by the time Sazanov reached Lyle's side, it was facing the two of them. It made a low gutteral snorting sound.

"It's going to charge!" said Sazanov nervously, lifting his gun.

"Easy, easy," murmured Lyle, although his thumbs were pricking really badly.

The creature's head rocked from side to side and it moved a step forward. Sazanov tensed. Lyle had a half second realisation of what Sazanov was about to do. Then the man launched a grenade.

"Down!" shouted Lyle and pulled Sazanov to the floor, despite the fact that the latter was an idiot who should know better than to let a grenade off in an enclosed space.

There was a loud bang and then an ominous sound of moving metal. Lyle glanced up to see the ceiling buckling. Realising what was about to happen, he rolled towards the wall and then the whole lot came down.

21.5 PART 5

"Lyle! Lyle! Captain Lyle, report damn you!" Nick watched Lester talking into the radio.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I don't know. One of the UNIT soldiers did something stupid. I don't know what."

"That sounded like an explosion."

Lester sighed. "It was an explosion." He turned his attention back to the headset. "Lyle! Are you there?"

There was a pause.

"Lacey! I'm receiving you. Report please."

Jenny watched as Sayed talked into his headset. Beyond the door of the kitchen she could hear the anklyosaurus smashing up the common room. Tired, she sat on

the floor. Sayed crouched down opposite her, his mouth in a thin line.

"Two more men down," he reported.

"Who?" she asked.

"Sazanov," he said, "and a Captain Lyle."

Jenny bit her lip. "Lyle was a good man."

"So was Sazanov."

They sat in silence for a bit, listening to the sounds of banging from outside.

"It's not getting bored, is it?" commented Sayed.

Jenny shook her head. "They're not very bright, or so I'm told. High boredom threshold."

"Budge up," said Sayed. "I want to take a look."

"Careful!" She warned.

She moved aside and he crawled forward to peer through the keyhole. He sat back, facing her across the narrow width of the galley kitchen. Suddenly a tinny rendering of *We Wish you a Merry Christmas* started playing.

"That bloody Christmas card," swore Jenny. "It drives me up the wall."

"I don't think the anklyosaurus likes it much either."

They sat in silence while the chirpy melody cycled round.

"So what now?" asked Temple after Lacey had finished reporting to the others.

"The stairs are somewhere behind that." Lacey nodded at the pile of debris in front of them. "As is Lyle," she added.

Temple cautiously prodded a bit of plasterboard with his foot. It bowed under the pressure. "Doesn't seem very stable."

Even the emergency lights were out now. Lacey played her head torch over the pile. The beam showed a lot of plasterboard and some pieces of metal that presumably had been floor joists. There was a big hole in the ceiling and wires dangled down.

The damage was much worse on one side of the corridor.

"That's where the server room was," commented Temple.

Lacey nodded. "Two explosions in more or less the same place. Won't have done anything very much good."

Where the server room had been there was now a really huge pile of stuff. The wall had given way.

"Stairwell was opposite the server room," observed Maitland.

Lacey shone the torch on the far wall. It was possible to make out the doors. "Rubble's not too bad there. We might make it into the stairwell, especially if we stay close to the wall."

"What about Lyle?" asked Temple.

Lacey considered the huge mound of rubble in front of them. Her training told her she needed to get the civilians out. She needed to keep with the plan. Instinct said they should dig for Lyle.

"What about the anklyosaurus?" asked Maitland.

Lacey made a decision. "We can't climb over this pile. It's not safe. If Lyle's anywhere he's on the far side. We're going to get to the stairwell. According to Captain Sayed, the anklyosaurus is in the common room so we head out towards the drum, link up with Professor Cutter and Lester, then come back and look for Lyle. Agreed?" She looked at Temple and Maitland, who both nodded.

Lacey slung her rifle across her back and cautiously placed a foot on the pile, one arm braced against the wall. Carefully, she transferred her weight then put her other foot down. There was a sound of movement and she paused, waiting for it to subside, before taking another step forward.

"One at a time, I think," she said. She advanced forward a few more steps until she was standing by the doors.

Suddenly there was a low growling sound and a flash of brown.

"What's that?" asked Temple.

Lacey shone the torch around. Perched higher up the mound of debris were several of the dog-like creatures she and Lyle had run into earlier. Instinctively she turned her head back down the corridor towards the store room they'd locked them into. It was right next to the server room, she realised, mentally mapping where the door in each room was. It looked like the explosion in the server room and then the one in the corridor had created an exit route for the creatures.

"Osteoborus," said Temple. "They're scavengers."

"We're a bit large for them to attack," said Maitland cautiously, beginning to clamber up after Lacey. "They shouldn't be too much trouble."

"They are pack hunters," shouted Temple from below. "They might well attack larger animals, especially if they think we're vulnerable."

Lacey leaned her back against the wall and eyed the creatures. She'd grown up in the country and knew working dogs. These animals were wild and not as cautious as they should be. Too long in ARC cages getting used to humans, she thought. She unslung the rifle.

"You going to shoot them?" asked Maitland, coming up beside her.

"You got any better ideas?" Maitland was usually sensible, but all the scientific team got a bit erratic when the animals were threatened.

"Short of chucking bits of wall at them? No."

"I'm all undefended back here!" squeaked Temple.

Lacey turned her head towards him. Temple was backed against the wall. Three Osteoborus hemmed him in.

"Throw wall at those three," she said to Maitland. "I'd rather not shoot in Temple's direction."

Maintland grinned. "Don't tell me you aren't tempted though."

Lacey snorted. She let off the safety and sent a couple of short bursts in the direction of the dogs above them. A couple fell and the others backed off.

"Oi! You!" Maitland shouted and started lobbing debris at the creatures in front of Temple. "Connor, get up here," she added.

"Move that way a bit," said Lacey. "I'm going to try and get this door open. The debris's quite likely to shift."

Maitland moved back towards Temple, still chucking stuff at the Osteoborus, which backed up. Temple himself put a foot on the rubble and started to climb up out of their way.

Lacey slung her rifle behind her again and aimed a kick at the stair-well doors. They shuddered but remained still. She kicked again and was pleased to see one budge slightly so there was a slight crack. She leaned against the door and slid her foot into the opening, forcing it wider while gripping hold of the other door with her hand. Suddenly the door swung open. Lacey hung on as a small landslide of debris poured into the stairwell beyond.

"Lacey!" she heard Maitland calling.

She hauled herself back up into the corridor. "I'm fine."

Temple shouted. Lacey swung her torch back towards them.

"It's biting me!" he shouted.

One of the dog creatures was hanging onto Temple's leg and he was kicking at it in ineffectually.

"Out of my way." She pushed passed Maitland and back into the corridor. She pulled out her pistol.

"Hold still, Temple."

"They're bone crushers!" he said, alarmed.

"I said, *hold still*."

The animal hung on. Lacey crouched down with the pistol next to the creature's head but made sure it was aimed well away from any part of Temple. Then she shot it. She felt the blood spatter on her face and hands. Temple's leg was

covered in blood and gore, some of it his own. She stood up and placed a shot into the heads of the two dogs in the corridor. There were sounds of whining and barking from above them.

"First aid when we're upstairs," she said and pushed Temple up the pile. "Maitland! Get into the stairwell!" she shouted. She paused to wipe the back of her sleeve over her face. Switching the pistol for the rifle, Lacey aimed a burst at the creatures above her. They backed off and vanished down the far side of the pile into the server room. Then she scrambled up and through the doors.

Maitland was examining Temple's leg in the emergency lighting of the stairwell.

"Upstairs!" said Lacey, "through the doors at the top. We can shut those."

21.6 PART 6

For we all like Figgy Pudding trilled the card.

"What *are* we going to do when it does get bored?" asked Jenny. "The only place it's got to go is back to the drum and we want to go there too."

"We wait here for the cavalry to arrive."

Sayed checked the door once more.

"What's it doing now?"

"Sofas."

Good tidings we bring to you and your kin.

He sat back. "You're remarkably calm about all this. What is it you do again?"

"PR."

He raised an eyebrow. "That often involve dinosaurs?"

"It does these days."

He grinned, looking rather like a small boy. "It must be a lot of fun."

"It has its moments. This isn't one of them."

"Come on! It's not so bad. There's a real life anklyosaurus out there."

"It's Christmas Eve. Correction, it's Christmas Day. I've been hand-cuffed to a radiator, blown up and now I'm trapped in a kitchen with an unknown enemy soldier who's having a geek moment about two tonnes worth of anklyosaurus that might just randomly break the door down any minute. An anklyosaurus which, might I say, despite its vast destructive power, can not shut up one crappy Christmas Card which is about to start on its tenth assertion that it won't go until it's got some."

So bring some out here

"Have dinner with me."

"What?"

"Will you have dinner with me."

"You handcuffed me to a radiator!"

"Think of it as an apology. You saved my life. Many wouldn't have."

Jenny boggled at him. "I don't believe you."

"Don't believe you saved my life? Because I'm quite certain about that, or don't believe I'm apologising, because I'm perfectly serious about that too."

Jenny gestured helplessly round the room.

"I don't believe you're asking me out to dinner. Here! Now!"

"It's a perfectly simple question. Will you have dinner with me? Or do you have a boyfriend?" He looked a bit crestfallen at that thought.

"I don't have a boyfriend," she found herself saying without thinking. "Or, at least," she corrected herself, mentally moving Cutter forward for back up purposes, "it's complicated."

He sighed. "How can it be complicated? Either you have a boyfriend or you don't. Anyway it's only dinner. If you've got a sort of boyfriend, dinner with me might help him make up his mind."

"You handcuffed me to a radiator."

"I can see the whole radiator handcuffs thing is going to be an issue in our relationship."

"We don't have a relationship," Jenny hissed.

"You haven't actually turned me down yet."

Jenny opened her mouth.

And a happy new year!

Suddenly, he held up his hand. "Sounds like your friends have a plan."

Lacey pushed through the doors at the top of the stairwell. Temple was seated on the floor with Maitland binding his leg. The sounds of the anklyosaurus in the common room were clear. She thought she could also hear singing.

"Let's move away from the common room," said Lacey nervously. She mentally made a note of where the kitchen, Miss Lewis and the third soldier were in relation to her and then slipped in a clip of armour piercing bullets. She'd need them if the anklyosaurus came their way, but she didn't want to shoot anyone.

They backed up the corridor but almost immediately came to the hole in the floor. A single metal joist ran across its middle.

"OK. Maitland, you cross first. Take Temple's laptop. I don't want him trying to balance with an injured leg and carry something. Then Temple. I'll come last."

Maitland took a careful look at the floor and then walked across swiftly and decisively. Lacey had always thought she looked nimble. Clearly she was right. Temple, on the other hand, paused at the edge, looked at the joist and visibly gulped.

"What if it doesn't hold my weight?"

"These things are supposed to be over-engineered. It'll hold. Just don't jump up and down."

He cautiously put one foot on it and looked at Maitland. "Abby?" he said, half whining.

"You'll be fine," she reassured.

"I don't like heights."

"Then don't look down, idiot."

Temple shuffled onto the joist. It creaked. "Abby!" he said again.

Maitland held out her hand. "Here, it's not far. Take my hand. Look at me."

Temple reached out and grabbed Maitland's hand. Shuffling some more, he made it across. Lacey shouldered the rifle and stepped onto the joist. She felt it move slightly under her feet. Throwing caution to the winds she ran across to the far side.

"I'm not sure it's that over-engineered," observed Temple. Then his face entirely changed, a speculative look settling on his countenance. "It certainly wouldn't hold an anklyosaurus."

Lacey looked at the hole in the floor. "If we covered it with something, would the anklyosaurus notice?"

"Probably," said Maitland, "but it wouldn't connect it to a hole in the floor."

Lacey looked at Temple for confirmation. He shrugged. "Abby's better with live animals. If she says it won't notice, it won't."

Lacey nodded. "We can cover the hole with one of these doors." She walked to the nearest room and fished a screwdriver out of her tac vest. "Can one of you hold this for me while I take it off its hinges?"

Maitland came to help while Temple sat on the floor and fiddled with his laptop. Together, Lacey and Maitland lifted the door and rested it on the joist, concealing the gap on the far side. Lacey stood back and admired their efforts.

"Well, it's the first time I've set a pit trap in an office block, but I reckon it'll serve."

Temple looked up. "I've got a recording of a female anklyosaurus. I can play the sound on the laptop speakers."

Lacey looked at him in surprise. "You have what?"

"I have a recording of a female anklyosaurus. I took it just before this one got trapped here, while we were herding the others back through the anomaly. I keep recordings of as many cries as possible in the database."

Lacey stared at him. "Why?"

Temple stared back, his mouth working wordlessly. "Because," he said at last.

"Whatever," she said. "OK, on my signal."

She made Temple and Maitland retreat up the corridor a bit. Then she knelt and sighted at the common room door at an angle which would send any bullets away from the kitchen. She patched into the radio.

"Captain Sayed, we have a plan."

"I'm listening"

"We're going to lure the anklyosaurus down the corridor over a hole in the floor. It should drop through to the floor below."

"Should?"

"I'm all sighted up and ready. You and Miss Lewis stay in the kitchen until I give the all clear."

"Understood."

"OK, Temple, it's all yours."

Temple hit a key on the laptop and a loud groaning sound filled the corridor. They all waited. The sounds of destruction from the common room faded. All was silent except for a tinkling voice demanding Figgy pudding. Connor hit the keyboard again and the sound reverberated once more. There was a shuffling sound. Lacey saw the anklyosaurus emerge from the common room and start moving towards her.

"Once more," she said.

Temple sounded the cry again. Lacey forced her breathing to slow down. She knew where the hole in the floor was. She wouldn't be wasting any bullets unless it got over the door. Somewhere behind her, in the drum, came the sound of automated weapons' fire and a cry of pain.

"What was that?" asked Maitland.

Lacey continued to watch the anklyosaurus, refusing to be distracted. It moved cautiously down the corridor towards them.

The anklyosaurus moved to a shambling run. Lacey forced herself to keep the rifle steady, uncomfortably aware that if anything went wrong she wouldn't have much time. It crossed on to the door. There was a shriek of metal and the door tilted sideways. The anklyosaurus let out a huge bellow. Lacey kept it in her

sights. There was a bang and the door slid through the floor and onto the pile of debris below, taking the anklyosaurus with it. Lacey stood up.

"All clear," she said into the mic.

"On our way."

"Lester?"

Lester motioned Nick to silence with an irritated gesture. He had one hand pressed to his ear where he listened to the others' reports and was looking terribly professional in a pinched kind of way. Nick looked out of the office window. In the red of the emergency lighting the velociraptors were gathering together. They'd explored the drum and were about to move on.

"Lester!"

Lester looked up with an irritated expression.

"What?"

"The velociraptors are moving. We need to stop them."

Lester came to stand by him at the window.

"If they stick to the lower floors it will to our advantage. We get a clear run to the garage."

"Lyle and that other soldier might still be alive, just unconscious. They're in the lower corridor, if they are anywhere. Come on, Lester! Have a little optimism."

Lester looked at him steadily for a moment, then nodded.

"Very well. How?"

Nick looked around, thinking as he spoke. "There's a holding cage down there with a manual door lock. If we can somehow lure them in." He trailed away, thinking of the dead rhamphorhynchus outside and Castellini's knife, still at the dead man's belt.

"We need a bucket," he said.

"Of course! I always keep a supply of buckets in my office," sniped Lester. "You'd better use the waste paper bin."

He emptied out a small pile of paper onto his desk and handed Nick the metal container. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Cut up the rhamphorhynchus and put the meat in the holding cage."

"And what if the velociraptors get interested too early?"

Nick looked around the office and then picked up Castellini's discarded rifle.

"You're not serious."

Nick shrugged, "I should be able to scare them off with the noise. I don't need to hit anything."

Lester sighed. "What will I be doing all this time?"

Nick looked at him, concerned by the flatness of his tone. "Staying in here," he gestured helplessly, "co-ordinating."

Lester gave him a cold look, then nodded.

Cautiously Nick exited the office. He leaned over the balcony and let of a burst of gunfire into the velociraptors below, just to scare them back from the exit. The heavy weapon kicked in his hands and he found himself sitting on his bum. He glanced behind him. Lester stood at the window to his office and shook his head. Gingerly Nick got back to his feet and peered over the parapet once more. The velociraptors had backed up and were now clustered near the garage.

Nick worked his way around the upper level to the entangled forms of Castellini and the rhamphorhynchus. He reached over to Castellini's belt and extracted the knife. Then he began to butcher the creature. He made faster work of it than he would have, had it been an autopsy, but it didn't need to be pretty, he just needed to get as much meat as possible into the holding cage. He became uncomfortably aware that his hands, at least, were getting covered in blood that would also attract the velociraptors. When he'd filled the bin he stood up and glanced into the drum. The raptors were clustered just below him on the walkway, probably attracted by the movement and the smell. He quickly moved down the slope towards the floor.

He was almost there when, with a sudden screeching sound, a velociraptor appeared directly in front of him and leaped. Instinctively Nick threw himself forwards and rolled beneath it as it jumped. He lifted his head and realised he'd dropped the gun and bin which now lay further up the ramp, beyond the raptor. Nick rapidly crawled backwards, away from the creature, which turned to face him and crouched down for another spring.

21.7 PART 7

The raptor's head exploded. Behind it stood Lester, holding Castellini's pistol, a grim expression on his face. He picked up the rifle and handed it back to Nick.

"Try not to drop it again," he said.

"Thanks," said Nick.

Lester barely acknowledged him but stalked back up the walkway once more. Nick picked up the bin and reloaded the meat. When he set foot on the floor of the drum, the entire pack of velociraptors turned to face him. Awkwardly, he

raised the rifle and let off a blast of gunfire into the air over their heads. The recoil pressed him against the wall but he managed to keep hold of the gun. The velociraptors didn't appear that impressed, but then they'd spent several months in a strange environment and Abby had kept telling him how well they were adapting. They did back up a little though.

Hastily, Nick edged round the wall to the holding pen. The door was open and the cage empty. He backed inside to the far wall and emptied out his wastepaper bin on the ground. Then he hurried forwards. The raptors were now uncomfortably close to the entrance, attracted by the prospect of food. He let off another burst of gunfire and seized the opportunity it gave to leave the cage for the drum. The raptors' heads moved to track his movements. Then, almost as one, they moved to attack. Nick aimed the gun right at them and let off another blast, but he couldn't hold it steady and his bullets didn't seem to be hitting anything, although it was difficult to tell, reptiles were good at ignoring minor injuries.

There came a shout from up above and a lot of swearing. Nick revised his opinion. He wasn't hitting any velociraptors.

"Lester!" he called, but at that moment the first raptor was upon him. He whacked at it with the butt of his rifle, knocking it to once side.

Then there was further gunfire. The kind of controlled, targeted, professional gunfire that Nick wasn't supplying. Two of the raptors dropped. Nick rapidly backed out of the way around the side of the drum.

Lyle, looking a bit battered, dark hair ruffled and his tac vest hanging from his torso, emerged from the corridor. Several of the velociraptors were already inside the cage, pulled by the smell of meat and pushed by the noise. Nick waved at Lyle, urging caution. There were a lot of the beasts. He wasn't convinced even Lyle could dispose of them all and he wanted to save the raptors if he could. If they could persuade them that there was easier food available, then the creatures would leave them alone. Nick willed the velociraptors into the cage. At first there was hardly any movement and then, one by one, they entered.

Lyle walked up to Nick and snatched the rifle from his hands with a look that spoke volumes of trouble later on. "Lester!" he called, unable to disguise the concern in his voice.

"Professor Cutter," came a voice from the balcony. "You are the most fucking incompetent, insubordinate bastard I have ever had the misfortune to manage."

Lyle grinned. "He'll live."

Lester emerged above the parapet. His suit was ruined and he was pressing a blood-stained handkerchief against his shoulder. Lyle waggled his hips and blew Lester a kiss.

"Miss me, darling?"

Lester closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand.

Nick hurried towards the holding cage and began to lower the door.

Abby listened with relief as Lester informed them that Lyle was fine. Captain Sayed and Jenny were approaching them up the corridor. He wasn't bad looking, Abby thought, now that she could see him without the balaclava. If you went for squat and chunky, at any rate. She wondered what he made of them. Lacey looked worst, with blood from the dogs smeared across her face. But Connor was limping and they were all dusty and grimy.

Jenny and the Captain stopped short on the other side of the hole in the floor.

"You'll have to take those shoes off," the Captain said to Jenny. "I'll go first then you take a run and a jump. Don't worry about the landing. We'll catch you."

Jenny nodded mutely. Captain Sayed backed away slightly and then took a run up and a leap over the gaping hole. Abby watched Jenny eyeing the hole and then she moved to one side, which made sense. It was a lot narrower at that point. Jenny took off her high heels and started to run. She leaped well before the edge but had plenty of speed to carry her across. The Captain contrived to catch her anyway. As Jenny put her shoes back on, Abby saw her raise her eyebrows at him.

Abby hadn't much taken to Sazanov. Quite apart from that, UNIT, or whoever Lester said these people were, were clearly responsible for their current plight and so were not her favourite people. She watched this newcomer suspiciously.

"Right," said Captain Sayed, looking at them all. "You'll be Private Lacey?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which makes you two Miss Maitland and Mr Temple."

Connor, standing at her shoulder, nodded. Reluctantly, Abby nodded too.

"OK. I'll take point, the civilians take up the middle, Lacey, you bring up the rear."

"Wait a minute," Abby squared up to him. "Who put you in charge?"

"I did," said Lester in her ear, making her jump. "Now all of you get here right now and Lyle can take charge."

Sayed smirked and took the lead. Connor took her hand as they fell in behind with Lacey at the rear.

It was less than a minute before they emerged on the upper walkway of the drum. Lyle, Nick and Lester were already there. Lester was sitting on the floor

and appeared to be bleeding from one arm. Lyle, squatted in front of him, looked remarkably unharmed, apart from a few cuts and bruises.

Nick's face broke into a broad smile when he saw them all.

"Jenny! You're safe!" he said. Abby watched as he hugged a distinctly surprised looking Jenny. Nick then went bright red. "Abby!" he added and gave her a hug too. Abby winked at Jenny over Nick's shoulder. "Connor!" he said gruffly and shook his hand awkwardly.

"All the merry band here I see," Lester said acidly.

"He just wants to make sure you don't worry about him," said Lyle. He glanced up at them and then his eyes widened in surprise.

"Hamza Sayed!"

"Jon Lyle!"

Lyle stood up and the two men clasped hands.

"I take it, you two know each other," said Lester from the floor.

"We were in the same unit, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. A few years back now, mind," said Lyle. "I should have known that only an idiot like Sayed would get involved in trying to raid the ARC."

"And I should have known that such lax security could only have been your responsibility," returned Sayed, good-naturedly.

"Oh good!" said Lester witheringly. "I'm in Lyle's episode of *This is Your Life*."

With an air of indifference, Sayed peered down to the floor of the drum. "All clear below. What's the plan?"

"There's a small truck in the garage," said Lyle. "We get down to the floor. Maitland, you're driving." Abby nodded. "Temple, you and Lester are getting into the back of it and staying put. Use the first aid kits."

"He clipped my bloody arm," retorted Lester. "I'm hardly walking wounded."

"You can do as you're told for a change," muttered Lyle.

"Cutter and Lewis, you get in the back but sit by the doors. You're going to be opening the main door when we get there so you need to be able to get out quickly. I'm assuming there are more creatures in the tunnel to the entrance so, Lacey, you're in the passenger seat at the front. Keep the way ahead as clear as possible. You, Captain," he grinned at the UNIT soldier, "and I are on the tailgate. Maitland, you drive us to the main entrance and stop. Cutter and Lewis, get out and open the doors then get outside. Sayed and I will get off the truck and cover you. Soon as the truck is through, start closing it from the other side. Everyone understand?"

They all nodded.

"OK. Sayed, you're on point to the truck. I'm rearguard. Lacey, with me. Let's go."

They headed down the sloping ramp. Once at the bottom, Lyle turned to cover the entrance back towards the armoury. The emergency lighting showed nothing beyond the large garage doors.

The truck was right by the doorway. Captain Sayed walked all around it once as the others approached. Abby climbed into the driving seat and Lacey got in beside her. She heard someone bang on the back doors.

"Let's move!" shouted Lyle's voice.

Abby started the truck and they set off. For good measure she switched on the headlights, allowing them to see what was ahead properly. The tunnel led from the drum through the main row of cages and then out.

There was a pack of small compsognathus in the tunnel. Abby mentally classed them with velociraptors and the like although Connor tended to be dogmatic on the point that they weren't raptors at all. They were small, two-legged and carnivorous. They were also incredibly cute, in Abby's opinion at any rate. She hoped too many wouldn't get hurt. The truck was too large for the small dinosaurs to consider a prey animal and they cowered back as it drove past.

The Coelophysis, another non-raptor therapod, also a pack hunting animal, was a different matter. They were about the same height as the truck and clearly considered it fair game. One jumped on the bonnet. Lacey leaned out the window and shot it. There was the sound of more gunfire from the back. Glancing in the wing mirrors, Abby could see that both packs were following them. Lyle and Sayed were picking animals off but the packs seemed undeterred. The half of her mind that wasn't running on adrenaline was fascinated by the apparent cooperation between the two species.

All too quickly they were at the main doors. Abby halted the truck. She kept the engine running.

"I'm getting out," said Lacey. "They're going to need as much firepower as possible back there." And she was gone.

Abby heard the back doors opening and more gunfire. She glanced in the mirrors. Cutter and Jenny were running up the side of the truck. Lyle, Captain Sayed and Lacey had spread out in a shallow triangular formation and were laying down a steady cover of bullets. Abby wasn't a military expert but it looked to her like the UNIT man and Lacey were just keeping the animals cautious and at bay while Lyle picked them off one by one. A lot of the Coelophysis seemed to be dead or injured.

Cutter and Jenny were hanging off a large wheeled handle, turning it slowly.

In front of her the entrance gate started to rise. When it was almost high enough to get through she sounded the horn and leaned out of the window to look at the soldiers. She could only really see Captain Sayed and he waved her on. She frowned at him.

"Move it, Maitland!" Lyle's voice came over her headset.

She pulled her head back in and drove through the doors. Jenny and Cutter were already on the other side, turning a second manual handle. She turned the truck around once she was out so she could see what was happening and so the headlights would illuminate the scene for the soldiers. The three of them were holding their formation and backing up slowly. Sayed and Lacey had to duck their heads to get under the door. As soon as they were through they both dropped to their knees and carried on firing. Lyle, in the centre, slightly further in, continued to back up. She saw him change clips, an operation that took seconds, but something took advantage of that moment. It looked like a compsognathus, though it was difficult to see clearly. Lyle was knocked onto his back. Lacey scrambled to her feet, but Captain Sayed was up first.

"Hold your position, Private," he ordered over the radio.

Abby watched Lacey drop again while the captain dashed forwards to Lyle. He grabbed the compsognathus by its neck and hauled it up. Abby couldn't quite see what happened next but guessed he'd put a bullet through its brain at short range. She did see him throw the body away into the pack. Cutter and Jenny, meanwhile, had stopped turning the handle.

"Should we raise the door?" she heard Jenny call.

"No! Carrying on closing!" came Lyle's voice.

Captain Sayed had hauled Lyle to his feet. It looked like the UNIT soldier was still firing the rifle. His gun arm was jammed awkwardly against his side. Lyle turned and staggered towards the entrance. His chest appeared to be covered in blood. He ducked under it and turned. Both he and Lacey were lying on their fronts now, continuing to fire. Abby watched the door lowering, willing Sayed to emerge. Almost at the last minute he did, rolling under the closing door. Two compsognathus tried to follow. One made it out. It was at the far side, right by Cutter and Jenny. Cutter spotted it and dived forwards with a rugby tackle. He clamped one hand round its jaws and the other pinned its hind legs. He stood up, looking triumphant, the struggling creature in his arms.

Jenny stood by Lester, next to an ambulance in which paramedics were seeing to a vocal and irritated Lyle. About two dozen ARC soldiers were massed around the entrance. They'd be heading in to start clearing up the mess fairly soon. Cutter and Abby were talking to them, Connor trailing along behind. She didn't need to hear the discussion to know what it was about it.

"They'll not kill more than they have to," Lester said, obviously thinking the same thoughts she was.

She couldn't help smiling. "It's funny how the soldiers respect Cutter, even when he's being an idiot."

"They always respect someone with the knowledge to save their lives," said Lester. "The good ones anyway, and I try only to select good ones. Speaking of which..."

He nodded towards Sayed, who was walking towards them. A small clutch of UNIT troops had appeared on the scene and Sayed had been deep in discussion with them ever since.

"Am I getting an official apology?" asked Lester when Sayed was in earshot.

Sayed shrugged. "The General's working himself up to it, I think."

Lester sighed, "I suppose you'd like me to go over and commend your professionalism."

"I'm up shit creek and no mistake," said Sayed. "To be honest, sir, I don't know if a good word from you will help or hinder."

"Right now I have the moral high ground," said Lester. "I think I should capitalise on the fact."

"Sir?"

"Budgets, young man. I'm thinking budgets."

Lester struggled to his feet and set off towards the UNIT contingent.

"James! You're injured," called Jenny.

"I am aware of the fact. I'm hoping it'll make me look pale and interesting."

Jenny rolled her eyes at Lester's retreating back. She looked back at Sayed and then swiftly at her feet.

"So that Professor?" asked Sayed. "He your complication?"

Jenny looked over at Nick, deep in animated conversation with Abby and Connor. "He used to know a woman called Claudia who looked exactly like me. Well apart from the fact she wore less make-up, had lighter hair and was better at being fluffy and accommodating."

"What happened to her?"

Jenny hesitated.

"Hey! I've signed the Official Secrets Act... and seen your collection of dinosaurs."

"Far as I can tell she vanished in some kind of time paradox and I popped up in her place."

"OK," he said, "that's complicated." He paused again. "You like him?"

Jenny smiled. "He's the most pig-headed, stubborn, wilfully blind," she paused searching for an adjective, "*Scottish* idiot."

"I'll take that as a yes."

Jenny smiled ruefully at him and he smiled back.

"Well," he said, "if you do change your mind about dinner..." and he fished a pen and notepad out of his tac vest and started scribbling. "That's my number."

She took it from him. "I'll bear it in mind."

He sketched her a salute, turned, and was gone.

Jenny was still staring at the scrap of paper when Lester got back.

"I'd hang onto that if I were you."

"Why?"

"An informal contact in UNIT could be useful."

Jenny glanced over at the General and his platoon, who were loading themselves back into their cars.

"Your meeting with the General not go well?"

"It went very well. There'll be a full meeting and post mortem next week. By the end of the month, if I play this right, UNIT will be subsidising us and we'll have some autonomy from C19."

"So what do you want Captain Sayed's number for then?"

"C19 won't go down without a fight. I'd like to keep the unofficial lines of communication open."

A medic appeared out the back of the ambulance and looked at Lester. "Time to go, sir."

Lester nodded, "Connor!" he called, "time for our hospital trip."

Jenny watched Abby squeeze Connor's hand quickly before he limped over towards them. Once the ambulance drove off, Jenny walked over to where Nick and Abby stood in the entrance to the ARC.

"Time to go home?" she asked.

"I'm going to stay and supervise this," said Nick. "You two can go."

Jenny nodded at Abby. "Go home. I imagine Connor will be back in a few hours. When do you have to be at his parents?"

Abby looked at her watch. “In a few hours. I’ll wait until morning and then warn them we might be late. I don’t suppose they’ll be surprised.”

She walked off and Jenny was left alone with Nick.

“You don’t need to be here,” she said.

“Yes I do.” He ran his hands through his hair. “They need someone who knows the creatures to help round them up. Don’t worry,” he added, spreading out his hands. “I’m not going to get in the way. Just give advice over the radio.”

Jenny glanced into the gaping mouth of the ARC and wondered if she should stay as well. She was desperately tired and was supposed to be at her own parents’ by midday. She glanced up and caught sight of a lone, forlorn decoration above them.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” she said. “One thing though.”

“What?”

She pointed upwards to the small scrap of green.

“Mistletoe.”

His kiss was firm but chaste.

“Merry Christmas, Jennifer Lewis.” There was a smile lurking around his mouth as he drew away.

“Merry Christmas, Nicholas Cutter.”

Chapter 22

Robin of Sherwood Drabbles

22.1 Winter in Sherwood (Challenge "from a character's viewpoint")

Winter gripped Sherwood. Frost stood out on the bare branches of the trees, a mocking memory of beauty. Moving beyond the fire at the cave mouth was an agony of biting wind and a penetrating damp that cut to your heart.

Scarlet was leaving anyway.

"Don't go," John had said. His voice carried echos of summer warmth, long chilled by bickering and argument.

Much watched, still and silent, frozen solid by the bitter ice wind.

Tuck tended to the fire.

It had been winter in Scarlet's heart since Elena died.

The summer in Sherwood had only ever been an illusion.

22.2 Do not got Gentle into that Dark Night (Challenge "Sherrif's POV")

The Sheriff died in his bed.

Some would have called it peaceful.

The forest was long clear of outlaws.

Gisburne was dead; lost to war and rebellion. His successor also believed in force as the option of both first and last resort.

Hugo continued to amass wealth and remained smugly content with his lot. Robert, enmeshed in ties of blood, achieved little with his aid.

Once Robert de Rainault had had plans. None had been achieved and he knew how he would be remembered.

Surrounded by incompetence, venality and thugs, he raged impotently in death as he had in life.

Chapter 23

I Get Knocked Down

A Primeval Fanon Short Story

Lyle's lungs were bursting. He'd thought he was pretty fit, thanks to the university football team and the OTC, but more than half the class seemed to be ahead of him and he was damned if he was going to fall behind any further. Sandhurst's Old College was somewhere off in the distance, oozing discipline, precision and tradition from every carefully placed brick. Lyle wanted to be a part of that.

He realised more men were passing him by. He'd over-stretched himself at the start of the run, trying to keep pace with the leaders and he was paying for it now. A body bumped into him. He lost his balance and felt himself falling.

"You all right there mate?"

He looked up into dark brown eyes. It was a cheerful London accent clearly belonging to the bald-headed Indian-looking bloke standing above him with a hand outstretched. Well, to be honest, he wasn't so much standing as leaning, with his other hand on his knee, gasping for breath as well.

Lyle took the hand and hauled himself up. "I'll survive. Jon Lyle, by the way."

"Hamza Sayed." Sayed straightened up. "We'd better get going again. Don't want to be the last back."

Lyle looked behind them and was pleased to see there were more people straggling along than he had first thought. "Not much danger of that, I think."

Hamza Sayed clutched on tight to the rock wall and wondered how on earth Lyle had ever persuaded him to come down here. He peered upwards at the ridiculously

shaped twist and curve of the tunnel above him.

"You reached the grinder yet?" asked Lyle's voice.

"The what?"

"It's not really much of a squeeze. Tends to take novices that way though and we call it the grinder for fun. You'll have to wriggle round a bit."

Hamza closed his eyes and reminded himself that the walls were not actually closing in on him and that the not-actually-a-grinder was going to be perfectly safe. He hauled himself upwards, wedged his left foot at right angles in some kind of crack and groped for the next handhold which Lyle assured him was on the wall behind him. His fingers scrabbled at some bare earth. Bits of dirt and gravel dropped down onto his face. He ducked instinctively, a mental image of being buried alive flashing across his mind. His left hand reflexively let go.

"Falling!" he managed to shout.

The line jerked taut, halting his descent.

"Caught you," came Lyle's voice. "How did you manage to bloody fall? I've taken school kids up that climb."

"Momentary lapse," muttered Sayed.

"That's not like you."

"I'm fine." Sayed grabbed the rock face in front of him and began to climb once more. Caves, he decided, were definitely not his thing. Hopefully Lyle would stick to proper outdoors rock-climbing in future.

They were in a bar in Sarajevo but for some reason Danny Boy was blaring out on the speakers.

"Fucking Irish theme bar," slurred Lieutenant Lyle as he downed his third vodka.

Lieutenant Sayed stared at his drink and tried to remember what it was. He was also trying to recall why drinking alcohol, after more than twenty years of abstinence, had seemed like the right thing to do two hours previously. The evening had started out on lager and cider, he remembered that. He took a cautious sip and decided the drink was probably some kind of whiskey.

"You're a rotten Muslim, you know that," observed Lyle.

"You trying to pick a fight, on the day your Dad died and all?"

"He'd have said the same thing. You are totally pissed. Never seen you pissed before."

"I'm keeping you company." Sayed remembered why he was doing this and downed the probably whiskey in one.

"He was a good man, my Dad," said Lyle glumly.

It was never established how the fight started. Lyle claimed, in private, that one of the Paras had spoken ill of his father. Sayed vaguely recalled something about Islam. They both agreed that they had stayed standing which was the important thing as far as the two men were concerned.

Sayed made a mental note that Lyle's opinion didn't actually trump the Prophet's, especially where alcohol was concerned.

"You're crazy," remarked Lyle as he checked Sayed's 'chute.

"Then why are you here with me?"

"Someone has to watch your crazy arse."

"This is hardly a war zone."

Lyle peered at the mountains below them and shook his head. "Couldn't we have done this somewhere sensible first?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

"I'm thinking health and safety, sane behaviour, knowing what you're doing."

"Says Mr. Crazy Cave-diver. Don't go all health and safety on me. I know your reputation. Anyway, we've skydived lots of times. This is just the same with a bit of extra fun involved."

Lyle didn't comment. Sayed was right that this shouldn't be that dangerous. They both had the relevant training and safety equipment.

"Ready?" asked the instructor. He opened the door of the plane. Sayed jumped out. Lyle was damned if he was going to be knocked out and followed.

They opened their arms and legs and let the wingsuits steer them through the air currents.

When they reached the ground safely Sayed was grinning. "I've got to get some more BASE jumping experience. Imagine doing that along a cliff face."

Lyle shook his head. "*You* imagine. You can have the skies and I'll stick to the caves."

The roadside bomb knocked the landrover down, tumbling it off the road and into the dry sand of Afghanistan.

Sayed kicked at the door, forcing it open. He crawled out into the sunlight, aware that Lyle was on his heels. Gunfire stuttered out from somewhere in the boulders surrounding them. Sayed made a dash for cover and heard Lyle opening fire behind him. Once he was wedged between two rocks, he opened fire in turn and watched as Lyle covered the distance between them.

"Driver was a gonner," muttered Lyle.

"I saw."

"Fuel tank is leaking."

"Any other cheerful news for me?"

The rest of the convoy had halted. Soldiers were laying down a covering fire. Sayed and Lyle needed to get back to the main company, but Sayed didn't reckon much for their chances out in the open. They both eyed the landrover thoughtfully. Suddenly a lick of flame sprung up in the fuel around the vehicle.

"We're going to have to make a run for it," observed Lyle.

"I agree."

"Together?"

"As long as you don't want me to hold your hand."

The two men began to run, away from the landrover and back towards their troops. There was a large explosion and they were both knocked flying through the air.

"So this better offer? What is it?" Lyle was curious.

Sayed shrugged. "Desk job with a UN outfit, based in Geneva?"

"Desk job?" Lyle sputtered. In the half light of the campfire Sayed's face was unreadable. "Give me a break! You'll go stir crazy in a desk job."

"Maybe I'm fed up of getting knocked about all the time."

"No you're not. Don't give me that shit." Lyle realised he was getting angry.

Sayed just shrugged. "Whatever mate. There's a promotion goes with it. So it's the quiet life for me from now on."

And that was that. Lyle tried one or twice more to find out why Hamza had chosen to leave active service and each time he came away dissatisfied. Something

about the whole situation didn't ring true.

So they drifted apart.

Lyle was binding up Lester's wounds and wondering how to get the remaining ARC team out of the building safely.

"All the merry band here I see," Lester said acidly.

Lyle turned round to greet Jenny, Abby and Connor and his eyes widened in surprise at the UNIT Captain who followed them.

Chapter 24

Granny Weatherwax and the Soul Traders

Discworld/Echo Bazaar/Firefly crossover

The scent of opium was heavy in the air. Jade fragments spilled across the tables, clattering between the dimly lit jars. Man Suen knew her time was running out and she struggled against the ties that bound her. The soul traders would be returning soon and no one had the first clue where she was.

The sound of coughing broke through the low murmur of voices from the room beyond.

"What d'you call this then? I can hardly breath!" a strident voice complained.

"It's opium."

Sharp footfalls run on the wooden floor beyond. One of the soul traders began a threat but was cut short by thud, then sounds of a scuffle.

A tall black woman suddenly backed into the room. Long curls hung down her back and she wore tight trousers, a leather jerkin and boots. She was holding off three of the traders with fists and the odd well-placed kick. Man Suen watched as two of the men fell beneath her onslaught but the third rushed her and she was pinned to the floor. He pressed his fingers to her throat, a strange leer on his face.

Then an elderly lady walked into the room behind him and clobbered him over the head with her walking stick.

"I do so hate being ignored," she muttered and her eyes narrowed and focused on Man Suen. "What's this then?"

The woman picked herself up off the floor choking. "One of the missing girls, I reckon."

She produced a sharp knife and began to cut Man Suen's bonds.

"See Zoe! I told that Captain Vimes there were soul traders here!"
Zoe smiled at Man Suen. "I don't recall as I heard him contradict you Granny."
Granny humphed. "Didn't send no watchmen with us either."
"Didn't need them, you said."
"We didn't. Still would have been nice to have them."

Chapter 25

In Harm's Way

Part One

"Lorraine can you call up MI5 or MI6 or whoever the relevant people are and tell them I want a look at this file."

Lorraine peered over her glasses at Lester. He was standing in front of her desk with a post-it note in one hand and a look of such studied disinterest on his face that she knew instantly he was hoping for a miracle and trying not to let it show. Then she looked at the file number he'd written on the note. It consisted of numbers and digits, nothing else. Lorraine was mystified. "Can I tell them why?"

"I found a reference to it in Leek's computer files, and something about a breeding programme. If you need to put the frighteners on them to get hold of it, feel free, but use your discretion. I'd rather not tip too many people off."

"I see." Lorraine looked at the file number again and shifted several mental gears into battle-axe mode. "I don't suppose whatever you looked at gave any hint which intelligence agency was holding the file, did it?"

"We should be so lucky. I don't even know who Leek's contacts were, but he must have had some to build that facility of his. Start with requesting the file from all of them in turn, see if that scares anyone out of the woodwork."

"Very good, sir. Do you need it in time for the inquiry?"

"I don't think so. That's looking to be a fairly standard affair. A bit uncomfortable for me and some questions will be asked about our vetting process, but he came with good references. A lot of other important people are going to look very foolish if they make too much out of it. No, keep this separate. I don't want to muddy the waters."

Captain Jon Lyle cursed quietly but fluently from where he lay in a slight ditch about 100 yards from the anomaly.

"At least we got the kids away from there," said Captain Becker.

"Yeah, we got the kids away, shame about their teacher," Lyle shot back.

Lyle's team had been assigned to the shout but Becker had volunteered to help out. Lyle was a couple of men down. Blade had a broken leg courtesy of an over-enthusiastic Triceratops and Kermit was on paternity leave. It wasn't that Lyle objected to having Becker around but it muddied up the chain of command which he didn't like. More importantly, Becker wasn't one of Ryan's men and there was no real way to get around that. It made the lads uneasy.

Becker was right about focusing on the kids, though. Ryan had never let recrimination get in the way of a job so neither would Lyle. The kids had, in fact, already been on the way out of the grounds when the soldiers arrived, but one of the teachers had gone back, curiosity over-riding common sense. The woman's body lay in the mud. One of the raptors was slowly dragging it back to the anomaly.

"Looks like velociraptors to me." It was Taylor, on loan from UNIT. His thick welsh accent echoed loudly over the radios.

"I have seen a velociraptor before," said Lyle. "Anything useful on their behaviour?"

"I don't know. I'm still getting used to this database."

"Well get back to us when you have something," said Becker. "It's not his fault Connor didn't leave a manual," he said quietly.

Lyle scowled. It wasn't Taylor's fault he wasn't Connor. It wasn't Becker's fault he wasn't Ryan. That didn't mean Lyle had to like the situation.

"Can we shoot them?" asked Becker.

"Take a bit of killing, but yes, bullets won't bounce off them or anything alarming. They just do that reptile thing of ignoring injury for a stupid length of time."

Becker said nothing, but Lyle saw the slight shrug from the corner of his eye. He ignored it and turned to his medic.

"What do you reckon, Lieutenant Owen. Might she still be alive?"

To his credit, Ditzy didn't answer immediately, but regarded the still form being dragged across the field. "Unlikely, but possible."

Lyle nodded. "OK men, we're going to try to scare the raptors back through the anomaly but we won't be crying if they don't make it. Careful where you shoot. If that teacher's still alive we don't want to be responsible for killing her.

Aim high and walk forwards slowly. Finn, Lacey, cover the flanks but keep out of line of fire."

His men rose out of the ditch and headed towards the velociraptors in a steady line, firing high as they went. Finn and Lacey fanned out to either side, keeping a wary distance but ready in case the raptors came their way. The raptors paused and eyed the soldiers warily. One bounded forward, standing over the teacher's body and screamed out a challenge. Lyle aimed carefully at its head and shot. It fell heavily across the woman. The second turned and ran.

"No luck with that file, I'm afraid, sir!" Lorraine had spent the better part of a morning on the phone about the file and then had sat back and waited to see what would happen. That was three days ago. No one had got back to her or responded to her follow up calls. She was pretty sure she'd hit a brick wall.

Lester was sitting at his desk, frowning at the handful of letters she had brought in for his attention, but he looked up when she spoke. "That sounds ominous."

"They could just be covering their involvement." Lorraine was accustomed to Lester's withering looks, so she merely endured this one and then played the only card she had. "C19 were the most obnoxious about it sir. But that's par for the course."

Lester looked thoughtful. "It is, but that doesn't mean there's nothing going on. They never liked the autonomy we had, and Leek was with them before he came here."

Lorraine watched Lester thinking.

"Get me Mr. Graham on the phone. I think it's time the two of us discussed this upcoming inquiry frankly."

"Very good sir." Lorraine left the room.

Once she was gone Lester dumped the letters in his in-tray. He would look over them later. Then he fished out his notes on Leek. There was minimal information, just a few snippets he had gleaned from Connor's upload of Leek's computer system. He knew there was a 'breeding programme' but he had no idea who was running it, or what their aims were.

He also knew that there were customers and the first shipment was predicted for early August. It was now late June. It was definitely time he put some heat on C19.

"You did well today," said Becker.

Lyle tried not to snap back at him. He didn't need a pep talk from Captain Becker. He also knew the pep talk was only happening because everyone had got so used to him being the Lieutenant and the Captain's right-hand man that they half-expected him to just return to that space, now there was another Captain on the team. It didn't help that his team had been posted to Afghanistan for a tour. They got back to find the ARC a changed place. Cutter was dead, Jenny had resigned, Connor and Abby and some new bloke called Quinn were missing. There was a new, young, slick and smiling Captain in Ryan's office. The office Lyle had refused to use when he got promoted in the aftermath of Ryan's death. Nothing was right. Everything was difficult and his men were jittery and uncertain as a result.

Major Preston had even warned him that there would be problems, in a roundabout way that involved a lot of swearing. He'd offered Lyle a commission in another unit, said he'd try to move the whole team across, but Lyle had wanted to stick with the ARC. He felt a loyalty to the place and the people, even though most of them had now gone.

He watched as the ambulance was driven away with the teacher on board. Lyle was surprised she had still been breathing when they reached her. But she had been. He was glad they had aimed high. "Paramedics think she'll make it," said Ditzy coming over. "It'll be hit and miss though."

Lyle nodded. "You and Finn stay and watch that anomaly until it closes. The rest of us will get back to the ARC and start on the paperwork."

"Can't you get Lester to do it for you?" asked Lacey.

"What do you think, Private?" Lyle returned shortly. It wasn't that he necessarily objected to discussing his personal life, but he didn't want to get into it in front of the new Captain. He didn't know what Captain Becker thought of homosexuality, nor fraternising with civilian big-wigs and he didn't particularly want to find out.

"Well," said Kathy Burke, "this is nice."

Liz Lester scowled at her across the table. The restaurant was crowded and noisy. The walls had been lined with mirrors, so Liz could see her own face, truculent and sulky under her dark hair. She looked like a spoilt child, she realised. Liz had a horrible fear that service would be slow and this 'friendly meal' she was being forced to have with her mother would go on forever. She tucked a strand of hair that had fallen loose from her pony-tail back behind one ear and tried to look more adult. She needed to aim for cold and disdainful.

"Liz, you do have to say something," said Kathy. "You can't just sit there and sulk for an hour."

"Try me," said Liz.

Kathy sighed. "How's your father doing?"

"Fine."

"I heard there was some sort of inquiry going on."

"Nothing Dad can't handle."

"Are you sure?"

Liz looked up. There was a change in her mother's tone that set warning bells ringing. "What do you know?"

Kathy shrugged. "A man came round asking after him and Captain Lyle."

"What did you say?" said Liz suspiciously.

"Nothing," Kathy returned in an irritated tone. "What do you take me for?"

"Someone who can't hold a civilised conversation with Dad for more than 10 minutes."

Kathy rolled her eyes. "That still doesn't mean I'm about to give out details of his love life to random strangers."

Liz was intrigued in spite of herself. "Who did the man say he was? Journalist?"

Kathy shook her head. "Civil servant he said, MoD. He certainly seemed more Government than Press."

"Why would the MoD be interested in Dad's love life?"

"That's pretty much what I thought, so I didn't say anything."

"Did you ask Dad about it?"

"Imagine the row."

Liz thought about that. "D'you mind if I mention it?"

Kathy shrugged. "Guess not. I have the card he left somewhere. Give me a moment."

Liz glared suspiciously at her mother and nurtured the disturbing feeling that she'd just been played.

Jenny and Lorraine had fallen into the habit of having lunch together on Wednesdays in Jenny's first few weeks at the ARC. She had been bewildered and abrasive, trying to fit in with a team that not only didn't want her but *felt* like it wanted someone else.

Lorraine, a side step away from the scientists, and a side-step towards administration and PR had shown quiet sympathy in the efficient processing of forms, fielding of phone calls and the odd offer of lunch. They had gradually fallen into a routine and, after Jenny left, they kept up with the lunch time meetings.

Jenny sat in the sunshine outside their regular small restaurant and idly looked at the menu. She knew it backwards but the habit of reading and choosing lingered with her.

"Sorry I'm late." Lorraine hurried up and sat down.

"Don't apologise, I know what the place is like. Has a Triceratops run amok in Madame Tussauds?"

"Don't tempt fate. No, nothing so exciting. That official inquiry about the Leek incident is still rumbling on. Given every agency in government wants the whole thing quietly swept under the carpet, it's creating a huge mountain of paperwork."

Jenny shook her head. "Troublesome to the last. If no one wants a fuss, why is it even happening?"

Lorraine shot her a hard look and Jenny realised why, suddenly. In fact it was obvious.

"Cutter pushed for it, didn't he?" she asked. In fact she remembered him ranting about it shortly after Stephen's death, but then Cutter had been ranting about a lot of things at the time and since it hadn't really fallen under her responsibility, she'd quietly filtered it out.

Lorraine nodded. "I think he wanted someone to blame. He made a lot of noise. Someone decided the whole thing had to happen, just for the look of the thing. Cutter may have had the political instincts of a small puppy but he was a professor and he was visible, if nothing else."

Jenny sighed, "And now it has a momentum of its own, I suppose."

"Yes, but there's only a week or two to go, then it's all over. Thank God!"

"Dad? Did you know someone had been round at Mum's asking about you?"

Liz watched her father's face, but it was carefully neutral. "Really?" he said, in a bored tone. She'd hoped to surprise him with the question when his guard was down, which meant just after Coronation Street. It seemed the ploy wasn't going to work.

"Yes, really! MoD they told Mum. She's thinks it's got something to do with the inquiry. They were asking about you and Lyle."

"I couldn't possibly say. It's possible I suppose."

Liz bounced down on the sofa next to him. "Take it seriously Dad! What's this bloody inquiry about if your private life is relevant?"

"My private life isn't relevant. Don't worry about it Liz."

"Dad!"

Lester looked at her sternly. "Keep out of it. I know you want to go in all guns blazing, but it's nothing to do with you and I have it under control."

"But Dad!"

"I'm serious Liz." Lester picked up the Times and stood up. "I'm going to bed. Try to prevent Lyle disturbing me until I've at least had time to read the headlines."

Liz stuck her tongue out at his retreating back. It was clear that she was getting nothing out of her father.

"Has the soap opera ended?" Lyle emerged from the study where he had retreated to watch football on iPlayer the moment Coronation Street started.

Liz waved at the televison. "What do you think?"

Lyle's eyes narrowed. "Have you and your father been arguing? You've got that Lester stubborn face on."

"Not exactly, no. Do you think you could ask him something for me?"

"No. I'm keeping out of any arguments you two decide to have. Where is he?"

"Bedroom." Liz decided not to mention Lester was reading the paper. It would serve him right for not letting her in on whatever the problem was.

Liz sighed as Lyle left and turned her mind back to the problem at hand. Lester was worried and that meant she was worried too. The business card, which her mother had handed to her, flipped over and over in her hands as she thought through the options.

"I heard you turned down a job with UNIT," Lester muttered over his lover's shoulder as they lay spooned together in bed.

"You and your bloody networking. Who told you that?"

"Does it matter? Why did you turn it down?"

"It's not like it came with a promotion and besides, you need me at the ARC."

Lester sighed inwardly. He had a feeling this conversation wasn't going to end well but it was a conversation they needed to have.

"You'd have had your own Company to command, rather than a section, international recognition, better promotion prospects," Lester said.

Lyle shifted in his arms. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Of course not, but I don't want to hold you back."

"Has someone said something?"

Lester frowned at the back of Lyle's head. "What makes you ask that?"

"Is shagging the hired help spoiling your image as the perfect civil servant?"

Lester closed his eyes. He'd been worried the conversation might take this turn. "It is a little irregular. But I wouldn't raise it if I didn't think you were throwing away an excellent opportunity."

"Would it be more regular if I was a leggy blonde from the secretarial pool?" Lyle was clearly going to fixate on the negative.

"It wouldn't be more regular no."

"But?"

Lester sighed out loud this time. "But it would excite less comment."

"The lads need me. The ARC needs me. The whole place was in chaos when we got back from that last posting in Afghanistan."

"Becker didn't have much to work with. Your men had to learn the ropes once."

"Which we did without compromising security or getting the chief Science Officer killed. You need me, Lester."

Lester let the matter drop. Becker's men were working much better now. There was no real scientific team to speak of at present. Certainly the team Lyle knew and trusted had all gone. Lester felt the strains in the morale at the ARC. Captain Lyle, his relationship to Lester, and his tightly-knit team who made it clear that things had worked smoothly before all these newcomers turned up, were more than a small part of the problem. But for once Lester lacked the courage for the fight. Lyle would view it as a betrayal.

The man sitting opposite Liz was youngish and awkward, as if his body had somehow grown too large and wiry for him. Liz had him pegged as junior staff. Presumably his job was to vet her in some way and then pass her on up the chain.

"So, as part of the custody deal after your parent's divorce you are forced to live with your father." The man frowned.

"That's right," said Liz firmly not giving his doubts time to crystallise, "and I want to go back to live with Mum. I'm fed up of him and his boyfriend."

The man coughed. "You'd be prepared to go on record with an account of his lifestyle."

"Sure!" said Liz. "Serve him right." She hoped she wasn't overdoing this. She wanted to appear keen, naive and a little vindictive, not perky and obnoxious.

"Very good," said the man. "I'll arrange for you to talk to someone and we'll write up a statement for you to sign."

"Good oh! I'll wait here shall I?" said Liz brightly. If she was going to achieve anything she needed to steam-roller the forces of bureaucracy into submission. She'd seen her mother do this a couple of times and had cringed with embarrassment, but she had noticed how effective the technique was on the right sort of lower-management bureaucrat.

Oh God! She was turning into her mother.

She looked at her interviewer expectantly, willing him to get up and leave her alone in the room with its inviting looking piles of paperwork. The man looked slightly disconcerted. "Yes, yes. Just wait here. I'll be right back!"

Liz allowed herself a small smile of triumph as he left the office. Once he was gone she nipped quickly around to the other side of the desk and rifled through the drawers, mostly stationary. Then she took a look in the filing cabinet. Her gaze was arrested by a folder with the words "Leek, Oliver" typed on the lable. The name rang a bell of some kind and the folder was bulging with documents. Her fingers reached out to rifle through them.

"What are you doing?"

Liz looked up to realise her interviewer was back. It was a shame the office hadn't had windows into the corridor, then she might have seen him coming. She pushed the filing drawer to and decided to act like a spoiled child, better to get pigeon-holed as a brat than a spy. "I was bored."

"I think," he said frostily, "that this interview is now over. I'm sure we'll be in touch."

Liz scowled, but there was little she could do to avoid being escorted from the building.

"Heard you turned down an offer of a transfer to UNIT." Sayed, UNIT Liaison to the ARC, was drinking lemonade in the sunshine.

Lyle had opted for bitter. It was a beer garden after all. He and Sayed had met at Sandhurst and, now their jobs had brought them back into contact, they often met up for an informal chat. Their superiors tacitly encouraged the friendship.

"Everyone seems to have heard that," grumbled Lyle. "What's the big deal?"

Sayed ran a hand over his bald head in a habitual gesture. "You turned down a perfectly decent offer of advancement. That makes people want to know why."

"I have loyalties."

"You're not the only person capable of fighting dinosaurs you know. I heard Captain Becker was shaping up."

"Oh yes! He'll be fine once he graduates from kindergarten. You've heard a lot."

Sayed stared blankly into his glass for a moment. "I've seen a lot of women throw away their career prospects for one reason or another, usually their partner."

"I'm not a woman."

"You're doing this for Lester though."

Lyle suppressed the temptation to growl. He was doing the right thing, sticking with the ARC. Why did no one else seem to think that?

"So why exactly are we having lunch?" Jenny asked, raising one perfect eyebrow.

"Can't good friends have lunch?" asked Liz.

"We're good friends now are we?" Jenny smiled. "Come off it Liz. I worked for your father for nearly two years. You're not fooling me."

Liz sighed. "Something's up."

"Liz, something is always up. He's a politician. I'd be worried if something wasn't up."

"There's an inquiry."

"We had an insider turn traitor. I've already given evidence. It shouldn't be too much of a problem. It's routine to have an inquiry about these sorts of things, but your Dad didn't do anything wrong."

"But Jenny, they're poking around in his private life, asking about him and Lyle. I just know they're trying to blacken his name."

"That's putting it a little melodramatically. He's allowed to have a private life and this the the 21st century."

"It's some department called C19. I went to their offices and volunteered to testify against Dad and they almost snapped me up before they found me poking around in their filing cabinets."

"C19?" Liz observed a mixture of emotions flit across Jenny's face. "They're bad news Liz. Keep well away. You're lucky they didn't arrest you."

"So you admit this is serious."

"It's serious but you really, really don't want to tangle with C19. Believe me."

"Who are C19 and who was Oliver Leek? I remember his name and they had reports from him in their office."

"Liz, keep away. I'll take it from here."

"You have to tell me, Jenny. Who was Leek? What's going on?"

"I'll deal with it Liz. Keep out."

"No."

Jenny had pulled up around the corner from C19's prestigious London office and squeezed into a tiny parking space. Liz watched her empty her purse into the meter. Then Jenny paused to look back into the car where Liz sat in the passenger seat, arms folded aggressively across her chest. Liz hoped her disapproval of the plan was obvious.

"You'll stay here?" Jenny, it seemed, could scowl just as fiercely as Liz could.

"Yes."

"I'm serious, Liz. You put a foot outside this car and I'm phoning your father. Do I make myself clear? This absolutely isn't a game."

Liz opened her mouth to protest and then shut it again. "Message received. Loud and clear."

Jenny nodded. "OK, here goes nothing."

She pulled a small identity badge out of her brief case and pinned it on her lapel. Then she headed towards the entrance to the C19 building. Liz watched her

march around the corner and then settled down to wait.

It was about fifteen minutes later that a well-dressed man came around the corner and walked over to the car. He appeared to have keys, since he opened the locked door and sat down inside, next to Liz.

"Who are you?" she asked suspiciously.

"None of your business," he replied. "However, you are going to get out of this car and go into the building with my friend."

Liz glanced out of the passenger door window and saw there was a second man standing there, blocking her exit.

"And if I don't?" she asked.

"I'll shoot you."

Liz glanced down, and saw that the man was pointing a small revolver at her.

Part Two

"You can't do this," said Liz in desperate defiance. "I don't care who you are, you can't just kidnap people!"

She was sitting in the back of some kind of van, with her hands cuffed. Jenny sat opposite her, looking pale and alarmed. Their guards weren't saying anything.

"They can't do this, can they?" Liz appealed to Jenny.

"I'm not sure," said Jenny slowly, eyeing the guards carefully. "Technically no, not in the way they've just done it. But a lot of that is our word against theirs. If they'd arrested us while breaking and entering..." Jenny's voice petered out.

"But I'm a minor. They have to inform my Dad. I have to have an adult present!"

"Only if questioned, I think. So far they've not questioned us."

"Where are we going?" Liz turned her attention back to the guards. "What are you doing?"

The men still didn't answer.

They drove on into the darkening skies.

"Liz not home?" asked Lyle as he wandered in.

"Obviously not." Lester barely glanced up from his paper.

"Oh well! Time for some you and me time." Lyle flopped down on the sofa next to Lester and placed an arm around his shoulders.

"I'm reading the paper."

"Which you can do once Liz bursts in and says 'don't mind me, just carry on'"

Lester laughed quietly. "I think she means it, you know."

"I'm sure she does. Doesn't mean I want to canoodle on the sofa while she's fixing bacon and eggs - any more than I want to walk in on her and Juliet when I fetch a beer from the fridge."

"I don't have beer in the fridge."

"Liz and I have an arrangement. We hide it at the back, behind the Waitrose hummous mountain. Anyway, why are you so tense?" Lyle ran a hand thoughtfully along the back of Lester's shoulders. "It isn't this inquiry, is it? I thought you said that was going to be a white-washing job?"

"I thought it was, but someone's decided to play nasty. I'm just trying to figure out why."

Lyle sat back and stared at Lester. "Who've you insulted lately? More than usual, I mean?"

"No one in particular. No, I've obviously asked the wrong question in the wrong place at some moment."

"Any idea which question?"

"Not really, but Leek had some notes about a breeding program and Lorraine is being stone-walled by everyone we've asked about it. My money's there, which probably means C19, which means things could get very nasty. I've no friends there."

"Can you do a deal?"

"That rather depends on the nature of this breeding program, don't you think?"

Lyle grunted. "That's the problem with you. Just as I think you're going to do something efficient and evilly politician-like, you grow a conscience. You're going to fight the inquiry then."

"Right now, it's the only choice I have, but it means I'm going to be rotten company for the next few weeks."

Lyle laughed. "Don't worry, I've had bastard COs in the past. I'll just remember to jump to it when you bark and take my frustration out on the range."

"Jenny! Jenny! Wake Up!" Jenny rose up through confused memories of dark corridors and masked men, to the sound of Liz's voice.

"Mmmm?" asked Jenny sleepily.

"Jenny, wake up, you're having a nightmare!"

Jenny blinked herself awake. She was lying on a narrow bunk bed in a tiny cabin. She and Liz had been locked in there some time early evening. The gentle movement of the room told her they were at sea. "Sorry Liz, did I wake you?"

"I couldn't sleep." Liz whispered. "I keep thinking about Dad. He'll be worried sick. Juliet, too, we were supposed to be going out tomorrow."

Jenny gave her hand a comforting squeeze. "It's not your fault. I knew I shouldn't have let you tag along." Jenny kept her thoughts to herself, but they ran on C19's reputation for black ops. Mostly they reflected that there were places C19 could move them to that were outside UK jurisdiction. There were cover stories that could be constructed that might not seem plausible, but would be plausible enough to prevent people looking too closely. She was frightened, and frightened for Liz, but mostly, she just wondered why C19 were bothering. She and Liz simply weren't that important in the grand scheme of things. Why bother with a kidnap when a sharp reprimand would have served?

"Do you think they've let Dad know?" asked Liz.

"Lester will kill me," muttered Jenny glumly. She'd underestimated the danger and now Liz was in C19's hands.

"At least he can't sack you."

Jenny chuckled, in spite of herself. "No, I suppose he can't."

"Why did you leave Jenny? You didn't say. Is that what the nightmares are about?"

"Not really, though I suppose they could be related. You know Nick died."

"Yeah, Dad said. He was pretty cut up about it."

Jenny had thought long and hard before she resigned, so it wasn't difficult to explain her reasons. "I was fond of Nick too. Very fond of him, I suppose. Too fond, perhaps. I let it all get a bit personal and when he was gone... I don't know. I felt a little as though I'd made a fool of myself and a lot as though I just couldn't really see the point any more."

"Oh," said Liz. "And the nightmares?"

"A nightmare, it's not like I have recurring nightmares, for which I should consider myself lucky, I suppose."

"OK, the nightmare, what was it about?"

Dark corridors, and sinister faceless men; the feeling of being trapped and helpless. Jenny struggled with what to say. “About six months ago, at Christmas, there was a break in at the ARC.”

“Oh! I heard a little about that, Lyle’s mate Hamza had something to do with it.”

“Indeed he did. He took us all captive and then used me as a hostage. Handcuffed me to a radiator.” Jenny could tell her voice sounded sharp and bitter. She was glad of the darkness so Liz couldn’t see her face.

“I didn’t know that. I just caught a chance remark. I assumed he’d been working with Dad and Lyle.”

“He did at the end. He turned out all right but... I suppose I was very frightened. Being taken captive again must have set the memory off.”

In Jenny’s mind Captain Hamza Sayed was defined by a few short moments. The impression of strength and ruthlessness and power lingered in her mind and she knew that she always froze up a little when his name was mentioned. It wasn’t really fair on him. He’d also been courteous and gentlemanly. He took her out to dinner once, but the fear always muddled her emotions whenever she thought about him. She’d never phoned him back for a second date.

“What are you doing with me?” Liz demanded.

She had been frogmarched up to the ship’s bridge. Beyond the windows it was early morning. The pale light showed instrument panels, charts laid out on the table and, most importantly, a working GPS system.

“Miss Lester?”

She assumed the man in front of her was the ship’s captain. He was in a naval uniform of some kind and had an air of authority. She judged that he must be in his forties or fifties with a thick set face that was beginning to show the first traces of lines.

“So what if I am?”

He nodded at an aide who began dialing a number on a bulky satellite phone.

“What’s going on?” Liz asked.

The captain ignored her, listening to the phone until it was answered.

“Mr. Lester?” he asked. “Very good. I have your daughter here.”

“That’s my dad on the phone?” asked Liz, her mind racing. “Let me talk to him.”

"You say hello and then I take the phone back," said the Captain. "I hope that's clear."

The phone was held to her ear. "57 degrees north, 9 degrees west," Liz shouted the numbers off the chart. "Do you get that Dad? 57 degrees north, 9 degrees west!"

The phone was snatched away. She half expected someone to hit her and rocked back in anticipation, but the Captain just pursed his lips in disapproval. "Take her away," he said.

As she was dragged out she could see him lifting the phone once more. "Mr. Lester, my instructions are very clear. No harm will come to your daughter if you play nicely."

"What's that all about?" asked Lyle suspiciously.

"None of your business." Lester was thin-lipped.

"No? Sounded like some kind of blackmail to me! Was it about Liz? She didn't come home last night, I just checked her room."

"Keep out of it, Jon."

"James, she's my family too, you can't pretend she isn't. What's going on?"

"I said keep out of it!" Lester's expression was dark. Lyle firmly closed out of his thoughts.

Lyle opened his mouth.

"No! Keep out!" Lester tore the top page off the notepad on the hall table and brushed past Lyle.

Lyle remained gaping in the hallway a moment. Then he eyed the notepad thoughtfully and pulled a soft pencil from the holder.

Lester was writing his resignation letter when he felt Lyle's breath on the back of his neck.

"Don't do that, Jon. Sneaking up on me isn't funny."

"Blackmail isn't funny either. What are you afraid I'll do if you tell me? Spill the beans to the police?"

"Go on a one-man hunt to get her back."

"Oh!"

"I haven't lived with you for two years without getting some insight into your character."

Lyle's arms sneaked round Lester and Lester could feel him eyeing the letter over his shoulder.

"Resignation eh?" said Lyle. "It's Saturday morning. No one's going to get it until Monday. Can you hold off until then?"

"No, I can't, Jon, and I won't."

"It won't make any difference."

"It'll make you think there's a chance you can do something. It's too dangerous, Jon. We handle this my way, no heroics."

"Just me. Just the weekend. Don't give up, James. You know I wouldn't ever put Liz in danger and she'll kill you if you just give up like this."

Lester sighed, folded the letter up carefully and placed it in an envelope. It signalled the end of his career. Something might be salvageable, once Liz was back and safe, but it would generate too many questions. He wondered if there were any career options in civil service memoirs.

"Liz would not want you to do this," whispered Lyle.

"She's only sixteen. Liz doesn't want a lot of things that are going to happen anyway."

"That's not true. You know her. She's level-headed and sensible with the determination of a pit bull. She'd never, ever, ever, agree to this. Not in a million years and she'd be right. You've got resources, James. You can fight this."

Lester badly wanted Lyle to be right. Not just because of his career, but also because of the ARC and all the people there who depended on him and the political will that was needed to keep hunting for Connor, Abby and Quinn. Not to mention the sick dread that, even if he did play nice, C19 had little reason to return Liz to him, beyond a certain graciousness to a defeated enemy. C19 did not strike him as particularly gracious. Did he dare risk it? How much, exactly, did he trust Lyle? Lester put the letter carefully down on the desk, smoothing it out. "Very well, Jon. I'll hand the letter in, in person, on Monday."

Lyle patted him on the shoulder. "Good decision."

"I hope so. This isn't some game Lyle. It's my daughter's life on the line... and Jenny's too, it would seem."

"Jenny!"

"They say they have her as well."

Captain Hamza Sayed had been woken up from a well-deserved lie-in to hear Lyle's urgent tones on the end of the line. "Sayed mate? It's Lyle! I've got a problem."

Hamza had pulled strings like mad, working from the ominous designation, C19, and a grid reference.

Now he had a name, Black Rock Island. Black Rock Island appeared to be a lump of rock off the coast of St Kilda. For some unknown reason it was ostensibly Argentinian, but they had leased it to C19 for a hundred years. It wasn't far from the grid reference Liz had given. Hamza also had permission for a single unacknowledged operation with minimal resources. It would have to do.

"You should tell Juliet," Lyle said as he packed his bag. Sayed was picking him up in an hour.

"I shouldn't have told you. Why the hell would I tell Juliet? The more people who know the riskier this gets, and it's already a lot riskier than I'd like."

Lyle managed to shrug, rather than grabbing Lester by his carefully tailored lapels and shaking him. "Your choice, but I don't want to be the person who explains to Liz why Juliet was kept in the dark. And they had a date this evening, you're going to have to tell her some excuse."

Lester waved a dismissive hand. "Leave it to me. I'll think of something."

Lyle stood up and pulled Lester into his arms. "This is all going to be OK."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"Trust me."

Lester closed his eyes. Lyle kissed him gently then let him go.

Liz sat and glared at Jenny across the dinner table. It was bad enough that they'd been kidnaped, tied up, shipped about and then locked in an, admittedly rather luxurious, cell but now, it seemed, they were expected to make polite chit-chat with their captor.

He'd introduced himself as Mr. Caine. He had smooth black hair, flecked with grey and was wearing a suit that Liz knew, from long exposure to her father, was well-tailored. Jenny kept glancing side-long at him and a small smile constantly hovered at the corners of her mouth as she decorously sipped wine and nibbled at her salmon.

Liz scowled at the pair of them.

"How long do you propose to keep us here?" asked Jenny. Liz was startled. Jenny's eyes were still lowered and she was gazing up at Mr. Caine from under carefully made up lashes but there was an edge to the question that the flirtatious delivery didn't disguise.

"Only until James Lester decides to play nice."

"Really," Jenny smiled. "And if he doesn't? You can hardly keep us indefinitely. People may be looking for us."

"Oh, I have no doubt someone is. But we are a long way from London here and outside UK jurisdiction. I'll doubt they'll find us and even if they do they will have to get past my pets."

"Pets?"

"Miss Lewis, you will have to allow me some means of maintaining my air of dashing mystery. However, I would caution both of you against any attempt to escape."

"Aww fuck!" muttered Lyle as he pulled on the wing suit. "You arranged it this way deliberately didn't you." He scowled at Captain Sayed.

"No choice mate," Sayed grinned as he checked Lyle's parachutes. "No idea what surveillance equipment they have and these are the least likely to trip anything."

"I hate fucking wing suits."

"Cheer up mate. There are caves once we get down there."

Lyle stared Sayed hard in the eye. "You will suffer in those caves, Captain Hamza Sayed."

"Looking forward to it Captain Jon Lyle."

"Right! Let's do this thing!"

They jumped from the UNIT airplane and began their descent towards Black Rock Island. Lyle only hoped it was the right place.

"Aww fuck! I hate caves."

"Your infiltration route," said Lyle cheerfully.

"Do I detect a note of smugness in your tone?"

"What? Me? Smug?"

Sayed hit Lyle gently. "We need to be careful. UNIT pulled some plans from when the place got built, but we've no idea what security systems they have."

"What was that?" Hamza Sayed didn't consider himself particularly nervy but something was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. If he'd been Lyle, he'd have said his thumbs were pricking.

"Your imagination. Pull yourself together, caves aren't that bad."

"It's not the caves, Lyle, we're being stalked."

Lyle snorted quietly.

"Honestly, just hold still and listen and stop being a smart arse."

"You're imagining..."

"Shut the fuck up, Lyle. I don't like caves but I've been on enough ops not to let a twinge of claustrophobia get to me. Now listen!"

Lyle straightened up and listened. Hamza watched him rub his thumbs thoughtfully. Then Lyle turned slowly to look behind them, but the caves were dark beyond the beams of their torches.

In the silence nothing moved. Lyle turned back and glanced sideways at Hamza. They shared an understanding.

Hamza gestured onwards and they started to move, cautiously and quietly this time. Behind them came the faintest of sounds.

Hamza switched off his torch and ducked behind an outcrop, gesturing Lyle to carry on. Hamza could almost see Lyle grimace, but the man knew better than to argue with an order.

A shape moved through the darkness. Hamza stilled his breathing. It was rapidly obvious it wasn't human and Hamza was forced to hope that it's sense of smell either wasn't up to much, or that his scent was covered by the artificial fibres of the wing suit.

The only light he had was from Lyle up ahead but it cast just enough for him to see a silhouette. His mind said cat, though he wasn't quite sure why because

it was big. It was huge. He'd seen stuffed polar bears that were smaller than this and polar bears were high up his list of animals not to meet in the wild.

The vast shape padded silently up the tunnel. When he listened hard, Hamza could hear Lyle's faint footfalls, but this beast was making no sound. Hamza raised his gun, sighting where he hoped the head might be. Then he heard a low rumbling growl. He had a brief impression of white teeth and the the shape jumped straight at him.

Part Three

Lyle had walked maybe twenty yards up the tunnel when there was a sudden sound of gunfire behind him.

He turned and ran back. His torch showed Sayed standing over a sleek cat-like creature.

"That thing's huge!" muttered Lyle.

"You're telling me, mate. Quick and quiet too. Wouldn't want to tangle with a pack of them. Any idea what it is?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

"You're the one who's always hanging out with extinct species. D'you reckon it could be a sabre-toothed tiger?"

"Nah! I've seen one of them, this is nothing like."

It was smaller and more compact than the smilodon had been, but still big. Something winked at Lyle from around it's neck and he crouched down to look more closely.

"It's been tagged."

"What?" Sayed crouched by him and looked at the thin collar the creature wore. "Looks like a heart-rate monitor."

"But why would you..." Lyle's voice tailed away. "Fuck! They'll be sending a team down here to check on sonny boy and once they see the bullets the hunt will be on."

Claxons blared out causing everyone in the dining room to jump.

"Excuse me," said their host. He stood and walked towards the door. Liz seized the opportunity presented by his turned back to lift a steak knife from the

table.

"Take them back to their rooms," ordered Caine.

Liz debated internally as they walked along the corridors. When was the best time to act? If there was an alarm on now, it was probably as good a moment as any. But they'd need to dispose of their escort somehow. She decided to make her move when they were just outside their room. They'd could shut him in once he opened the door.

Liz braced herself dropping the knife gently into her hand. When their escort ran a card through a reader next to the room they'd been locked in, Liz stepped up close and pushed him suddenly against the wall, pressing her knife against his throat.

"Jenny! Open the door!" she ordered.

"Liz?"

"Just do it."

To her credit, Jenny pushed the door open.

"What do you think you will achieve by this?" demanded the man, but he looked nervous.

"Why should I tell you?" returned Liz. "Go on! Into the room! Jenny take the card!"

She shoved him roughly into the room and slammed the door shut.

"What are we going to do?" asked Jenny.

"Don't know. Something though, anything's better than hanging about worrying."

Jenny pursed her lips. "And the pets?"

"Yeah, well." Liz shrugged and tried to look nonchalant.

Jenny looked up and down the corridor. "Let's assume there are no pets actually walking these corridors. See what we can find out. Make the most of the opportunity." She flashed Liz a smile and Liz distinctly saw her square her shoulders.

Liz looked up and down the corridor. She realised that she was shaking slightly, alarmed at her own audacity and the danger. "Which way?" she asked.

"Well, we came from that direction," said Jenny. "If we're going to explore, let's head that way."

Lyle and Hamza crouched in the tunnels, listening to the shouts and stamping feet. Fortunately the system had been formed naturally which meant it had a number of unexpected turns and crannies. Lyle was an expert at finding such places. They were about three feet up a tunnel wall, jammed into a crack. Hamza loathed everything about it. He could feel the walls closing in.

"They'll find us eventually," muttered Lyle.

"We wait until that first batch have got further out, then we slip in behind them."

"They'll still have the main entrance covered."

"They always would have done, mate. It's the best chance we've got."

"I hate fubar ops."

Hamza glanced at his watch. "OK, it's been five minutes. Waiting won't make us any prettier."

They dropped down from their hiding place and began to jog quietly through the tunnels.

There were five guards on the doors. In fact there were five guards positioned behind a small defensive barrier that ringed the entrance to the complex. The entrance itself was set into the solid rock of the cave wall. It wasn't going to be easy to get in. Hamza began producing explosives from various pockets.

"That's going to be a bit noisy isn't it?" asked Lyle.

"They already know we're here. All we got now is speed." Hamza eyed the entrance carefully. The guards weren't going to be easy to deal with.

Lyle was obviously thinking the same thing. "We should decoy some of the guards off into the caves. Five's a lot for the two of us to take out, even with surprise on our side. They have the advantage of position."

Hamza paused. He might be able to persuade Lyle to act as decoy, but Lyle's ties to Liz were strong. Hamza knew Liz a bit, but not much, and his connection to Jenny amounted to hand-cuffing her to a radiator and then being told politely to get lost. He'd taken her out to dinner, once, since and it had felt a little like the start of something, but then it fizzled. She had a complicated relationship with a professor and a wary look in her eyes whenever she glanced his way. So it was

clear that Lyle was going to be the one inside the complex searching for his step-daughter and the beautiful but aloof Jennifer Lewis. Hamza decided to accept the inevitable with good grace. "Good idea. I'll draw them off. You go rescue that step-daughter of yours." He handed over the explosives and checked his gun.

"Don't get caught," admonished Lyle.

"As if."

Hamza took a run past the entrance and sent a spray of bullets in the direction of the guards. Then he headed for a second cave entrance opposite. He could hear shouts but, as yet, no movement. He popped his head out. The guards were gesticulating and talking into radios. He offered up a silent complaint, chased it with a swift and contrite prayer, and then popped out again, moving slowly towards the guard post, using cover carefully and choosing his shots. The guards had the light behind them which meant they were silhouetted and easy to see. He managed to hit one, which was good. It would add urgency to the others' attempts to get rid of him. He grunted with satisfaction when he saw two slip out round the edge of the defences, obviously in an attempt to flank him. He began to retreat drawing them away and to his tunnel. He was just reaching it when he saw a blur of movement and one of the guards screamed. The other started to run towards him at full tilt, but he was turning now to fire back the way he came.

Hamza didn't pause to think too hard but took to his heels and headed deep into the tunnels.

There were two guards left outside the door. Lyle wasn't quite sure what had happened. He'd seen the blur of movement, and all the guards had opened fire. Lyle saw what he hoped was Sayed disappearing into the tunnels at the far side, a guard on his heels. Lyle told himself not to worry. Sayed knew what he was about, even if he went into a funk whenever he got underground.

Lyle considered his options and then selected a small projectile explosive from the kit Sayed had handed him. He edged forward across the space, trusting to the low light levels to keep hidden. As soon as he was close enough, he primed his grenade and lobbed it over the heads of the guards. Five seconds later he was on his feet and running towards the defensive barrier. One of the guards was still alive and struggling to his feet. Lyle shot him quickly and then turned his attention to the lock.

Hamza had been running for about five minutes. He stole occasional glances behind him but couldn't see what was following. However he had a distinct sense that it was on his heels and that it was, in fact, toying with him.

He had heard the second guard scream. A high and loud scream that had ended in a gurgle.

Hamza rounded a corner and something heavy landed on his back. He couldn't see what it was in the dark. It must have been about the size of a man but there was skin against his face that felt leathery. He had a distinct sensation of long fingers on his shoulders and a haze of warm, smelly breath blew past his ear. Teeth sank into his neck. He shouted out loud and instinctively punched backwards with one hand. He felt the weight drop and staggered round.

He let off a burst of fire and then thumbed the torch mounted on his gun. He wanted to see what he was facing. In the beam of light he saw three creatures crouched in the tunnel. They were about the same man-sized. They had no fur and looked, vaguely human like, in the way they moved and crouched. Thin leathery wings stretched between their limbs. The lead creature opened it's mouth and snarled, revealing rows of sharp teeth.

Hamza fired again, into the gaping mouth this time, and was pleased to see the thing topple backwards, but the other two leaped for him. He stepped back, firing, but was amazed to notice his bullets seemed to be bouncing off the leathery hides. He'd thought only aliens had bullet-proof skin. One creature spread out its limbs and glided through the air on the skin stretched between them. Hamza continued firing and was relieved to see it drop to the ground, the wings in shreds. Then the next was upon him, claws raking his body armour. He punched with the butt of the gun, wincing at the pain in his shoulder. It fell back, giving him a moment to reach the knife at his belt. Then he stepped in close and thrust, letting the sharp point, with his weight behind it slip in where the skin seemed to stretch over the creature's throat. The knife slipped home and it fell back to the floor.

He pulled the bloody thing free and turned to the other creature which lay shrieking on the floor, limbs flailing. He stabbed it through the throat and then paused to examine the bodies. The creatures looked like bats with enlarged ears and tiny eyes. Their hide was leather and was thick and layered over most of the body, almost forming plates of armour, but where it stretched thin it was vulnerable. He was just lucky the throat was one of those places.

He shrugged off his pack and began to pull out his first aid kit. The adrenaline high was already wearing off and his arm felt heavy and limp. He wondered what

other monstrosities were lurking in the tunnels.

"I heard an explosion," whispered Liz.

"We head in that direction, then," said Jenny firmly.

"How do you make that out?" sputtered Liz.

"Either they're fighting someone in which case we want to meet up with them or they're up to something and we want to find out what it is." Jenny hoped she was sounding braver than she felt. She couldn't honestly see Liz's escape attempt ending well but they were escaping now and needed to make the most of it they could.

"What do you think you're doing!" shouted a voice. "Drop that gun, raise your hands and turn around slowly!"

Liz and Jenny looked at each other in surprise and alarm. Jenny turned cautiously, but there was no one behind them.

"Round that corner," whispered Liz.

Carefully they walked to the corner. Jenny fished in her pockets and pulled out a small make-up mirror. She crouched down and pushed it round the corner at ground level, feeling Liz's chin resting on her shoulder to get a better look. In the mirror they could see Lyle. He was facing the mirror, but a soldier was between him and them. The soldier's back was facing them, but even so, Jenny was pretty sure he was carrying a gun.

Before Jenny could react, Liz had barrelled around the corner. Lyle's mouth dropped open as Liz weighed into the soldier with two sharp punches and a well-aimed kick. As the man collapsed, Liz grabbed the gun from his unresisting fingers.

Jenny walked round the corner. "Good afternoon Lyle, what are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you two."

"Going well, is it?" asked Liz.

Lyle had a large map spread out on the wall of the corridor. "I got this map from UNIT."

"UNIT are here?" Jenny hoped she didn't sound too eager, but the thought of a small regiment of well-disciplined soldiers was distinctly comforting.

"I'm afraid not. It was just me and Sayed."

"What happened to Sayed?" Jenny felt a sick dread. It had been bad enough when Nick died. She hardly knew Captain Sayed and their acquaintance hadn't started well but, well, he had been a friend of sorts. She didn't want his death on her conscience.

"We got separated. Don't worry, he's a pro. Anyway, this is the best map UNIT have of this place. Someone managed to wangle the construction plans out of C19."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Bet you anything you like the internal layout bears no resemblance to this."

"I already discovered that. But, this internal harbour here must be in roughly the same place. It exploits a natural sea cavern, according to this." Lyle tapped a large open area on the map.

"What's the plan?" asked Liz. "We're not going to get far in a boat."

"We've got a beacon. If we can get out into the ocean there's a UNIT boat can pick us up."

"That assumes we don't have a dozen men in speed boats chasing us."

"So we're going to have to be quiet and discreet."

Jenny groaned looking between Lyle and Liz. "We're doomed."

"What about Sayed?" asked Liz. "Don't we have to wait for him?"

"Hopefully he'll meet us at the harbour. If not, we don't wait. Right now they're blackmailing your Dad so it's important we get you out. If Sayed gets caught there will be a lot of inter-departmental bullshit but he'll be fine eventually."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Jenny, dubiously.

"Pretty much. UNIT have a lot of clout and Sayed, bless him, isn't important enough for C19 to risk making a stink over."

"Or UNIT to risk making a stink over either, for that matter," pointed out Jenny.

"UNIT stick by their own, or so I've heard."

"It's just..." persisted Jenny.

"Either way, he'll try to meet us at the harbour, so that's where we're heading."

Jenny couldn't argue with that.

"I'll take this gun," said Liz, unexpectedly. They had tied up the soldier she had attacked. His gun was lying discarded in the corridor.

Lyle looked at her appraisingly. "You know how to fire that thing?"

"The CCF fire a variety of the SA80. It looks pretty similar."

"I don't think..." began Jenny.

"Not a lot of choice," Lyle overruled her. He turned to Liz. "You know the rules. Don't point it at anyone if you're not actually going to fire it."

"Don't take off the safety unless you intend to fire. Every shot should be aimed. Yeah I know the rules. We going to do this?"

Lyle nodded. "I'll take point. Jenny in the middle. Liz, you're rear guard."

"Lester will kill us for letting her have a gun," Jenny whispered to Lyle as they set off.

"She's a sensible kid and she's been around guns. Our chances are better this way. I'd kill myself if she got hurt because she didn't have a gun."

"And if she gets hurt because she does?"

"Like I said. She's a sensible kid. I trust her."

"I can handle a gun! Let me have it!"

"She practices."

Jenny glanced back at Liz. Somehow the gun made her look even younger than her years. A frightened girl, clutching something big and black and ugly.

"Well this certainly isn't on the map," whispered Jenny.

They were in a large cavernous warehouse area, with a distinct animal smell in the air. It was dark, but Lyle's torch showed a door on the far side.

Lyle consulted his GPS and cross-checked with the chart. "Works in our favour though. All this warren of corridors is gone and the harbour should be just across the room."

Lyle flashed his torch around the room and a creature from Jenny's nightmares suddenly flung itself into the beam of light, crashing against the side of a cage. Jenny gave an involuntary gasp and stumbled backwards.

"What was that?" asked Liz.

"Some kind of predator from the future," muttered Lyle. "Shit! What is this place?"

"Oh God!" said Jenny. "We know C19 were behind Leek. This must be another storage area. Like the one where..." she tailed off.

"Where what?" demanded Liz.

"Where Stephen died," said Lyle grimly. "Right we get out of here and we report this place to Lester, asap."

They started out across the floor.

"What else is in here do you think?" asked Jenny.

Lyle flashed his torch over the cages. Jenny got a blurred impression of scales and fur and teeth. "All sorts of shit," muttered Lyle grimly. "Come on!"

"Wait a moment!" Jenny had spotted a small desk as the torch beam swept past. It was full of paperwork. Her curiosity and administrator's instincts were aroused.

"Jenny, we don't have time for this!" hissed Lyle as she headed over.

Then the door at the far end of the room opened. Jenny could hear voices. Any minute now someone would turn on the lights. Jenny looked around frantically. There was another door behind the desk. Without thought, she darted forwards, opened it and stepped through.

There were muffled sounds of shouts and, more alarmingly, shots. Jenny hastily stepped away from the door, aware that less than an inch of wood wasn't much protection against high velocity bullets. She realised she was in the main corridor on Lyle's map. She could hear more shouting. Hopefully that meant Lyle and Liz were still alive, but she couldn't go back the way she had come.

Somewhere feet were running, coming her way. Jenny eyed the labels on the doors that lined the corridor, as she hurried away from the noise: office; armoury (locked); infirmary; storage unit. Jenny tried the door to the storage unit and was relieved that the handle turned. She pushed her way in, closing the door.

"Hello Jenny. Long time no see." The voice was a bare whisper.

Jenny had a sudden vivid flashback to a darkened room and a man in a balaclava. She whirled round to see Hamza slumped against one wall, what looked like a makeshift bandage around one shoulder.

She gasped, in spite of herself. "You're hurt!"

"Ran into something nasty in the tunnels."

Jenny crouched down and looked at the dressing cautiously.

"If you could manage to tie it a bit tighter, things would look up," whispered Hamza. "If you don't mind."

"No I don't mind. What do I need to do?"

"It's worse than it looks really. The bleeding has stopped, but I'm worried about the bandage slipping."

Hamza was wearing a bullet proof jacket over a black shirt. Jenny had to help him off with the jacket and then push the shirt away. He'd tied the bandage across his body from the bite where his shoulder joined his neck down under the opposite arm. Jenny pulled it tight and tucked the ends in, resisting the temptation to let her hands linger on his smooth skin. Hamza's breath drew in sharply as she tugged, but he managed a smile to match her own.

"It's good to see you again, Jennifer Lewis."

"It's good to see you, Hamza Sayed."

"Should we move?" whispered Jenny. She glanced anxiously at the storeroom door.

Hamza shook his head. "Too much activity still. We need to sit this out."

"Oh well, at least there isn't an anklyosaurus out there."

"Or that bloody musical Christmas card."

They both laughed quietly. Jenny eyed Hamza thoughtfully. It was difficult, now, to imagine being afraid of him. If anything she felt reassured by his presence.

"How's your complicated professor?" he asked suddenly. There was a slight catch in his voice. Jenny wondered if she detected a hint of jealously.

"He died."

"Oh." Hamza paused. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's OK. I've got used to the idea and there was never really anything between us, just lots of complications."

"It's still tough to lose a colleague."

"Yes," Jenny agreed, thinking of all the colleagues both lost and genuinely dead. "Yes, it is."

Hamza fell silent, staring thoughtfully at the gun cradled in his lap.

Liz was running. She wasn't sure where exactly, she just kept Lyle in sight and hoped for the best. Behind them, somewhere, were pursuers.

When the lights had flooded on in the warehouse, Lyle had shot out the lock on the nearest cage and shouted, "Follow me!"

Liz hadn't watched what happened next. She was busy filing the sounds of animal shrieks and human screams somewhere safe for examination at a later point. The important thing was that it shouldn't distract her now. She'd done this before, she could do it again. Get out of danger and then deal.

Lyle slowed up. "You OK?" he asked.

"Yes." Liz scowled at him. "That was a raptor of some sort, wasn't it."

Lyle nodded. "Nasty buggers but they're not bullet proof. It'll only keep C19 occupied for so long."

"Right. So what do we do? We need to find Jenny."

Lyle's mouth straightened into a line. "You're the priority."

"We can't leave Jenny!"

He looked her in the eye and the contours of his face softened a little, but his tone when he spoke was grey. "I'm sorry Liz, but the same argument applies as with Sayed. You're the Ace card here. Chances are, once we get you out they'll both be safe."

"You don't know that!"

"Liz, I do know that if you fall back into C19's hands we've lost. I also know that if we fanny around trying to find Lewis and Sayed then you'll almost certainly fall into C19's hands. We're barely ahead of the game as it is."

"This sucks!"

"You're right about that. It sucks big time. But that's the way it is."

"OK, where now?"

"Harbour's back the way we've come. We're going to have to double-back and be ultra-cautious. We'll try skirting round that big warehouse room, maybe listen up at the door in case it's empty and we can cut through."

"Check every door!" The order echoed down the corridor.

"Can we hide?" asked Jenny.

Hamza laughed and stood up, helping her to her feet. "Somehow I don't think so. Looks like our luck may have given out."

The door handle turned and Jenny found herself shoved behind Hamza, trapped between his back and the wall. The sudden sense of security hit her so hard she clutched onto him in surprise.

Hamza had already dropped the gun and raised his hands by the time the door opened. Their captor paused and then called over his shoulder. "I've found two of

them!"

Jenny and Hamza were led back into the warehouse area. This time the lights were on and several armed men were standing around. Loose tarpaulins had been thrown over the cages. There was blood on the floor. Jenny hoped it didn't belong to Liz or Lyle. A lean man with an air of authority looked them up and down. His gaze drifted over Jenny and then, apparently, dismissed her to fix on Hamza.

"Who are you with soldier? How many of you are there?"

Hamza shook his head. "Don't give me that. It's not my job to make your life easier."

The lean man nodded towards one of the others and a tarpaulin was pulled off a large box. Jenny recognised the creature inside as a velociraptor, two-legged, with a tearing claw on each foot. It screeched and threw itself against the bars of the cage. Jenny recalled many lectures from Abby on animal care. This one was probably hungry, angry and frightened all at once.

Hamza seemed unfazed. "Dinosaurs eh? I assume you're expecting me to be impressed."

The lean man looked bored. "Not impressed by dinosaurs? What about this?" A second tarpaulin was pulled free and Hamza was pushed up against the bars of the cage housing the predator. It immediately flung itself forward, snarling mouth open wide.

"Not a dinosaur expert, mate. What is it, a velociraptor?"

"It's the most efficient killing machine ever to evolve on Earth." Jenny looked around sharply when she heard the cultured tones of Mr Caine. "It's going to wipe out humanity, puff! like it never existed."

Hamza appeared to eye the predator thoughtfully as he was pressed up against it. "Now that's quite a claim. What makes you so sure?"

"Just passing on the information. Good evening Miss Lewis. You'll forgive me if I'm not entirely over-joyed that it is you they've re-captured. You are something of the second prize in this little game."

Jenny suppressed the desire to grind one of her high heels into his foot. "I'll survive," she said mildly.

"Now I think this handsome soldier of yours owes us a little information in return."

"It doesn't work like that mate."

Caine nodded. The man pulled Hamza back slightly and then slammed him against the bars of the cage, again. “How many men do you have with you? Who do you represent?”

“Oh fuck off,” said Hamza. “I’ve already been asked this.”

“Really, you *are* being most obstructive.” The soldier pulled Hamza back once more at which point the lean man stepped forward smartly and punched him in the stomach. Hamza doubled up and fell to the ground.

“What are you trying to do here?” asked Jenny, desperate to create a distraction.

Caine raised his eyebrow, “Guess.”

Jenny looked about her. “Well, you’re shipping creatures somewhere.”

“How observant.”

“Destabilsation,” said Hamza from the floor. “You set something like that free, somewhere where the infrastructure’s a bit wobbly and all hell will break loose.”

“Very well deduced, Mr. Sayed. Kneel him up. I’d really like him to give me some information and if he won’t I want him shot.”

“You’re not going to shoot,” said Hamza, sounding bored. “We’re both members of Her Majesty’s Armed Forces. You shoot me, and the paperwork, if nothing else, will be a total nightmare.”

“Since you now know what the plan is, I really can’t afford to let either of you get back to ARC or Lester’s allies. This is C19. You’ll find a lot of the normal rules don’t apply.”

“There’ll still be paperwork. Always is. You’re British after all.”

Caine laughed mercilessly. “Shoot Miss Lewis, start with the knees. That will give our toy soldier something to think about.”

With a chill Jenny saw the gun turned upon her.

Part Four

At that moment a door banged open and Lyle charged in, firing as he came. Instinctively Jenny dropped to the ground. There was a horrific and deafening sound of gunfire and screams, then silence.

When Jenny raised her head, she was surrounded by bodies. Hamza was still kneeling where he had been put. Across from her stood Lyle. Next to him, clutching the big ugly gun was Liz. Her face was white as a sheet and set in a grimace of horror.

"Liz, are you all right?" Jenny clambered to her feet, all else temporarily forgotten.

"I think I just killed someone."

Lyle reached Liz before Jenny did. He enveloped her in a hug for a moment and then stood back, took her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. "You did what you had to Liz. It's not pretty, but sometimes the world leaves us no choice."

Jenny bit her lip. She badly wanted to hug Liz too and tell her it would all be all right, that she hadn't killed anyone. But when Jenny looked at the bodies on the floor and the unsightly pools of blood... Her mind went into a coldly calculating place that noticed the direction of the spatter. Liz had almost certainly just killed someone, and lying to her probably wouldn't help the situation; she was too sharp and brittle to be brushed off with platitudes. Jenny thought she was good with people, but this was beyond her experience. Lyle, the soldier, was better equipped for this.

Liz took a deep gasping breath. "He wasn't really threatening Jenny that bad."

"You don't have time to decide these things," said Hamza staggering to his feet. "They might have backed down, but they could have easily fed us to the predator."

Jenny gulped. "I like my kneecaps. Thanks Liz!"

"It's more than kneecaps," said Hamza. "You might easily have never walked again. Liz did the right thing."

Lyle waved impatiently at both of them and turned back to Liz.

"We can work this out later," he said. "Right now we need to concentrate on getting out of here. Are you with me?"

Liz gave one short nod.

"The suit got away," said Hamza. "I think you winged him, but he made a bee-line for that other door. Five minutes tops and the whole place will be here."

"OK, let's get out of here and steal ourselves a boat."

"Wait a moment." Jenny found her eyes drawn back to the packing crates, the velociraptor and the predator.

"What? We can't afford to hang around."

"This might be important."

There was a clipboard resting on the edge of the crate. Jenny walked over and picked it up, looking through the dispatch notes. ¡code¿Livestock¡/code¿ She didn't recognise the names of the receiving organisations but she didn't like the look of the countries: Zimbabwe, Cuba, Iran. Her eyes drifted back to the caged animals. "They're mad," she heard herself whispering.

"Who are?" asked Hamza.

"C19. They're going to ship these animals out to various world trouble spots. Like you said, they want to destabilize governments by triggering a crisis."

"Take more than a couple of dinosaurs to destabilize some of those places," said Hamza, looking over her shoulder. "They're used to large wildlife."

"Not something like the predator though. That's going to..." Jenny cross-checked the code numbers against the tag on the cage, "Iran."

"No one would be crazy enough to set it loose in an urban area would they?" asked Lyle.

"Better believe it mate. There's no end of crazy out there."

"Take the shipping records. We'll take some photos. Use it as evidence," said Lyle.

"No time," said Jenny. "These ship in three hours. They'll be long gone before anyone gets here."

"What then?"

Jenny bit her lip. Nick would hate to hear her say this. "We'll have to kill the animals. I don't think there is anything else we can do in time."

"No!" said Liz. "No more killing!"

"We don't have much choice," said Lyle gently. Jenny watched him check his gun. "Or enough ammunition. Sayed how are you doing? Some of these buggers take a lot of killing."

"I've got a clip left, but bet you anything you like they've got others around here. There's the animals in the tunnel system for starters. We're not going to slow them down much by killing these here, an hour or two tops. We'd do better to destroy the harbour and helipad. Then they won't be able to move large cages off the island."

"Breeding program!" Lyle slapped his forehead. "It's the fucking breeding program."

"What breeding program?" Jenny asked.

"Don't know for sure. Lester's been muttering about it in odd moments. It would explain why they're trying to blackmail him though. Fuck!"

They all looked at each other. Jenny wondered if the calculation was as plain on her face as it was on on Hamza and Lyle's. Up until now Liz had been the ace and all their efforts had been focused on getting her back to Lester. But now the choice was between Liz and Lester and some untold number of people in Harare, Havana and Tehran. Lester was breathing down the necks of these people. Would slowing them down be enough? Even if they were all captured or killed?

"You got any explosives left?" asked Hamza.

"Yes!" Lyle looked decided. "Liz, you're coming with me. Let's see if we can find the helipad that's on Sayed's plans. Sayed, Jenny, see if you can secure a boat and do something to bugger up the harbour."

Jenny opened her mouth to protest at Liz going to the helipad, but then shut it again. Lyle was the closest thing Liz had to a parent here. She didn't need to interfere.

"Are you worried I'll fall to pieces?" Liz hated herself for asking, but it was like a hundred different thoughts and worries were working at her brain and saying even just one out loud was imperative.

Lyle stopped on the stairs ahead of her. She saw him glance both up and down the stairwell, clearly checking for threats, then he sat down and patted the step next to him indicating she should sit.

"I'm not a child, you know."

"Yes, you are Liz, and you know it. You're one of the most sensible, sorted out kids I know, but you are still a kid and one of the ways you've always shown how level-headed you are is that you've never pretended to be something you're not. Now sit down."

Liz stared at his face, which looked deadly serious, and then reluctantly sat next to him on the stairs.

"Right, now the first time you kill someone, it's horrible. It always is. It's one of the ways you know you're human. A good soldier never takes killing someone lightly. That's why we have the rules we do. You know that right?"

Liz nodded, more just to make him carry on, rather than because she necessarily agreed.

"You did the right thing back there, and I'm proud of you. But there's a reason every right-thinking army deplores the use of child soldiers. Sometimes, simply because you're so level-headed, it's easy to forget how young you are. That's my fault."

"I *chose* to pick up the gun."

"And I chose to let you. And right here and now, you're the kid and I'm the adult and, what's more, I'm your father's lover so that makes me responsible. I shouldn't have let it pass like I did. So firstly I want us to be clear on that. Once I'd let you have the gun, you did everything right, and if there's anyone to blame for anything it's me not you, OK?"

Liz nodded again. “OK.” She still felt a seething mass of anxiety and doubt but she did feel somewhat better. There was the knowledge that Lyle as going to stand between her and anything that was coming.

“Good. Secondly, let’s be honest with each other, you’ve been thinking about a career in the army, haven’t you?”

Liz looked at him carefully. “I’ve never said so.”

“No, but you’re in the CCF, and you ask a lot of questions.”

“Maybe I’m just interested in who my dad is banging.”

“And maybe you’re interested in a career in the army, because prurient curiousity in your father’s sex life isn’t really you. So I’m telling you, you did well today. At sixteen you shouldn’t have had to go through that, but you did really well, and if you want a career in the army, the way you’re reacting now and the way you’re dealing with it makes me think you would be better at it, rather than worse. I don’t think you’re going to fall apart on me, and that is the most important thing. We need to get rid of that helipad and then we need to get out of here. I’m going to keep you as safe as I can, and I’m going to protect you as much as I can, and we’ll deal with anything else that happens once we’re home. I just need you to carry on being Liz Lester and not try to be any older than you are, and certainly I need you to carry on being sensible and tough.”

“OK. I think I can sort of shut it away and worry about it later. That’s what I did when the dinosaurs attacked us on that school trip.”

“Yes, if you can do that it’ll help. But don’t forget to let it out again once we’re safe. Keep being Liz.”

Liz managed a wobbly smile. “I’ll do my best.”

Lyle grinned back. “That’s my girl. I hate myself for saying this but hang onto that gun. Just don’t shoot unless all else fails.”

“There’s not a lot of activity here,” whispered Jenny as she peered over one of the crates at the side of the harbour.

“All out looking for us, I suppose. Can you see a likely looking boat?” Hamza was crouched next to her and they were wedged between the crates and the wall. Jenny had her mirror out once more and was angling it around the harbour.

Jenny looked in the mirror. The harbour was in a large natural cave, a mixture of boats were moored up on jetties. “How about that one?” She pointed out a

motor boat. It was relatively small, so there wouldn't be anyone unexpected on board, but it had a covered area and looked big enough for four.

"Not a bad choice. Now to work out where to place explosives."

Jenny moved the mirror about doubtfully. "It's not going to be easy to close this place down."

"No, and we need to."

"The entrance then, somehow. Can you bring it down?"

"Don't know. Depends how strong it is really. I need to see, can you budge over?"

There was an uncomfortable moment or two as Hamza climbed across her so he could see round the edge of the crate. Their shoulders were pressed close together once he sat down and Jenny found herself flashing him a small smile.

"Sorry!" he said. "Bit squished, I know." He looked awkwardly away from her.

Jenny looked at him closely. His face looked strained and she guessed he was in a lot of pain from the shoulder. Maybe that explained the 'keep away' vibes he was giving off. She gave a mental shrug and turned her attention back to the problem in hand.

"What about the big boat on the right," she asked. "Could we move it in across the entrance somehow and sink it?"

"Now there's a thought."

The helipad was free to the open air. It felt like a blessed relief to be fighting the wind.

"Where is everyone?" asked Liz.

"I reckon they're short-staffed. Facility this size, it should be crawling with people but I think most of them are still in the tunnels. Everyone else will be headed for the harbour, assuming we're escaping that way. Jenny and Sayed are going to have all the fun."

Liz watched Lyle walk around the helipad, placing Hamza's explosives and then, almost without thinking, she moved back towards the emergency stairs and kept an eye on them, listening for footsteps in the stairwell.

"Right, I'm done," said Lyle suddenly. "We're on a ten minute timer. We need to get down those stairs and out onto the ground floor fast."

Jenny and Hamza had stolen the small boat they hoped to escape on and driven it out to a much larger one anchored in the centre of the harbour. The handful of dock workers hadn't even glanced their way as they drove off, proving that you could find a jobsworth anywhere. Hamza had placed charges in the hold of the large boat and was now trying to work out if he could hot-wire the starting motor. Jenny rather gathered that theft and electronics weren't his speciality, although he claimed to have been on a course.

"Believe me," he said from under the engine housing, "if this were a Honda we'd be long gone."

"Miss Lewis, Miss Lester, I do hate to interrupt your escape!" Mr. Caine's voice rang out across the harbour cavern.

Hamza's head emerged slowly. He looked at Jenny. "Have a look outside," he whispered. "Try to keep him talking or distracted."

Cautiously Jenny backed out of the cabin. Caine stood on a metal gantry that ran around the harbour. The dock workers seemed to have vanished. Caine was back lit from the corridor behind him, a sinister shadow surrounded by brilliant white. A large box stood next to him on some kind of trolley. Jenny sincerely doubted he'd wheeled it there himself. She deduced tjat he must be being theatrical.

"You can't keep us here forever, you know," she shouted.

"To be honest, we never intended to keep you here for long. Just long enough. However, now you have all become inconvenient. It looks like you will need to be disposed of."

Jenny heard Hamza shuffle in the cabin. She glanced down and saw him crouching on the floor behind the door. He appeared to be readying his gun. Jenny balled her hands into fists, resisting the temptation to shout a warning, or ask Hamza if he really meant to shoot. She met Hamza's eyes and he nodded her to one side.

Calmly she moved and Hamza surged to his feet, raising the gun to his shoulder. There was a crack as he let off a shot. Caine disappeared backwards through the door behind him and it shut with a bang. Jenny blinked as the light levels suddenly dropped. There were a few lamps positioned on the jetties, but somehow the light they cast was minimal.

"Goodbye, Miss Lewis, Miss Lester," Caine's voice echoed over some kind of PA system.

There was an ominous clanking sound. Jenny's eyes were drawn to the large

box. The top appeared to have come loose. The unmistakable form of a future predator was perched on the edge, it's head raised to catch the echoes from the vast chamber.

Part Five

Jenny saw Hamza stiffen. She'd thought him alert before but now he seemed entirely focused and preternaturally still. Then he said quietly. "Know how to handle a gun?"

Jenny glanced at the predator. "Absolutely."

"There's rifles in that gun locker. Get one."

Jenny knew the locker he meant. He'd smashed in the lock, less than five minutes ago, hoping the engine key might be inside. She stepped quickly into the cabin and grabbed one of the guns and a clip of ammunition.

He was still standing on the deck, focused on the predator as she emerged. "I suppose it's too much to hope the thing can't swim."

"Probably, they can be shot though. Nick killed one once."

"Should have known. Anything else you can tell me?"

"They hunt by echo-location and sound."

"Shit!" Hamza hissed.

Jenny looked back to the gantry. The predator had vanished. There was a sudden bright light. Hamza, it appeared had lit a flare. It illuminated the whole harbour area. Desperately Jenny looked about for the predator, only to see it, already on the boat to one side, crouched to spring.

Without thinking, she swung up the SA80 and let off a burst in it's direction. It tumbled backwards under the hail of bullets and into the water.

"How unexpected. Though perfectly delicious."

Liz halted where she stood in the stairwell and looked back to see Lyle turning round slowly. She recognised Caine's voice. Lyle stiffened, looking behind him and further up the stairs.

"Drop the gun, Captain Lyle. I assume you are on your way to join your companion and the two ladies. I fear they may be having a spot of bother with a predator."

"What have you done?" asked Lyle.

"Drop the gun and raise your hands."

Carefully Lyle placed the gun on the floor and stood up with his hands raised. "Go on, tell me then."

"Ah Captain, I don't think so. I just hate shooting armed men, they can do such unexpected things."

Liz didn't let herself think. She stepped smartly out round the corner and opened fire past Lyle.

"Liz!" he shouted.

She stood still, feeling the adrenaline rush. "I had no choice, right?" she asked desperately.

Lyle looked shaken. "Right. You did fine."

Liz forced herself to look at the broken body on the stairs. She'd hit him three times, a ragged trail of bullet holes across his chest.

Lyle picked up Caine's gun. Liz looked at his face and saw the concern get wiped away and a kind of hardness replace it. She felt strangely calm herself. Now wasn't the moment the moment for concern. Right now, they needed to get things done.

"He came from up there?" Liz pointed to the door. "You reckon there's a second route into the harbour?"

Lyle glanced at his watch then he rifled quickly through Caine's pockets and produced a key card. "Only one way to find out. It's now or never, though."

"Better be quick then."

"Can you see it?" whispered Hamza. He was walking quietly round the deck, his gun aimed at the water.

"No."

He drew in a hissing breath. "We need to lure it back on board, then we set off the explosives and jump for it."

"How do we lure it up here?" Jenny whispered. "Should I tap dance down the deck and then flash my knickers?"

"It's a tempting idea. Watch my back."

Hamza began to kick the side of the cabin, a slow rhythmic beat. Jenny watched all around. The loud bangs made her tense up. The creature must know where they were but then that, presumably, was Hamza's plan. Suddenly the door

on the gantry opened once more. Liz and Lyle were clearly silhouetted against the light.

"Jenny? Sayed?" called Lyle.

Jenny saw movement, up on the ceiling above them.

"Watch out!!" she screamed and fired in the general direction of the predator.

She saw Lyle glance upwards and then, without hesitation, he grabbed Liz in one arm and jumped off the gantry, into the water below. Seconds later the predator landed on the steel struts, claws slashing through the space where the two of them had stood.

Hamza opened fire. The predator turned, snarled and leaped again for the two of them on the boat, scrambling across the roof of the natural cavern. A hail of bullets from their guns followed it, but the thing was moving too fast. Then it leapt through the air towards them.

"Allah be praised," muttered Hamza. "Jenny, jump! Now!"

Jenny dived off the side of the boat, she was aware of Hamza following her and then an explosion ripped through the water behind them. Seconds later there was a second explosion, somewhere way up above them. Jenny assumed it was the helipad.

Jenny kicked off her shoes and swam in the direction of the harbour's edge. The burning boat lit up the whole area and she could see Lyle and Liz, ahead of her, scrambling out of the water and onto a jetty. Then something splashed and dived. She thought she saw a ridge rise up out of the water and then sink again. She stopped and started treading water, her mind racing. There was something in the harbour area, no doubt something too big to get out of the narrow entrance, another one of Mr. Caine's pets.

"Did you see that?" asked Hamza from the water beside her.

"Yes." She reached out and clutched his hand. He gave it a squeeze, but then quickly dropped it.

"Lyle! We have company!" Hamza shouted.

Hamza struck out once more towards the shore and Jenny followed him.

"Lyle! Boat!" Liz shouted and began running down the jetty.

Lyle followed her. They scrambled into a motor boat and Lyle began pulling at the engine's starter motor. Jenny kept swimming towards them, trying not to think about whatever was in the water with them. Hamza seemed to be dropping behind. She turned, treading water and looking back.

"Keep swimming," he shouted tersely. "I'll get there."

Jenny turned and struck out again towards the boat. Hamza's injured arm, she realised, must be holding him back.

The engine sputtered into life under Lyle's hands. The little boat started out from the jetty and towards the swimmers.

Mounted lights flashed out. Jenny blinked and then the motor boat was alongside her, arms reaching down. She scrambled up and let Liz haul her on board. Turning she saw Hamza still in the water. Lyle moved them closer and Hamza grabbed hold of the edge. Jenny leaned forward to help him and the boat tipped dangerously to one side. Liz threw herself backwards leaning out to counterbalance the weight.

"Something's got my ankle," said Hamza.

Jenny hauled desperately on his arm, watching him wince as her fingers dug into the makeshift bandage on his shoulder.

"Liz! Helm!" shouted Lyle. "Jenny, let go of him and step back."

Jenny looked over her shoulder, Lyle was stepping forwards, SA80 at the ready.

"You'd better know where you're aiming that thing," remarked Hamza.

Lyle opened fire. Hamza's head ducked down against the edge of the boat and then suddenly he heaved himself over the side.

"What the?" asked Lyle.

A thick, sinuous tentacle was wrapped around Hamza's ankle. Hamza grimaced and began to pull it off. "Doesn't seem to have stingers, luckily," he remarked.

At that moment a huge body surged out of the water, large tentacles waving above the boat.

"Fucking hell!" Lyle opened fire.

"Jenny! Helm!" shouted Liz.

Jenny found herself clutching a small tiller while Liz picked up a second gun and opened fire in turn. The massive creature rose further out of the water and a large mouth opened. Lyle and Liz continued firing and abruptly the thing fell backwards generating a series of waves that made the boat bob alarmingly up and down.

"Here, let me take that." Lyle gently took the tiller and turned the boat towards the harbour entrance. "Liz, you can put that gun down now, as well."

Hamza lay on his back at the bottom of the boat. Jenny placed a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He struggled up to a sitting position. "I've had better days." He shrugged her hand away and Jenny frowned at him, wondering again what the sudden standoffishness was all about.

"I suppose Nicholas Cutter would have known what that thing was," he said.

The pieces fell into place in Jenny's mind. Hamza obviously didn't mind a live rival for her affections, but he was going to be difficult about a dead one. A small voice inside her head tutted and said 'typical man'. She decided, in that moment, that the problem needed to be dealt with before it got out of hand. She leaned down and kissed Hamza. She felt his moment of surprise and then a hand in her hair, pulling her in gently. Someone whistled, Jenny guessed it was Liz.

Hamza broke away and gazed at her. "OK, maybe not *such* a bad day. What was that for?"

Jenny smiled. "It wasn't *for* anything, except maybe to say would you like dinner?"

"What about your dead complicated professor?"

"He was never as important as he sometimes seemed to be."

Lyle, at the tiller snorted. "He was a fucking idiot. Don't get me wrong. He was a good man, we all miss him, but a fucking idiot. If you're worried about being second best to the great man, Sayed, you'll need start rushing off into danger without back-up and talking a load of bollocks."

Hamza laughed and sank damply back onto the floor of the boat. "Isn't that what I do all the time?"

"OK, well, yeah, but not the same. Totally not the same. You talk less bollocks at any rate."

Hamza closed his eyes and Jenny wondered how much pain he was in. She reached out as his eyes flickered back open and his hand tangled in hers. "Dinner it is, then," he said.

"Right! Now we get out of here! I think we've caused enough chaos that it won't matter if we leave the harbour standing. Besides we all need dry clothes and fast." Lyle swung the tiller and they headed for the harbour mouth. Beyond them the dawn was just beginning to break as the sun rose above the sea.

As they stepped off the UNIT jet, Lyle could see Lester and his ex-wife waiting on the tarmac. Liz almost jumped off the steps and ran to them. Lyle followed more sedately and watched as Liz flung her arms round her father. He also saw the expression of sudden and brief pain that flitted across Cathy's face at the way Liz excluded her, even in a moment such as this.

Lester wrapped his arms round Liz and held her tight for a moment. But then his head raised and he stared out accusingly at Lyle. Lyle had heard one half of

Liz's conversation with Lester on the UNIT satellite phone. She'd come down hard from the excitement and the horror of the night. When she started to talk about the killings her words had been swallowed up by the effort of restraining sobs. Lester glared at Lyle for a moment then, pointedly, he turned his back and lead Liz away.

Lyle felt a gentle hand on his arm and looked up to see Jenny standing there. "Give him time," she said.

Lyle's thumbs were pricking. "I put her life in danger and ended up turning her into a killer. He's not going to forgive that quickly."

"Her life was in danger anyway and she's a lot tougher than I think even the two of you give her credit for. Wait and see."

Jenny was tired when she finally walked out of the debriefing with several UNIT high-ups. They hadn't kept her long, maybe an hour, but as she'd run over events with them, she'd felt a huge weariness creeping over her and her eyelids were drooping.

"We'll get you a driver to take you home," she heard someone say.

She nodded faintly and let them lead her to a cramped waiting room where she was bought a cup of truly terrible coffee by a young and spotty private.

"They said you needed a driver. Will I do?"

She looked up, startled, to see Hamza standing in front of her.

"Are they done debriefing you?"

"Not really, but they're done for now. There'll be more questions in the morning, but I asked if I could take you home and keep an eye on you."

"Keep an eye on me?"

He looked suddenly serious. "We don't think C19 is going to try anything, but just in case. Doesn't have to be me, if you'd prefer someone else."

Jenny smiled. "No, it's fine. I hope you like ready-meals though."

"Sounds like heaven."

"OK Captain Sayed. Ready meals for two it is." She slipped an arm through his as she stood up. "And I hope you're not going to be all strange about Nick Cutter."

"Nah, Lyle's been listing his faults for me. I'm going to assume he's not a problem until it turns out he is."

Jenny laughed. "Lyle really is an old woman underneath it all, isn't he!"

"Too true. My nan doesn't hold a candle to him when it comes to matchmaking and, believe you me, she prides herself on her skill."

Jenny shook her head, laughed again, and allowed herself to be escorted out of the building.

"Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart. It's a pleasure to meet you." As far as Lester was concerned it was no pleasure at all, but when UNIT bigwigs made appointments you might as well bow to the inevitable, so he was making the best of it and being polite.

The elderly man grunted. "Pleased to meet you too, sir."

Lester gestured to a seat and then sat back down behind his desk. "How may I help you?"

"It's more a question of how I may help you."

"I don't quite follow."

"I'm a bit of an old dinosaur, Mr. Lester. UNIT keep me around for the sake of morale. Everyso often I come in and regale the troops with tales of the old days when we held off alien invasions with string and double-sided sticky tape."

"I imagine you were a little more efficient than that."

"Well, maybe a little, but these days I just get wheeled out for events, medal ceremonies, posh dinners, that kind of thing. I got sent out for lunch recently with a charming couple. A young UNIT Captain who I gather is your liaison and a very poised young lady who I understand used to work for you."

"Miss Lewis."

"Indeed, very careless of you to let her go, in my opinion."

"I didn't have a lot of choice, she resigned."

The Brigadier grunted. "In my day, I didn't take 'I quit' for an answer. Can't have good people resigning on you. UNIT are trying to poach her, you know. That's why they had me wining and dining them in Claridges."

"Did it work?"

"Might have done, hard to say. A little too sharp, your Miss Lewis, to be taken in by the glamour an old duffer and his tales of alien invasions."

"She was a good manager. There are a lot of bad memories here but I think she might take up a similar job again, in different circumstances, if the offer was right. Is that why you're here?"

"Not really. I gathered a little about that recent kerfuffle up in Scotland, involving your daughter."

Lester stiffened quietly behind his desk.

"Now, don't go looking all severe. Captain Sayed and Miss Lewis were very discreet, but you have to forgive an old soldier like me some curiosity. I did some digging."

"And...?"

"I've a wife, an ex-wife and a daughter, you know, and a grandson these days. You try to keep them out of the firing line, but it's a strain. My first wife left me and my daughter, well, never really forgave me for it."

"It's a common enough story throughout the army and the civil service. I hardly see..."

"You can't completely protect them, Mr. Lester. From what I hear, you had some unusual domestic arrangements, but you were blessed with two people who, when you couldn't protect them yourself, were more than capable of protecting themselves and each other. That's unusual in this business. You shouldn't blame them for it."

"She is only sixteen."

"Children can be remarkably resilient. I'm not saying you should put them in the firing line, but I gather that once she was there, your daughter coped admirably and she was fortunate to have a parent, of a kind, with her to help out."

"She should never have been put in that position."

"No, but you are not to blame for that, nor is Captain Lyle. Mr. Lester, you can't completely protect them. If you can't accept that fact, get out of this business, don't push them away. Besides, the Captain just accepted a commission with UNIT. If you don't do something quickly, you won't have any staff left."

Lester stared across the desk at the old soldier. "UNIT is a better place for him."

"Maybe, but he should come to us because it's where he wants to be, not because he's escaping from somewhere he doesn't feel wanted." The Brigadier broke eye contact and harrumphed. "Well, I've said my piece. I'll leave you to think on it." He nodded and left the room.

Lester sat in silence for a moment and then opened a drawer. Inside was a photo of himself, Liz and Lyle. The frame was bright and tacky, something Lyle had given him as a joke and which he'd put on his desk in a kind of one-upmanship. All three of them were smiling at the camera, just like any other family. Thoughtfully he placed it back on the desk.

Chapter 26

All Irregularites will be Handled

A Primeval/Sapphire and Steel Flashfic

Claudia stared at the glittering shards of light all around her. Beyond them she could see her colleagues, Lester, Stephen, Connor and Abby, all standing strangely still as if frozen in place. She reached out to them and her hands brushed a surface, a barrier between her and them. She pushed and felt it yield. She pushed harder trying to force her way through.

"I wouldn't. That's a weak point in time."

She spun round. A man in a grey suit and a woman in a blue dress stood before her. It must have been the man who had spoken.

"Sorry?"

"You've been over-written," said the man. "You no longer belong there."

"If you break through," added the woman kindly, "things will follow."

Claudia turned back to the barrier. Where she pressed against it she could now see swirls of darkness between the pieces of light. They radiated out from where she stood.

"Come with us please," said the woman. Claudia looked back. She was holding out her hand.

"I'm returning to my friends."

"You can't," said the man. "We won't let you."

"And if I don't come with you?"

"We take you anyway," he said harshly.

The woman pursed her lips and shot him a disapproving look but didn't contradict his words.

Claudia glanced sideways at the darkness writhing behind her. She bowed her head and sighed then held out her hand. She felt the woman take it, her hand cool

and smooth. Together they walked forwards into the light of the anomaly.

Chapter 27

The Great Unconquered Sun

A Primeval Short Story

Now:

The hut was crude. From the outside it looked like little more than a pile of logs with mud packed into the gaps. They had lacked the skills to make something elegant, but it served its purpose. It kept out the rain and the snow and, most importantly, the icy wind that these days blew hard down the narrow valley.

Claudia latched the door shut and hefted her bundle. It didn't contain much. The anomalies at the junction hadn't opened anywhere particularly useful for some weeks. She had some inexpertly salted meat and some fruit Ryan had found on some prehistoric summer island. He had described the warm sandy beach and the fruit-laden trees, making them all yearn to be out of the cold and away somewhere else. She had also packed a small knife. It wasn't much, the first of their efforts at smelting. The blade was soft and pliable. Helen probably had better, but Claudia was including it more as a message than a gift. They were becoming self-sufficient. Helen needed to up her game.

The route to the natural ford across the stream was almost a path these days, worn smooth by their feet, leather buckets of water weighing them down.

Claudia met Helen by that ford, the day before every full moon. A rendezvous arranged by a chance remark, a harsh joke an embittered Nick had made at Helen's expense.

"You're like a werewolf, an animal disguised in human clothing, why should we meet with you?"

"I'm only a werewolf at the full moon. Come the day before!"

Claudia and Helen had never discussed it, but the next full moon Claudia had gone down to the ford and Helen had been there. Ever since then Claudia had gone back each full moon. Helen haunted the valley like a ghost or a spirit and Claudia needed to keep some kind of tab on her. Claudia brought goods. Helen brought snippets of information. They made an exchange and then they parted.

Claudia quite enjoyed the brief encounters. They made a change from the remoteness of their lives at the edge of the anomaly junction and she had the small pleasure of knowing these were the spoils of victory.

Earlier:

Claudia Brown was walking through a forest. The trees were tall, casting deep shadows and leaving open spaces underneath where little could grow.

She was aware that she was wearing practical, warm clothing, virtually hiking gear. She felt the weight of a backpack on her shoulders and the smooth wood of a walking stick in one hand.

She paused and looked around herself, frowning.

She remembered standing in front of the anomaly, watching Nick and Helen Cutter disappearing into the past with their cargo of baby predators and then it was as if she had fallen into one of the strange waking dreams she had started having. Sparkling shards of anomaly light flickered across her vision and now... this...

She heard a faint screeching cry, possibly a bird of prey. The trees around her were conifers and, through them, she could just see flickering lights. Claudia headed onwards, hoping to find an anomaly and hoping that would jog her memory of how she came to this place.

When the trees opened up she gasped in surprise. A field of anomalies lay before her, receding into the distance.

"Claudia!"

Nick Cutter stumbled out of the forest a short distance away. He was dressed as she was in practical clothing and was also wearing a backpack. But he looked different, leaner somehow and his hair had grown.

"Nick! Claudia!" Stephen and Ryan appeared together.

Nick's jaw dropped. "But..."

"I'm dead, so Stephen told me," said Ryan laconically. "I feel remarkably fit for a dead man, though."

"No! I mean yes! But..." Nick ran his hands through his hair and looked around. "None of this makes sense."

Now:

Claudia stopped by the ford. The stream was still running, but ice had formed at the edges and Claudia suspected it would freeze over before too long. She put her pack on the ground. Helen was nowhere to be seen, which surprised Claudia. Helen took a certain pride in her ability to make the rendezvous.

Claudia sat for a while on a rock, enjoying the sharp, pale sunlight that seemed so precious now the nights were drawing in. But after a while the chill wind started to penetrate through the thick red wool of the cape she was wearing. A cape that Ryan had looted from somewhere in the 16th century. It was incredibly warm, a rich woman's cloak, Nick had said, but it had its limits.

She stood up to leave but was arrested by the sight of a hooded figure in the trees. A human form, but with thick folds of material concealing its face.

"Helen?" Claudia asked.

The figure twitched and jerked. "Beware the dark. It comes in the dark and hates the light. Beware the dark."

The voice was unmistakably Helen's but the words were beyond strange. They were so completely unlike anything Helen might say that Claudia instinctively took a step towards her.

"Helen," she started and then stopped. You wouldn't ask Helen if she was all right. The very question would be insult.

"Talking nonsense? That's not like you, Helen?" Claudia went on the attack, taking another step towards the figure in the trees.

There was a hissing sound and Helen lunged forward, then retreated suddenly, back into the shade of the trees.

"Helen?" Claudia took a step closer.

"Keep away!" cried Helen. "Keep away and stay in the light!" Then she turned and ran into the forest.

Claudia was tempted to follow her but didn't. This was Helen. If she wanted help she would ask for it, or engineer a situation where it had to be given. Whatever was going on, Helen did not want her sympathy or assistance and probably needed neither.

Claudia shrugged, picked up her bundle once more and turned back towards the cabin. Pines and laurels grew in patches by the path. The area around anomaly

junction contained a weird mixture of flora and fauna. It was time's melting pot. On a whim, Claudia used her knife to gather branches into a bundle. It wasn't the home-made knife she had taken to Helen but a tough blade that had arrived here with her.

Claudia wasn't sure what the date was, but they did know the solstice was near. By Nick's calculations it would happen tonight. The solstice was as near to Christmas as she was going to get and, in this strange pre-human valley, it seemed somehow more appropriate. The solstice had always been there whereas Christmas was a modern thing. The evergreens were her present version of the brightly coloured baubles of her youth and felt, somehow, more appropriate.

Earlier:

"Hmm... looks like I've got four handguns, a first aid kit, some spare ammo and a torch." Ryan laid the equipment out in front of him.

Their backpacks all contained the same basic kit: a blanket, a spare set of clothes, some energy bars and a stout knife. It was the extras that were interesting.

Stephen pouted. "All I've got is some handcuffs, a rope and a set of cable ties. How come you get useful stuff?"

A very strange expression crossed Ryan's face. "I'll do you a deal. I'll swap a handgun and half the ammo."

Stephen smirked. "For the cable ties or the cuffs?"

Ryan waggled his eyebrows. "We can discuss it later."

"Thermos flask, kettle, trangia, a chopping board and..." Nick frowned at a book, "*Wilderness Survival Cookery*. Someone seems to be under the impression I can cook."

Stephen laughed. "Someone has a sense of humour, anyway. Ooh!" He produced a book from his own backpack. "*50 Great Homebrew Recipes*!"

"Now that I'll definitely swap for a handgun," said Ryan.

"What have you got, Claudia?" asked Nick, moving close.

"*Little House on the Prairie*." Claudia dumped the book on the ground. "A small hatchet or axe thing?" She frowned at the implement.

"Could be useful," said Ryan.

"Whetstone, cigarette lighter and a collapsible fishing rod and flies." She smiled delighted. "I haven't fished since I was a girl!"

"Looks like we won't starve," Ryan commented.

Claudia looked around them. She realised that it was getting quite dark. The sparkling light of the anomalies was deceptive. “We need to find a place to camp,” she said. “Nick, what do you think the chances are of something nasty coming through one of these anomalies?”

Nick looked at the shining lights. “High, I should think.”

“We need to find somewhere defensible to camp then.”

Now:

“Where do you think Claudia goes?” Stephen asked. He was huddled under several blankets in the tiny room he and Ryan called their own. Darkness had set in some hours ago but they hadn’t yet mastered the art of going to bed with the sun. The temptation was to lie wrapped in blankets and talk, or attempt to make things by the flickering light of home-made oil lamps.

“I don’t think,” Ryan said.

“You must be curious? She goes out every month. Doesn’t say where she’s been. Why don’t you follow her?”

Ryan looked at him with a resigned expression. “Sometimes you just have to trust people, especially COs.”

“She’s not your CO though.”

Ryan just grimaced slightly. Stephen recognised that expression now, it meant ‘don’t go there’. Ryan didn’t want to pick this apart. Claudia was his CO, as far as he was concerned, that was the end of the story.

“She goes to meet Helen, you know.” Stephen tried a different tack. “She must do. Why does she go?”

“There’s a value in talking to the enemy.” Ryan was infuriatingly calm.

“Nick will go ballistic when he finds out.”

“That’s between Nick and Claudia,” said Ryan firmly.

“Nick has a right to know,” Stephen said, but his voice sounded weak and whining.

Earlier:

They settled on a rough cave in a cliff face just as the night threatened to get really dark. At Claudia’s insistence they had cut wood in the forest with the small

hatchet and bound it up in Stephen's rope. This let them build a fire at the cave entrance.

"I'm not sure I'd call this cosy," Claudia muttered as she chewed disconsolately on an energy bar. "And we're going to have to organise watches."

"I don't know," said Nick. "Body heat." He moved closer to Claudia and she was surprised by the sudden intimacy, as she had often been surprised in the moments when Nick had made a move.

"Yes, body heat." She didn't resist his attention.

"There's something out there," said Stephen quietly, staring intently into the darkness beyond the cave mouth.

"Ryan, how can we best defend this area?" Claudia asked.

"That depends. The entrance is quite wide, even with four guns we can't cover it properly if there's a big pack of somethings."

"Nick, fire? Will that keep animals away?"

"Probably," Nick stood up and assessed the cave. "We don't have so much wood though. Not enough to keep a big fire going all night."

"Tell me about packs," Claudia's mind was racing. "Can we pick off a leader? Frighten them away?"

"That could work," said Stephen.

"It's our best bet," decided Claudia. "Keep the fire central to the cave mouth and as bright as possible for as long as possible. Pick off any stragglers that come round the edge. Try to hit the pack leader."

"We don't have that much ammunition," warned Ryan.

"We use it if we have to. Tomorrow we'll work on building some kind of defence across the cave mouth. For now let's concentrate on survival."

It was then that the first beast leaped into the cave. Claudia recognised it as a raptor, even as Ryan's gun cracked and the animal collapsed to the floor, a bullet through its brain.

"Will they turn on it, if we throw it out?" Claudia asked.

"Might do." Stephen nodded to Ryan and together the two men lifted the carcass and flung it over the fire and into the night beyond.

Claudia was startled by a hand on her shoulder. "You're turning into quite the major general," Nick whispered in her ear.

She pulled back, startled at the thought.

"Don't worry, I'm not put out. It reminds me of someone, of another you, really."

"And that's good?"

She felt the ghost of his hand cupping her face. "Yes, that's good."

Now:

Claudia and Nick sat close together, in companionable silence, before the fire.

"Ach, well," said Nick after a while. "We should put out the lanterns and go to bed. No point wasting oil. I'm glad the solstice is near though. We can do more in the light and it will be good to have the days getting longer again."

He stood up and stretched. Claudia watched him move towards the lanterns that hung on hooks from the rafters. Claudia was seized by a sudden fear and an image of Helen's hooded form, crouched beneath the trees saying, "Beware the dark."

"No," she said putting out a hand. "Leave them on for tonight."

"We need to conserve the fuel."

At that moment a scratching sound came from above them, as if claws were tapping, running across the roof.

"What was that?" Claudia asked.

They stood still, listening, as the rat-tat-tat sounded again. Then there was a shuffle and a thump. Claudia realised she had gripped hold of Nick's arm.

Suddenly, the door that separated the main area from Stephen and Ryan's room opened.

"Sounds like some kind of animal," said Ryan.

Ryan picked up his rifle. It was a musket from the English Civil War. Claudia was constantly terrified it would back-fire, but Ryan tended it carefully and, so far, it had remained safe.

Nick was already shrugging on his coat. "Are you going outside?"

Ryan nodded. "I want to get a look at it, at least. Find out what we're dealing with."

"Take Stephen," said Claudia, glancing anxiously at Nick, in case he objected. "He can take the other gun. He's as likely to identify it as you," she said by way of explanation. "And he's a better shot."

Nick nodded curtly, halfway to a shrug.

Helen watched the figures as they emerged from the door of the house in a blaze of light that hurt her eyes, forcing her to blink in the glare. She bared her teeth in the dark and dug her claws into the wooden shingles of the roof. She was

overwhelmed by the sensation of food. The rich smell of living meat assailed her nostrils.

With an effort, she hauled her senses back from the wolf and blinked as her viewpoint re-established itself from where she stood at the corner of the building.

She focused on the unmistakable form of Nick who was moving away from the small group in the doorway. She saw Stephen glance his way and Nick's oh-so-familiar gesture for quiet. She'd seen him use it a hundred times as he observed animals in the wild.

He moved away from the others into the darkness, as if drawn to her. Drawn by the smell of bonding, the smell of a mate who was waiting. She could almost feel the blood pounding through his veins. Instinct triumphed. Helen leaped.

There was the crack of a rifle shot and a sharp cry from Claudia. "No! Don't shoot! It's Helen."

Nick had one hand held at her throat. His eyes were wide with horror as he stared at her face.

She snarled, anxious to reach the meat, baring her teeth.

"Oh Fuck! What's happened to her?" That was the voice of Captain Ryan.

The lights were coming closer, blinding her with their brightness. Her brethren, the wolves, howled in the far hills and she unleashed them. She needed her help in this attack.

"No, back! Back!" It was Claudia once again, swinging brightness that hurt and burned. It pushed into her face, burned her eyes, driving her away.

She retreated, her mind calling to the pack swarming across the snows.

"She's lost it! She's totally mad!" Nick was already starting after Helen.

Claudia hung onto his arm, keeping him back. "No! We need to stay in the light."

"She's certainly not herself," said Ryan calmly.

Claudia thought of Helen's jet black eyes as she had fought with Nick. The way her lips had drawn back to reveal sharp pointed teeth.

Nick face hardened, like a thin veneer of stone over desperate pain. "We have to destroy her."

Claudia stared at him in horror, trying to understand how he could so suddenly turn against Helen, when he had fought for her so long. He looked shocked

and wounded. Claudia's mind raced over Helen's strange appearance and her encounter earlier.

"Maybe she's not completely lost. We have to find another way."

"Are you mad?" asked Nick.

"No." Claudia looked at him, watching the mixed emotions chase across his face. Nick was so open sometimes. "You can't abandon her. None of us can."

"Why not?" he said exasperated. "She'd abandon us like a shot if we were liabilities. You've said so yourself. She has in some cases." He eyed Stephen.

"Yes, she's abandoned us and manipulated us, and probably wouldn't lift a finger to help us if our positions were reversed," Stephen spoke up suddenly and unexpectedly. "All the same, are you going to abandon her?"

She is your wife. His thought hung unspoken on the air.

"What are we going to do?" Ryan spoke up suddenly, as if the decision had already been made.

"I think she's fighting for control. I think she tried to warn me earlier," began Claudia.

"When earlier?" demanded Nick.

"Earlier, earlier, when I went to meet her."

Nick's mouth opened.

"Just don't start, Nick," Claudia interrupted. "I went to meet her. I go to meet her the day before each full moon. It's useful. We need her, just not on her terms."

The movement up on the roof was sudden. Claudia wasn't sure if she saw it first or heard the report of Ryan's musket firing. She'd forgotten about the creature they had heard. A large brindled dire wolf fell to the ground at their feet.

"That's what was on the roof," said Ryan grimly.

"Incoming!" shouted Stephen.

Claudia was aware they had fired both their bullets. Stephen and Ryan would need time to reload. Dark shapes were visible, swarming across the snow.

Claudia was already stumbling back towards the door of the cabin as the creatures streamed out of the darkness, long sleek wolf shapes, powerful and efficient. A great, muscled leader at the front of the pack. Claudia gasped as she glanced into its eyes which were as blank and black as Helen's had been.

Its lips drew back into a snarl and it jumped.

There was a final shot. Claudia realised Nick was holding one of Ryan's handguns. He must have picked it up as they left the cabin. They rarely used them, conserving the ammo for times when a pack attacked.

Then they were all inside the cabin. Nick dropped the wooden bar across the door while Ryan shuttered the windows.

"I'm not sure that's necessary." Claudia glanced around the room. The lanterns and the fire flooded it with light. "I don't think it likes the light. When I met Helen she had her face covered with a hood. I think that was so she could hide from the sun, not so that I wouldn't see her eyes."

"Wait!" Nick's voice was harsh and abrupt.

Claudia watched him gather his thoughts for a moment, his hands waving. "Firstly, what were you doing meeting Helen?"

"I..." Claudia began.

But Nick ploughed on over her, "And what do you mean by *it*? and do you have any sensible reason for supposing it doesn't like light beyond the fact that Helen wore a hood.?"

Claudia was used to arguing with Nick. Half his objections were just thoughts flashing through his mind. "I need to meet with Helen. She knows this environment better than we do."

"That's not what you said when she offered to show us the way home."

"I said she wasn't going to show us home! Not that she didn't know how."

"Oh, so *we're* not allowed to associate with Helen, but you are. What makes you so different?"

"I never loved her!" It came out more abruptly than she had intended and she saw the shock in Nick's expression.

"Neither did Ryan," he said darkly.

"I'm not interested in meeting Helen," interrupted Ryan. "Keep me out of this."

"Someone has to meet with her. Someone who's not going to let their judgement be clouded by personal issues."

"You don't think the fact we're sleeping together makes it a little bit personal?" demanded Nick. "You don't maybe think that entitles me to know what you are doing, and in particular that you are meeting with my ex-wife?"

"What would you have done if I had told you?" Claudia threw back. "Forbidden me to go? Demanded to come with me? Called my judgement into question?"

"Like you're calling mine into question! I had a right to know."

"Not if you're going to behave like this, you hadn't!" Claudia knew she was handling this badly. There were ways to talk to an employee who had been kept in the dark that didn't involve shouting at them.

That said, the manual also had plenty to say about not getting romantically involved with employees for precisely that reason.

"Tell us about Helen. What's happened to her?" interrupted Stephen.

"*It* has got hold of her, clearly." The sarcasm dripped from Nick's voice.

"Well something has happened to her," Claudia shot back. "You saw her eyes and her teeth. Do you have a scientific explanation for that?"

"There is always a scientific explanation."

"Right now I'm telling you *it* has got hold of her and *it* doesn't like light and Helen is fighting *it*. You can figure out the science later."

"You're just jealous."

Those words again.

The temptation to step up and slap him was incredibly strong and her mind scrabbled in outrage. Why would I be trying to help her if I was jealous? If I was jealous what would that have to do with anything anyway? Look at you playing the big man with all the women fighting over you?

Instead, white hot with anger, Claudia turned on her heels. Almost without thought she grabbed Ryan's heavy military torch. They used it sparingly and it still worked. Above it were Stephen's handcuffs. They had hung them on display on the wall as a kind of joke. Then she left the cabin, letting the door bang shut behind her.

Earlier:

"You're being irrational!" Nick said. Somehow he managed to sound angry even though he was keeping his voice quiet.

"No," said Claudia, equally firmly, "*you* are being irrational."

Nick gestured to Helen where she lounged by the fireplace. A faint smile curled her lips. She was enjoying the argument. "I may not like it, but she can take us home," he said.

"No strings attached." Helen's smile was that of a predator. It didn't invite trust.

"I don't know..." said Stephen slowly.

"Oh, Stephen." Helen pouted and stretched languidly, like a cat. "Do you want to stay here?"

Claudia became acutely aware of the bare comfort of the cabin. Their inexperience in manual labour was betrayed everywhere in the roughness of their handiwork.

"How do we know we can trust you?" Claudia demanded of Helen.

Helen barely acknowledged her presence. Her eyes were fixed on Nick. "What other option do you have? Come with me."

"No!" said Claudia hearing, with surprise, the tone of finality in her voice. She forced herself to turn her back on Helen and face her friends. "Here, at anomaly junction, we will eventually find our own way back. If Helen abandons us in some other location we could be trapped for ever."

"We're stalled here!" said Nick fiercely. "I have no equipment, no reference books, no nothing. Don't you want to know what's happened to us? Don't you see we can't afford to wait? Helen just wants to get some leverage with Lester and the government. It's to her advantage to get us home."

Claudia looked at his passionate face and was almost overwhelmed by her fondness for him. She understood he was frustrated by the waiting, by the daily grind of homesteading and consumed by the need to get back to some kind of learned civilisation, but she was not going to let her men follow Helen blindly into the anomalies.

"She's not interested in our leverage with Lester or the government," Claudia said. "She has her own plan. She always has and she always will. We are not going with her."

"You're just jealous."

Claudia had no come back for that. It felt like a blow that Nick had even suggested it and her previous fondness melted away suddenly into a cold misery.

"I agree with Claudia." Ryan spoke for the first time. Claudia felt him step forward to stand at her shoulder. The rush of gratitude for his support surprised her.

Claudia glanced instinctively at Stephen. Would he side with Ryan, his lover, or would he side with Nick, with all the unspoken mess of Helen that lay between the two of them? They seemed to be groping their way to reconciliation but it was happening away from Claudia and she didn't truly know where Stephen's loyalties would lie in a moment like this.

Stephen looked at her steadily for a moment and then she saw his gaze jump anxiously between Nick, Helen and Ryan. Then he shrugged and turned his back on the argument.

Helen obviously sensed that the matter was decided. "Well, have it your way," she said.

She sounded unconcerned but Claudia felt the bitter warmth of triumph. She reached out to put a hand on Nick's arm, but he shrugged it off and turned away.

Now:

Nick was halfway to the door when he realised Ryan had stepped in his way, barring his route into the snow.

"Out of my way," he demanded angrily.

"Claudia has a plan."

"She's out there on her own, with Helen and whatever it is."

"Well maybe you should have discussed the situation with her rationally then, rather than flying off into a temper." Ryan looked disturbingly calm. Nick remembered him like that, backing up Lester.

"She was angry, irrational..."

"Someone was certainly angry and irrational," agreed Ryan calmly.

"She took a light and the handcuffs, Nick. I think she had a plan." It was Stephen, possibly the first time he had challenged Nick since they got here. Even so, he looked doubtful and hesitant.

"We can't just let her do this alone!"

"I think you have to decide if you trust her or not," said Stephen slowly. "Do you?"

Earlier:

Claudia gaped in surprise at Ryan. "What are we going to do with a hanging basket?" she asked and boggled at the overflowing and very flowery concoction he was holding.

"It'll make the place look more homely." He gestured at the newly-completed log cabin behind her. "Finish it off properly."

"Where did you find it?"

"Haven't a clue, but it looked Victorian at a guess. Lots of big skirts."

Claudia felt herself smiling at the twinkle in Ryan's eye. "You stole it."

He shrugged. "Big fancy house, they didn't need it. Besides we've stolen pretty much everything else we needed to build this place."

"That was different," she protested weakly but knew she was smiling too much and they *had* raided time for an inordinate number of necessities, working from big lists Claudia worked out and all the time searching for the elusive anomaly that would take them back to the 21st century.

"Well, we've got it now. Too risky to take it back."

"How will we hang it up?" Claudia looked around. They'd built a kind of veranda at the front of the cabin. Anomaly junction had proved very hot in the summer sun and they'd wanted the shade.

"I also acquired a hook and a ring." Ryan triumphantly fished the items from his pocket. "Hold the basket and I'll fetch a hammer. We can hang it from the front of the veranda."

Claudia looked at the basket of ridiculous flowers and smiled to herself. The log cabin was distinctly bare and functional but with the basket hanging up it would begin to feel like a home.

Now:

Claudia wasn't sure when the plan had formed in her head. But she had known what she was going to do by the time she had reached the door and seen the torch and the handcuffs.

She switched on the torch and stood shivering slightly in the biting wind. Helen stood in front of her, at the centre of a semi-circle of wolves. The darkness seemed thick around them and Claudia could almost see it retreat in the light of her torch.

Claudia advanced slightly, just to the edge of the veranda. That meant she stood next to the thick supports and the iron ring Ryan had put up for the long-dead hanging basket.

"Coming out to parley?" asked Helen. It sounded very like her. The tone of amused teasing was spot on.

"Who would I be talking to?" asked Claudia, watching her carefully, keeping the torch playing across the snowy ground between them.

Helen stepped forward, hips swaying, "Who would you like to be talking to?"

"I'd like to talk to Helen please, if that's possible."

"I'm right here," Helen took a step closer. Claudia could almost see the smile curling around the sides of her mouth. She allowed the torch to retreat slightly, letting Helen get that little bit closer.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Oh, lots of things? Wouldn't you like to find out what?" The voice was teasing and tempting.

"Good things?" asked Claudia, allowing Helen a step closer.

"Oh, very good things, wonderful things."

Claudia dropped the beam of the torch entirely so she stood in a small pool of light. Helen stepped closer still, so their faces almost touched.

"Wonderful in what way?" Claudia asked, allowing her arms to reach out to Helen, as if to steady herself or embrace the other woman.

Helen smiled, showing the tips of her sharp teeth as she did so. "Let me show you."

Helen lunged forwards but Claudia was ready for her. One end of the handcuffs went around Helen's upraised wrist, the other clicked shut around the iron ring. Then Claudia flashed the torch right up into Helen's eyes, causing the other woman to back away snarling, brought up short by the handcuff.

"My, what big teeth you have, Helen," said Claudia.

She didn't remain to see what followed. Claudia retreated back into the cabin, aware of the sounds of wolves howling behind her.

"Claudia!" She hardly saw Nick before arms enveloped her and she felt herself held tightly in a hug. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She looked up into his anxious face. "Honestly I'm fine. I hope Helen will be too."

His forehead rested against hers. "I'm glad. It's more than Helen would have done for you."

Claudia thought back to the far past, to her blind terror and winged predators swarming in the dark. She wasn't so sure, but she saw no reason to say that now. "I'm fine," she repeated, anxious to reassure him.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't..." Nick began.

Claudia pressed a finger against his lips. What was there more he could say. I'm sorry was more than enough. "It's okay," she whispered. "It's difficult for all of us."

"Right! Alcohol!" announced Ryan.

Nick actually groaned. "Must we?"

"It's the solstice and it looks like we'll be up all night, so yes. We must."

Ryan grabbed the tin cups off the shelf and approached the wooden barrel in the corner with the air of a man who meant business.

"Has anyone tried this batch yet?" Claudia asked cautiously. The previous batch of homebrew had had a distinctly acidic flavour.

"Now is clearly the time!" Ryan handed around the tin cups.

Claudia sipped hers cautiously and grimaced. The most that could be said for it was that it was better than the previous attempt. Stephen glared at his balefully, shot a loving glance in Ryan's direction and then downed it in one.

Nick eyed his thoughtfully for a moment and then handed it back to Ryan. "If I'm being difficult this evening, I may as well continue to be so," he said cheerfully. "I propose an alternative."

"What?" asked Stephen.

Nick turned and disappeared into the room he shared with Claudia. He returned bearing a glass bottle which said 'Tallisker' on the side. "I had this in my pack when I turned up here. I've been saving it for a suitable occasion."

"Now that's more like it," said Ryan with approval, tipping his own beer and Nick's onto the fire.

Nick solemnly poured the drinks. "Slainte!" he said as they clicked their cups together.

Stephen threw another log on the fire and the light blazed out.

"I brought in evergreen!" said Claudia, remembering suddenly. "So we could decorate."

Nick laughed. "Let's get to it then. We'll be seeing the solstice through, I think."

The lamps shone out against the long darkness and the fir and laurel decorated the walls. Stephen, Nick, Ryan and Claudia sat around the fire drinking whisky and talking of the future.

Earlier:

Helen remembered the raptor. She remembered its jaws closing onto her flesh and the surprised look on Daniel Quinn's face.

Anomaly junction was an old friend of hers but now she felt dislocated. She could not account for her own presence in this place. Some way away she could see four figures, all of them familiar. She watched as they gathered up their packs and headed towards the sheer cliffs that surrounded the valley.

She wouldn't go to them, not just yet. She needed to find out what was going on and she needed them desperate. Eager enough for her help that they would agree without question, and follow her without reservation.

In fact, thinking about things, Helen was sure she could turn this situation to her advantage. There were many unknowns but unknowns were a challenge and in this environment, away from civilisation, and government and soldiers, she would have the upper hand.

Now:

As the first weak light of dawn crept across the ground, Helen shrank back from the pale light. The wolves had already left her, seeking solace in the darkness of the trees. Helen hissed and pulled at the handcuffs but she couldn't escape. Then, as the pale morning light washed over her, the darkness fled.

It wasn't so much waking up but it was more like a cleansing, a feeling of clarity and well-being in her mind. She had failed and had needed the assistance of Claudia who had turned out to contain a core of steel Helen had never bargained for. Still she had used the resources available and she had survived.

Helen tossed her head and stood tall and proud beneath the great unconquered sun.

Chapter 28

Urban Dead Drabbles

Written for the Weekly DHPD Drabble Challenge.

Challenge 1: Welcome to Malton

Brigadier Hargreaves arrived at his new posting late at night. Bright search lights cast the camp into stark relief of black and white. Beyond the city wall and the camp, the empty fields of the town's former green belt vanished into darkness.

Hargreaves took a walk down the dual carriageway towards the wall which crossed it; enormous, heavy and brutal. Hargreaves could just make out the sentries patrolling the top.

"Welcome to Malton," said a roadside sign.

"Largest prison in the world." Someone had spray painted underneath.

At least Hargreaves knew what his first order in the morning would be.

Challenge 2: Shotgun

The shotgun was originally purchased by St. John Masters who wasted his Oxbridge education writing copy for the Malton Advertiser.

Two weeks after quarantine, it belonged to "Garfield". In 2003, he had spray-painted "Not in my name" on the railway bridge.

A month later, it's owner was the self-proclaimed Lord of Fryerbank. A year later it was in the hands of Officer Jim Extreme, DHPD.

Rotting fingers closed around the stock and brought it level with a single eye. Somewhere in the depths of what was left of a brain, the thought formed that it might make a good club.

Challenge 3: Death be not Proud

Death walks the streets of Malton.
We know it as we hide and run.
We know that zombie has his fun.
Death walks the streets of Malton.
His time has come.

But see his cloak is tattered and torn.
His scythe is blunt, in light of dawn.
Amid the dead, amid the groans
No longer does he walk alone.
A new age is born.

Death hides himself amid the crowd
That presses hard on barricade.
No man in Malton needs a shroud
Death is fleeting. The call is loud.
Death walks the streets of Malton tonight
He is not proud.

Challenge 4: Joy

Cat sang and Gabby played guitar. Once in a while they persuaded her to sing a folk song that wasn't depressing, although even the depressing ones seemed quite jolly if everyone sang *"Whack foll the daddio"* loud enough.

"And if I had more bricks and stones, I'd build my chimney higher"

Cat's father had sung this song. Gabby thought he had made bits up.

"It would stop the neighbours cat from pissing in my fire."

They all joined in:

"Come landlord fill the flowing bowl until it doth run over ¡br¿ For tonight we'll merry, merry be. Tomorrow we'll be sober."

Challenge 5: Tonight the Witches Ride

Cat double-checked the barricades on the school room door.

"It doesn't make a difference," said BD. "If they're coming for you. They'll get you."

"Just don't open the door."

The sound of tapping, "Let me in, BD!" cried a voice.

"No!" said Cat, clutching his arm.

"It named me." BD began to demolish the barricade.

Cat's eyes fell on a discarded box of chalk. The last plank was gone from the door and the handle was turning. She frantically drew a circle on the floor around them.

In a torrent of darkness and terror the hunt poured through the room.

Challenge 6: The Blackmore Building

It's stands at the heart of the empire. It isn't the heart, that would give it a significance it doesn't deserve, but it stands there anyhow.

We flow through it and around it. The quick come and go. They light it up for a few brief hours. They celebrate their triumph and then they are gone. It stands at the heart of our empire.

The curse was born here and the cure can be found here. The quick think it is hope. The dead know it is not.

It stands at the heart of the empire and it is ours.

Challenge 7: Street Fight

Twycrosse Alley is one of the oldest streets in Malton. A narrow lane squeezed between St Luke's Hospital and Withyman Road Firestation. During WWII, nurses evacuated patients across the gap while the wards burned. Now the DHPD are escaping.

In 1645, during the brief royalist defense of Malton, Thomas Mallows made an abortive stand in the alleyway. His son stood behind him, frantically reloading the muskets as he fired.

Gabriel Mallows doesn't know this but he curses anyway. Cat is standing behind him, reloading one shotgun while he fires the other. They won't keep the

RRF at bay for long.

Challenge 8: Silver

I'm in Stanbury Village, just south of Ridleybank, and running on empty. I lost my squad somewhere in the RRF rout. I've no clips left for the pistol and one shell in the shotgun.

Kersley Mansion is undefendable, as a result I have a small hope it won't have been looted as thoroughly as elsewhere. I stop to look for pickings. A display cabinet lies over-turned on the floor. I heave it up and realise I've got lucky. For whatever reason no one had ever checked it before.

I leave the silver, but take the ancient hunting rifle and ammunition.

Challenge 9: Family

"Where's Cat?" asked Gabby.

Anton shrugged laconicly. "Off sulking somewhere."

"Bulldog?"

"Off sulking somewhere else."

Gabby groaned. "Not again. What was it about this time?"

"Fucked if I know. I sent Officer S in to find out. They sounded deep in the usual 'lack of responsibility' 'you're a control freak' schtick."

Gabby grinned. "Poor Rook. He OK?"

"He'll live. He said he thought Cat *had* let the team down on the last op. BD punched him, then Cat chewed him out for getting BD stressed."

Gabby shook his head. "I guess he knows not to mess with that family now."

Challenge 10: The North Wind doth Blow

"Frozen solid! They're frozen solid!"

Sam rapped one of the zombies with his hand. It stood stock still. It's mouth was frozen in a grimace. It's hands reached upwards, bent like claws.

"Too much to hope they'll stay this way when the thaw sets in I suppose," said Anton.

"Almost certainly," agreed Tarabon.

"Make you feel like home Anton?" asked Sam. "Let's all decamp to Alaska, we'll be safe from zombies there."

"You can fuck right off."

"Still, might as well enjoy a few days off," said Tarabon.

"So," Sam looked around uncertainly, "what are we going to do now?"

Challenge 11: Something Old

Something stalks through the streets of Malton. It dances in the debris of the dying city. It has been called the Morrigan, Crom Cruach, King of the Redcaps, Spring-heeled Jack.

It is ancient. It dwelt in Malton when it was just a part of the wild wood, thick and endless. It is wild and savage. It has been called Herne the Hunter, Cernnunos, the Green Man. It leads the wild hunt. It isn't a tame thing.

Something old moves through Malton. The living fight and squabble and kill each other. Something old and ancient doesn't laugh but it knows joy.

Challenge 12: The Holly and the Ivy

Ivy covered the Neate Monument, an aging statue of a forgotten general in a war long lost. It had been unkempt even before the zombies took over. A holly bush grew, threatening and prickly, among the iron railings that surrounded it.

Cat had climbed the railings and cut both holly and ivy. They now trailed over the broken desks and shattered fittings of Cotty Street Police Station, covering the wreckage the war that had been lost and the new generals who were already forgotten.

"Happy Christmas, DHPD," she whispered and drank to dead friends and comrades.

Outside the zombies groaned.

Challenge 13: Starlight

"Cat! There is no fucking point!" complained Gabby. He stamped his feet in the snow to keep them warm. "We're out in the open here!"

"Don't be such a misery! Pass me up that last bit!"

Gabby groaned and passed up the string of lights. Cat hung them over the doorway of Club Meade.

"There!" she said climbing down the ladder. "Now all we have to do is turn them on."

Gabby grunted. "All we have to do is fit a generator, repair the building and *then* turn them on."

"Whatever," Cat grinned. "We'll still have star lights for Christmas."

Challenge 14: Something New

Cat spent the night on the roof of the library, clutching Black Betty. Gabby climbed up to see if she would come down but retreated in the face of her silence. He found blankets, though, and coffee and ventured back to make sure she was, at least, warm.

She didn't know it was the Tattooed Man who had taken BD, but something had, something new.

She watched the sun rise. The red light flooding over the rooftops of Malton, bathing the place in a gentle glow.

It was a new day. Time to give the gun to its new owner.

Challenge 15: Molebank

"This suburbs a mess!" complained Gabby.

Steve shrugged. "That's why we're here to repair it. You want peace and quiet, go to one of the green 'burbs."

The sound of groaning floated on the wind.

"That'll be the local zombies. About time we had a look at them."

Steve leaned out of a window and looked around. "Well, I'll be..."

"What? What!"

"Take a look at these zombies for me and tell me if I'm imagining things."

Gabby leaned out of the window and then gaped in amazement. Down the street came a line of zombies, all doing the conga.

Challenge 16: Running on Empty

BD got killed in West Becktown, part of the fighting retreat from Caiger.

By the time we reached Havercroft and Ackland mall we were out of syringes, and low on everything else. Ackland was burning and empty. That was the last time I saw a member of Bravo. Gabby lies dead somewhere in the ruins.

We detoured round Ridleybank.

In Stanbury Village I threw away the shotguns, they were slowing me down. It was three days since I'd seen another officer.

I've not eaten since Edgecombe. Ahead of me is the wall. I'm empty and I've nowhere left to run.

Challenge 17: Light

Living in Malton makes you appreciate the light. You spend so much time behind boarded windows.

A small chink of sunlight is creeping through a gap. The planks aren't flush. Prying fingers could gain purchase. Just now, though, it's only the sun.

We could plug in a generator, flood the empty dance floor with harsh electic light. But there are soft, silent footsteps in the ruins; the faint click of a safety catch. Light makes you easy to find, easy to see, an easy target.

Living in Malton makes you appricate the light, but it makes you love the dark.

Challenge 18: A Factory

Here on the production line
Stamp! Whirr! Clack!
Turning out the pretty dolls
Pack! Pack! Pack!

Turn the handle! Move the Boxes! Keep the stacking neat.
All for happy baby people out there in the street.

Now there's no production line.
Tiptoe! Run! Hide!
But we need the fuel and gennies
To be found inside.

Watch behind you! Watch behind you! Quick! Shoot! Quick!
BD nooo...

Here on the production line
Thwack! Arrgh! Scrunch!
Eating brains of pretty people
Yum! Yum! Munch!

In they wander! Always Creeping! In a lovely line.
All for happy babbah zambahs wanting for to dine.

Challenge 19: So Foul and Fair a Day

The government, or whoever was in charge these days, was leafletting again. White paper drifted down, half invisible amid the snow.

"I'm amazed they can fly in this weather," muttered Ian.

Cat staggered out into the biting wind.

"It's pointless," BD shouted after her. "Just more propaganda!"

But Cat wanted to *see*.

The design was clumsy and amateurish.

WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOU.

A picture of the "Free Malton League"; their leader sat in the centre, scowling and determined.

Cat touched it with frozen fingers.

"It's Claire." Her voice echoed faintly. "She's alive!"

"Who's Claire?" asked Gabby.

"My niece," whispered BD.

Challenge 20: Tiger

Once the tiger had been caged in Malton Zoo. The enclosure had been generous but, to a creature used to ranging over twenty kilometres, it had felt small and confining.

Zombies broke through the walls in the early days of the outbreak. Uninterested in the tiger, they had let her leap and run past them.

Now the tiger glides among the shadows and over the rooftops. It isn't the jungle she's used to, but it's jungle enough. The high forbidding walls do not trouble her. She hunts her prey. She knows that now it is the humans who are caged.

Challenge 21: The Wasteland

The DHPD pulled out of the Hills weeks ago. I'm in the wasteland.
Between the idea
and the realitiy
I stumble across Brains Monroe.
Between the motion
And the act
He's put down his shotgun, but I'm holding mine.
Between the emotion
And the response
He's killed many, many of us.
Between the desire
and the spasm
I've only killed zombies.
Falls the Shadow.
The question is, can I pull the trigger?
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper

Challenge 22: Aren't you a little short for a Stormtrooper?

I never worked out what Gabby had done to get on the wrong side of the Veterans of Fort Creedy. Let's face it, the possibilities are legion.

The rescue plan we eventually came up with involved a looted army surplus store, some gas masks, and a rather unconvincing cover story about an old World War I stash of mustard gas.

For some reason it worked though.

I think Gabby must have been expecting us. Leastways, when I finally broken into his cell, he merely raised his head from the bunk and said, "Aren't you a little short for a stormtrooper?"

Challenge 23: Law and Order

"Sic Temper Tyrannis!" The cry echoes through the building.

I carry on binding up BD's leg as Delta come back, their excited voices chattering about the pursuit and the kill.

Gabby appears in the doorway. "We got Brains Monroe!" he says excitedly. "My twentieh kill!"

"Well done!"

They look up to BD. He started Delta, initiated the hunts for killers. Gabby's eyes flame with pride and then he's gone.

"Don't act so disapproving Sis," says BD. "It's a tough city out there. We're all the law and order there is."

Some law and order where we turn teenagers into executioners.

Challenge 24: Biohazard

"Officer Scalia, get the civilians out the back!"

"Aye Ma'am!"

"Wha? Why?" asked Gabby.

"Not now Gabs." It would be obvious before I finished talking that the 'cades weren't going to hold.

"There are zombies out the back, too. What kind of a dumb plan is this?" That was Arthur.

"These zombies *are* the ones from the back."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I could explain why but it would take ten minutes we don't have.

Luckily Biohazard has already gone, taking the civilians with him. Some days you need an officer who won't slow you up with too many questions.

Challenge 25: Citizen Mallows

“Well we’ve done away with money, haven’t we? You have to admit we’re not a capitalist society any more.”

“The bartering is a nightmare,” pointed out Cat. “You often complain about it.”

“Well that’s because the dealers in Caiger are fuckers. They’re trying to reimpose Capitalism by other means.”

Cat rolled her eyes. “I’m not doing it Gabby.”

“But you’re perfectly placed. Just announce we’re a commune. We share everything anyway.”

“We do? You want to redistribute some of your stash of chocolate then?”

“Hey! I’m saving it for Vicky!”

Cat laughed and shook her head. “No chocolate! No commune!”

Challenge 26: With it or on it

They’d come in through windows and skylights, guns blazing, and if you survived or even if you didn’t you maybe did or didn’t pass their test and eventually they’d leave.

Since they were killing ‘civilians’ and we were all that counted as ‘police’ we took them on. We hunted them down and crashed through windows and skylights (or at least Jim did).

We shot them and they shot us. Meanwhile the zombies tore down the barricades.

Then they went away, leaving the suburb in ruins. Wellington once said, ”The only thing worse than a battle lost is a battle won.”

Drabble Meme: Revolution for Gabby

“This is the Revolution! Hand over executive power!” stated Gabby as he swept in, his forces at his heels.

Cat laid down her pen. She looked tired. “Someone needs to run things.”

“Dunell Hills is a police state, and you know it. That’s without discussing the way civilians are expected to support officers.”

“Take away the DHPD and everyone gets eaten.”

Gabby pointed Slasher at her. “The time to talk me out of this has passed.”

“I’m not going to hand over.”

Gabby placed the muzzle against her forehead.

Cat raised her eyebrows. “Go on. Make my day,” she said.

Drabble Meme: “I’m back from the Dead” for Biohazard

A tattered police jacket hung from the zombie’s shoulders. Rotting flesh was falling away from an empty skull, but there was some semblance of a man I had known.

Biohazard had been missing for months, swallowed up into the interior of Malton, defeated by the simple effort of remaining alive in this town. I’d not expected to see him again.

Yet here he was, constituting a biohazard as usual.

Muscles rebuilt themselves over bone, and flesh over muscles. Bio twitched and writhed as Necrotech’s poison did its work.

Finally his eyes opened and he groaned. “Ah! Bittersweet taste of life.”

Drabble Meme: “Basically... Run” for Gabby

I sat down next to the little man. He stared down at the swarming hordes of zombies in the street below. Some were already collapsing and crumbling to dust, victims of the accelerated virus.

“You planned this all along, didn’t you?” I couldn’t help the tone of accusation in my voice.

“Broadly speaking.”

“People died.”

He looked at me, expression neutral. “You should have done as I told you.”

A crash below us. Some zombie must have broken through our barricades. “Is that part of the plan?”

The little man stood up. “Not exactly.”

“So what do we do now?”

Drabble Meme: Life in Uniform for Goldstar (Double Drabble)

"There's really no escape, love. You might as well come back here." Alasdair Crowley leaned out of the window.

The plank hung out over empty space. Cotty Street Police Station beckoned invitingly on the other side of the road. The DHPD were so close and yet so far.

"You'll fall to your death. Come back to your Uncle Alasdair."

Zombies thronged the street. One of them, a policeman's cap strangely askew on its head, let out a long low groan.

"Come back. There's a good little girl."

I jumped and crashed into the throng of semi-rotted bodies. I closed my eyes, waiting for the inevitable; the teeth, the claws, the death that is not the end.

There was a lot of noise. When I opened my eyes, I saw the zombie in the police cap, in fact an entire uniform, between me and the horde. He groaned once more and his arms flailed, knocking back a lurching monstrosity.

A door banged open. "In here!" shouted a voice.

I got to my feet and ran.

"What happened there?" I asked, once I was safe inside the PD.

"That's Goldstar," said a grim-faced blonde woman. "A life spent in uniform dies hard."

Mean Streets

I dropped through a skylight into a nightmare torture chamber that stank of blood, fear and urine. A lone man was chained up to the wall, his mind broken, cursing and swearing at the burns and lacerations that swarmed across his body in intricate patterns. The place was littered with home-made blades and spikes whose use was only too clear.

I shot the man once, through the head and hoped the resulting zombie would break free before his tormentors returned. Then I fled.

The streets of Malton are mean, but sometimes they are preferable to the horrors behind the barricades.

The Dead

We are The Dead.

We have woken, clawing our way out of clammy earth, pushing aside rotten timber, opening our eyes to the baleful sun. Sinew and bone knits together.

We rise and answer the call.

We are many. We are one.

The sole purpose is to sweep away everything in our path, slowly but inexorably. We will cleanse the pathetic detritus of the living, who scrape together meagre, small-minded lives in the wasteland that is our birthright.

In the end each one is alone and lost and friendless.

Only we will remain, united, together and it will be good.

Medical Attention

I stared in disbelief at the man on the stretcher. His head rocked back and forth as his mind raced through some delerious fever dream. When I touched his wounded leg he screamed with the pain.

"He fell and broke his leg, then it festered. We heard the DHPD had medical supplies."

I looked at the stretcher bearers. They were obviously new to Malton.

I sighed, pulled out my gun, and placed a bullet in the patient's brain.

"This is what counts for medical attention in Malton, sweetie." I said to their disbelieving faces. "He'll be fine once he's revived."

Chapter 29

A Romantic Night Out

A Primeval Short Story

Claudia huddled deeper in her coat. Trust Nick to drive a car with broken heating.

"Sorry about the date," said Nick from the driver's seat.

"Not your fault," said Claudia. "We can always have a meal together another time."

"Tell you what," Nick told her, "soon as we hit the M6 we'll stop at a service station. I can treat you to a romantic Burger King."

Claudia closed her eyes and sighed. "What a week! First the golf course and now this."

"I think it's been rather a good week."

Claudia looked across and caught Nick grinning at her from behind the wheel. She couldn't help smiling back. On the personal front she hadn't had a bad week. Nick had asked her out to dinner and kissed her, though not quite in the customary order. Then, of course, walkers had spotted something in the Peak District and all her romantic plans, which had included a (now hastily cancelled) hair appointment and considerable investment in new lingerie had gone to pot. She'd have to see how seductive Nick could manage to be in a motorway service station. She supposed there might still be an opportunity to show off new underwear, albeit her distinctly unsexy thermals.

Darkness had fallen an hour ago. In the headlights she could make out a steep slope on the right rising upwards and a crash barrier to their left. The land was old Forestry Commission by the looks of it. Conifers planted in rows. She wasn't quite sure where they were. Mercifully far from the main tourist towns and villages it seemed.

"I hope nothing is trapped on this side of the anomaly," she said.

Nick shook his head. "If there is, Stephen and the Special Forces team should find it."

"But you don't think so."

"I'm almost certain the utahraptors were pack animals. From the tracks a big group came through the anomaly and then went back again. It's unlikely there are any stragglers."

"Unlikely enough that you were prepared to let Stephen lead the hunt without you?"

"I had better things to do," he said and smiled across at her again.

Claudia smiled back and wriggled inside her coat. Maybe she could get him back to her place and then contrive some sort of magical underwear change in the bathroom. She probably had enough M&S instant meals in the freezer to throw together something that approximated to a romantic dinner.

A house flashed past in the headlights barely registering on her consciousness and then there was sudden bang. Nick and Claudia both cried out at once. She had a vision of something large on the bonnet of the car. Claws scraped across the cracked windscreen. Beside her Nick was wrestling with the steering wheel and then Claudia heard the sound of metal scraping against metal and the car tipped up at an angle. She screamed as she realised they were off the road and heading down the slope. Nick pulled down on the steering wheel, trying to control the car, and they slewed sideways. Then Claudia felt the car tip. It seemed to hang for a minute and then it rolled. She ducked, shielding the top of her head with her arms as, rollercoaster like, she was first one way up then the other. Then they came to a sudden shuddering halt, car upright. Shaken, Claudia kicked open her door, released the seat belt and scrambled out. In the light of the headlights she could make out a small clump of trees which they'd apparently fetched up against. There was the crumpled body of what looked like a raptor under the front wheels. The back of the car seemed to hang over a precipice.

"Nick?" She peered back through the doors.

Nick was sitting still on the driver's side.

"Nick!"

He looked at her. "Claudia, are you all right?"

"Shaken and bruised but otherwise fine. How about you?"

"My leg hurts."

It was difficult to see anything but it was clear that his side of the car was partially crushed by the trees it had crashed into.

"Can you move?" she asked.

"I think so."

He started to pull himself towards her, screamed and stopped.

"Hang on a moment," she told him.

He'd just tossed the regulation backpack he'd been given earlier in the day, into the back of the car. Claudia hauled it out and rummaged through it in the beams of the headlights. First aid kit, food, rope, torch! She came back round the side of the car and switched on the torch to look in. There was a nasty red colour on the driver's side under the dashboard, but at least she could see everything and it didn't look like Nick was trapped.

"I'm going to phone Ditzy," she said.

"How about an ambulance?" suggested Nick.

Claudia shook her head as she fished her handbag from under the passenger seat. "Raptor under the front wheels."

"If I die from blood loss, I'm blaming you," he replied.

The medic answered almost straight away.

"Ditzy, it's me, Claudia. Nick and I have been in an accident."

"What sort of an accident?"

"A Raptor jumped the car and we crashed."

"What's your situation?"

"I'm fine but Nick's leg is hurt. It's too painful for him to move. The raptor's dead."

"Is there any bleeding?"

"Some."

"OK. You need to stop that."

"I've got one of the First Aid kits."

"Good, there are bandages in there but first can you see where it's bleeding?"

Claudia scrambled back in the car. "Where are you bleeding?" she asked shining the flashlight under the seat. Now she looked more closely there was a nasty gash in his thigh near the torn metal of the car door.

"I see it," she said. "It's his thigh."

"What's the bleeding like? Is it spurting?"

"Errr, no."

"That's good. Sounds like he's missed any arteries. Get Nick to put pressure on it."

"Did you get that?" she asked Nick.

He nodded and clamped his hands over the wound, crying out as he did so.

"Right," said Ditzy, "put a sterile dressing and a bandage on it. You remember how from my First Aid briefing?"

"I'm going to have to."

"Good girl. Now do you know where you are?"

"Err, about half an hour along the road to the M6 from the anomaly site."

"Close enough. I'm going to hang up now, alert everyone to where you are and then come and get you. I won't use this phone so you can ring me back any time if you need help. Get Nick bandaged up and then stay put, OK?"

"OK." She heard a click as the line closed down.

Claudia pocketed the phone and opened the First Aid kit she'd found earlier, pulling out a dressing and a roll of bandages. She scrambled back into the car and leaned across Nick so she could reach his leg.

"What did Ditzy say?" he asked. There was a tightness in his voice that suggested he was in pain.

"You'll live," she reported. "Help is on the way."

Nick nodded. Claudia ripped the remains of his trousers away from the wound and began wrapping the bandage round his leg. She felt a little self-conscious since the exercise left her half-sprawled across his lap.

"You know," said Nick, "in other circumstances this would be quite enjoyable."

"Hold that thought," she said, scrambling back upright. She paused her face only a couple of inches from his and considered kissing him, at which point the car lurched backwards slightly.

"What was that?" asked Nick.

"The back of the car," she said nervously. "It's not exactly on anything."

"You could have mentioned that!" he said, full of Scots' indignation.

The car shuddered again.

"I have to get out of here," he said.

"You can't move," she objected.

"Believe me, I can if I have to."

Claudia backed out of the car and watched as Nick grabbed the back of the passenger seat and hauled himself across. He screamed again and stopped panting.

"Nick!"

"I have got to get out of here," he said between clenched teeth.

Claudia couldn't disagree. She leaned into the car once more and wrapped her arms round Nick's chest.

"OK, on three," she said, "one, two, three..."

Nick hauled once again on the edge of the seat and Claudia pulled too. He screamed again but Claudia kept on pulling until she felt him slide across the seat and then they both fell out of the car onto the ground. It's front rocked upwards,

freed from Nick's weight, and the whole thing slid backwards but then stopped again. Claudia scrambled to her feet.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

"Mebbe."

She shone the torch around and saw a rock only a short distance from them.

"How about we get you to that rock?"

"Sounds good."

Wrapping one arm round his waist, she hauled him to his feet. He gripped her shoulder and they struggled awkwardly, with much groaning and cursing, to the rock where she set him down. Then she went back to the car and gathered up the rucksack and her handbag from the ground, bringing them to the rock as well. Her phone rang.

"Claudia, it's Ditzy. How are the two of you."

"Surviving. Tell me the cavalry are on the way."

"We'll be with you as soon as possible, but you're looking at three quarters of an hour. The road loops close to where we are but we think it'll be quicker anyway to get back to the cars and then drive. Hart's found some tracks. Given that you hit a raptor he says it looks like another small group came through before the big pack. He doesn't think they went back. If you're where we think you are and Hart's timeline is right then they could easily be in your area."

Claudia's blood ran cold. "How many?"

"Four, maybe five."

Claudia looked around her anxiously.

"The whole team will be coming, armed," said Ditzy. "Stay in the car and, if possible, turn on some heating. I don't want the two of you dying from shock and exposure."

"We've left the car," Claudia cut in.

There was a silence at the end of the phone.

"We've not gone far," she added, "but it's sort of hanging over a precipice."

"How's Cutter's leg?"

"Painful, but we've got it bandaged."

"He can walk?"

"With help."

"It's probably not broken then, which is good news."

Claudia was distracted from replying by the sound of pebbles and rocks bouncing down the slope.

Nick obviously heard it as well because he picked up the torch and shone it upwards. Edging cautiously down the embankment towards them was a second

raptor.

"Ditz, we've got company. I'll phone you back."

Claudia switched off the phone and dropped it back in her pocket.

"Any ideas?" she asked Nick.

"It shouldn't like anything too strange. It seems quite wary of the torchlight." Nick flashed the torch around a bit and Claudia watched the raptor skitter slightly.

"How about loud noises?" she asked.

"Screaming probably won't help. It will sound like a distressed animal."

"I was thinking of this." Claudia fished her rape alarm out of her handbag.

"Worth a try," Nick agreed.

Claudia switched it on. The raptor shied away from the high-pitched siren. Claudia switched it off and she and Nick watched as Nick kept the creature in the torchlight. It gave them a fairly wide berth but headed towards the car. Claudia hadn't actually seen a raptor properly before, not outside Nick's textbooks at any rate. It walked upright on two legs, about the size of a large man, maybe a little bigger with its arms tucked in to it's chest. She couldn't see the feet properly but Connor had been lecturing them on utahraptors all day so she knew it should have a single pronounced claw. According to Connor the raptor jumped on its prey, held it with its fore-limbs and then kicked with the claws on its hind legs. Claudia suppressed a shudder.

"It's decided we might be dangerous, I think," said Nick. "It must be checking out the smell of blood from the car."

The raptor nosed at its dead comrade on the ground for a bit and then started to investigate the car itself.

"It's quite curious," said Nick in a fascinated voice. "It can't ever have seen a car before but it's going to climb inside anyway."

The raptor poked its head through the passenger door, now several feet off the ground. Then it worked its way round to the rear door which Claudia had also left open. She and Nick watched as, cautiously, it squeezed itself inside.

"So utahraptors are not that scared of novel things," observed Claudia. She didn't think that boded well.

"Maybe it thinks it's a sort of cave or something," hypothesized Nick.

Claudia watched as the car rocked and heard the startled scrabbling from within it.

"Keep the torch on the car," she said and cautiously left Nick's side. She scrambled the short distance down the slope until she was standing in front of it. Then, gathering all her strength, she grabbed the front bumper and heaved upwards. She felt the car tilt further, pivoting on whatever had arrested its slide.

Then there was a sound of scraping metal and it skewed sideways from her grip. She staggered backwards as the whole machine started to roll once more and then it was gone over the edge. There was a sound of banging and then a splash somewhere below her.

"That was my car!" said Nick indignantly.

"Put it on expenses," she said. "I'll sign it off."

"We shouldn't harm them unnecessarily."

"We're in the middle of nowhere. You can't move and we're completely unarmed. So don't get all high and mighty with me, Nicholas Cutter."

"What did Ditzy say on the phone?" asked Nick, apparently deciding not to argue. Which meant, Claudia thought, that he must be in a lot of pain.

"Stay in the car. Keep warm." Claudia paused and sighed. "Stephen thinks a small group of raptors came through before the main pack and are still here. Four or five, apparently."

Nick looked up the hillside. "So there are more on the way."

Claudia nodded mutely.

"We should get to that house back along the road. We're too exposed here."

"Ditzy said to stay put."

"He said stay in the car. He also said to stay warm, which we can't. Phone him and let him know where we're going."

"How are we going to get there? You can hardly walk."

"With your help I'll manage. Believe me I'd prefer a little pain to being eaten by a raptor."

Claudia pursed her lips but she couldn't really fault his logic. She fished out the mobile again and phoned Ditzy.

"Claudia!" The medic sounded relieved. "Are you all right?"

"We're fine. Cutter's car has seen better days though."

He laughed. "Cutter's car is not my responsibility."

"Look! Ditz, we're right in the open here and it sounds like there are more raptors on the way. We passed a house just before we crashed. We're going to try to make our way back there."

She heard Ditzy sigh. "If Cutter can walk it's not a bad idea. I still want to get you both warm but, as you say, somewhere you can defend yourself can't hurt. I'd rather you didn't have to move but under the circumstances, yes, see if you can get there."

"OK."

"Now, there will be morphine in that First Aid kit you've got."

"Morphine?"

"Believe me, on morphine you can walk out of a combat zone with a broken leg. Doesn't do the leg much good, mind."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," said Nick suddenly from where he sat.

"Nick's not convinced," Claudia relayed to Ditzy.

"Well, I'm not there so I can't judge. But you said initially his leg was too painful to move. You can try getting to the house without it but don't forget you've got it. At least check the kit for me and confirm it's there."

Claudia did so and realised that the morphine was a small pack of syringes.

"This has to be injected," she said.

"We covered that in the First Aid briefing. You've practised using the Med and Ket antidote. The principle's the same."

"That was then."

"Claudia, there's no one else going to be with you for at least half-an-hour. You've done this in practice. You'll be fine."

"If you say so."

"I do. Now, both of you get moving and don't forget you have the morphine if you need it."

Claudia put the phone back into her pocket and turned towards Nick. He was breathing deeply and had a pinched and pained look about his face. She looked at the packet of syringes in her hand.

"No," he said.

Claudia nodded. She packed the first-aid kit back into the backpack and added her handbag to the mix for good measure. She put the morphine pack in her pocket along with her phone. Nick had the torch. She shouldered the backpack and staggered under the weight. Nick put out his hand, holding her arm.

"I'm all right," she said and smiled at him in the torchlight. "You ready?"

He nodded and eased himself to his feet. She wrapped one arm round his waist and he slung one over her shoulder adding his weight to the backpack. Nick shone the light ahead of them and they began to struggle the three metres or so they had to travel in order to get up the hillside. It was agonisingly slow going. Although it wasn't as steep as she had at first feared, it was steep enough and Nick clearly had a lot of trouble putting any weight on his right leg. Mostly he just made small grunts and whimpers but sometimes he cried out inadvertently. Claudia closed her eyes and wondered whether to raise the subject of morphine once more but didn't.

Slowly they edged upwards. Claudia would take a step forward weighed down by the backpack and then haul on Nick as he half-limped, half-hopped forwards. Before long they were both panting and Nick gripped her shoulder painfully. At long last they reached the torn and broken crash barrier. Claudia grabbed hold of

it with both hands, hauling herself up onto the road, and then reached down and hauled Nick after her. They sat for a moment on the edge of the road, her arms wrapped around him, his head resting on her chest. Then he stirred himself.

"Must keep moving," he said.

Claudia nodded and clambered once more to her feet, helping Nick up after her. Nick shone the torch around them. Eyes flashed out at them from the tree line.

"Uh oh!" said Nick.

Claudia grabbed his waist once more and they began cautiously backing away. Nick kept the torchlight fixed on the eyes. Slowly and cautiously three raptors emerged from the treeline. Claudia fished her rape alarm out of her pocket and set it off. The raptors backed away slightly but continued to follow. Nick quickly flashed the torch around once more. The house appeared in the light, no more than a couple of hundred yards from where they stood but, given how long it had taken them and how hard it had been to reach the road, Claudia's heart sank. They would never make it.

"Claudia," said Nick and his voice had a steely quality to it.

"Yes?"

"I want you to give me your alarm, dump that rucksack, and then make a run for it to the house."

"No." Claudia kept edging towards the house half dragging Nick with her.

"Those things will work out we're injured before too long and then we're mincemeat. You need to get to the house and find help, or a weapon of some sort if you really must, bleach, chemicals, a good hefty spade, anything."

"I can't leave you here."

"If you leave the torch and the rape alarm with me I'll be as safe as we both are together. You'll be the one in the most danger because you'll be a fleeing target."

"Oh, thanks!"

"Claudia!"

"OK. But you're taking a shot of morphine first. At least you'll be able to run if you have to."

"I need to be able to concentrate."

"You *need* to be able to run."

Nick glared at her for a moment. She wouldn't normally have been able to force him to back down but the pain was taking a lot out of him, she could tell. After a moment or two he nodded.

She shuffled off the backpack then took the morphine out of her pocket. Getting a syringe out of the packet was a nightmare of cold fingers and the unpleasant

awareness of the raptors close by.

"Buttock or thigh?" she asked once she had a needle in her hands.

"You ever done this before?" he asked.

"No. You?"

"I've anaesthetised animals."

She looked down at the syringe in the half-light.

"Thigh," he said.

Claudia knelt beside him and placed one hand gently on his thigh, fingers touching the hip bone. She remembered practising this amid a lot of innuendo and giggles. It didn't seem so amusing now. She drew in her fingers and then straightened them again so they covered, hopefully, the right portion of the muscle.

"Where your hand is," said Nick.

She nodded, lifted her hand and jabbed in the needle "like a dart" as Ditzy had demonstrated in the briefing. Nick gasped. Hurriedly Claudia pressed the plunger home.

"Done?" queried Nick.

"I think so." Claudia withdrew the needle.

"OK," said Nick. "Go! Now!"

She gave the raptors another blast of the rape alarm for good measure. Then handed it to Nick. Once more he flashed the torchlight towards the house.

"You see the way?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to keep the light on you. It'll help you see where your feet are."

She nodded again.

"You ready?"

A third nod.

"Go!"

Claudia ran. Behind her she heard Nick shout. Presumably to get the raptors' attention. She didn't dare look back but concentrated on the house. As she drew near she tripped a security light which flooded the whole place with illumination. She reached the front door and began to bang on it, ringing the bell at the same time. She risked a look behind her. She could see Nick on the road, but not the raptors. The rape alarm sounded once more. There was no movement in the house. Claudia swore. They were making enough noise. If there was anyone in they'd have heard.

She looked around her desperately and saw a large garage with a side door and window. She'd seen how to do this on telly and only hoped it was halfway accurate. She pulled off her coat and wrapped it round her hand and then smashed

it hard against the window. The glass cracked in a satisfying fashion. She pushed her padded hand through the window and then wriggled it out of the coat and reached round for the door. Thankfully there was a standard chub style lock which she flicked open. Hurriedly she pulled the door. Alarms went off all around her but she ignored them and groped her way into the interior. Her hand fell on a light switch and she switched it on to reveal a large workshop piled high with tools. Away down at the road she heard the rape alarm sound again. There was a weedkiller spray attached to a backpack by the door which she grabbed and slipped on. Above it, on a shelf, was what looked like a hedge trimmer. She picked it up. There was a switch that looked remarkably like a trigger. She depressed it and was pleased to see the blades whirr on. She left no more time but turned and fled back towards the road.

Nick was seated uncomfortably on the crash barrier and the raptors appeared closer than they had previously. She grabbed the rape alarm from him and put it in her pocket. Then she thrust the hedge trimmer into one of his hands, took the torch and pulled out the nozzle of the weed-killer gun.

"What now?" she asked.

Nick blinked at her slowly and shook his head. "Well they've not actually attacked yet," he said after a moment. Claudia waited but apparently there was no more.

"So we back up to the house carefully?" she asked.

He blinked at her, then nodded. Claudia hooked the hand holding the torch round his waist once more and hauled him to his feet. It caused the torch to shine erratically on the ground and she fumbled with the weedkiller.

"I'm all right," he said, standing on both legs.

"That'll be the morphine."

"'S what it's for."

Claudia sighed but let go of him. It was certainly going to be easier with both hands free. They began to back up the driveway. Nick looked curiously at the hedge trimmer and switched it on a couple of times experimentally waving it around a little erratically. It suddenly occured to Claudia that giving a hedge trimmer to a man dosed up on morphine hadn't been a terribly good idea.

"Careful with that."

"Sorry," he said, "I was looking at the..." then he seemed to think the better of it. "Sorry," he mumbled a second time.

The raptors followed them, one slightly ahead of the other two. Then it stopped and crouched low. "It's going to jump," Claudia thought, panicked. She dropped the torch at her feet and grasped the nozzle of the weed-killer with both

hands. The raptor leaped towards Nick. Claudia aimed the spray gun at it's face, hearing the sound of the trimmer being activated. The raptor screeched as the spray from the weedkiller hit it squarely in the eyes. She heard a grinding sound from the trimmer. The raptor started to keen horribly. The sounds of the trimmer ceased. Claudia picked up the torch and shone it back down the path. The other two raptors stood still watching them. She swept it back towards the sounds of pain, where Nick should be. The raptor lay on the ground thrashing to and fro, the hedge trimmer discarded and broken next to it. Nick stood, covered in blood, staring at the horrific site at his feet.

"Are you hurt?" she asked anxiously, moving around the fallen raptor towards him.

"No. None of the blood's mine." He waved his hands slowly in front of him. They dripped blood.

"Come on," she whispered, ignoring the sounds. "Come on, let's get going."

When he still didn't move she took one of his hands and gently pulled him up the path. Once again the utahraptors followed but they paused by their fallen comrade, nudging at it with their heads. Claudia continued to lead Nick by the hand. She guessed that running on Nick's leg would be a very bad idea. However she wanted to get to the comparative safety of the garage as quickly as possible so she set a brisk pace and Nick seemed content to follow along behind her.

Claudia looked around the place as they entered. She'd been in too much of a rush when she broke in to register it properly. The workshop area was more like a large shed containing a handful of power tools and gardening equipment. A door then led from that into what was, presumably, the main garage. She sat Nick down on a stool and shut and locked the door behind them.

Nick looked dreadful. He was covered in blood. His face was pale and his eyes were wide and staring. There was a sink in one corner and Claudia dampened a cloth and began to wipe the blood from his face. He smiled slightly.

"I can clean myself up you know." He took the cloth from her but then stopped, staring at it.

"I'm not so sure," she returned. "You look pretty shaken." She dropped a light kiss on to the top of his head, took back the cloth and finished wiping off the blood. He caught her hand.

"Thanks," he said. "You're beautiful you know," he added smiling slightly drunkenly at her. His hands reached up. "You have starlight in your hair," he said, pulling at strands of it, "like the light from an anomaly."

Claudia shivered. It made her look for her coat which she pulled through the broken window where she had left it. "Ditzy said to keep warm."

"Body heat," he said.

She grinned. "Sounds like a good idea."

She moved closer and he wrapped his arms round her burying his head in her chest. Then his hands started to drift upwards towards her breast. She slapped them back.

"Watch it you!"

"I'm still seeing stars," he murmured.

"That'll be the morphine."

"Sounds like a good excuse," and the hands started to wander again. She trapped them and held them round her waist.

There was a crash of glass. Claudia let out an involuntary scream as a raptor's head smashed through the window. A clawed foot reached into the garage and down onto the workbench beneath affording Claudia an excellent view of the sharp, curved, specialised slashing claw Connor had been so excited about. It started scrabbling for purchase. Without thinking Claudia broke away from Nick's grasp and grabbed a spade from beside the wall. She swung it with all her might, crying out as she did so. There was a satisfying crunch and the raptor fell away from the window with a thud.

"You're wasted in management," said Nick behind her. "We should have you in the special forces team." He giggled at his own joke.

"It's not funny," she said, angered.

She felt his hand on her arm.

"I know, I'm sorry. Thanks for looking after me so well." He giggled again.

There was a thud against the door and the hinges shook.

"Give me that chainsaw," said Nick suddenly.

Claudia looked at it. "Absolutely not. I wouldn't trust you with that even if you weren't on drugs. As it is you're more likely to kill us with it than a raptor."

"Fire," said Nick. "We should be able to hold them off with fire."

Claudia looked around them. There was a small petrol can on a shelf above a lawnmower. She picked it up and sloshed it experimentally. It felt full. She put it on the workbench.

"Wood," she observed, moving to the back of the shed behind a table saw. "Dust sheets," she added grabbing a pile from a corner.

She carried them and the wood over to the workbench. The banging against the door continued. Nick began tearing up the dust sheets using a pair of gardening scissors but after he'd stabbed himself twice Claudia took them from him and told him to sit still. She tore them up and tied them round the ends of the scraps of wood. She laid two out on the workbench.

"Let's get those lit," she said, eyeing the door, "before we make any more."

She opened the petrol and poured a little onto each makeshift torch. She winced anxiously as some of it sloshed onto the floor.

"Lighter?" said Nick.

"I don't smoke!"

"Neither do I."

Claudia looked around desperately. Nick closed his eyes and rocked on the stool.

"Camping supplies!" Claudia had to pull over a stool to reach up to what looked like a small gas stove. Nick took it from her and pressed an ignition switch on one side. The ring lit up. He smiled. Claudia relieved him of it before he could do any damage.

"Hey!" he said indignantly. "Ooh!" he added, "flame trail!" and batted his hand in front of him.

Carefully Claudia held each makeshift torch over the stove until they were alight. Then she moved to between Nick and the door. It was not long before it gave way with a massive crash. A utahraptor moved through and Claudia waved and jabbed at it with a brand. Suddenly Nick stood and grabbed one of the torches from her.

"Hey!" she said, alarmed. Then he wavered on his feet and dropped it. The spilled petrol on the floor under the workbench caught light.

Throwing her own torch at the creature Claudia snatched the gas stove out of the way. She grabbed Nick's arm and they backed further into the shed. There was a small domestic fire extinguisher by the second door and Claudia picked it up uncertainly. At the moment the utahraptor was hovering in the doorway, clearly undecided about the fire on the work bench. If she put it out they would have no defence. Nick rattled the interior door.

"Locked!" he reported.

"Crowbar? Saw? Hammer?" asked Claudia.

"Axe!" he said, in a satisfied fashion, hoisting one from the pile of gardening tools stacked by the shelf unit. "Hold me up."

"Oh! no!" said Claudia. "I'll have that."

She handed him the fire extinguisher and took the axe. She braced herself and swung it at the door. It bit into the wood in a satisfying fashion but she lost precious seconds trying to get it free again. Then she stood back for a second swing.

Suddenly a voice sounded clearly outside.

"Duck!"

Extensive drilling by special forces had them both instinctively drop to the floor.

"Down!" Claudia shouted.

There was the sound of automatic weapons' fire and then Stephen's voice.

"I hit it. Give the Ketamine a minute."

The firing stopped. Claudia cautiously raised her head. She couldn't see the raptor so she hurriedly grabbed the fire extinguisher from Nick, who was sitting on the floor, a foolish grin on his face, and turned it on the workbench. Then Captain Ryan, Stephen and Ditzy were standing in the doorway.

"Party!" said Nick from the floor and giggled.

"I see you used the morphine," said Ditzy.

Six hours later, Claudia and Stephen were manhandling a sleepy but irritable Nick up the steps to his house. The morphine had worn off and he was in considerable pain which the doctor had, rather unsympathetically, said served him right for putting weight on his ankle. Nick had demanded more morphine in extremely colourful Scots which the doctor, an unflappable Yorkshire lass, had calmly ignored. She had suggested Claudia buy some co-codamol however and Nick had taken some before they left the hospital.

"I'll be fine," he said for the umpteenth time.

"We know," replied Stephen indulgently, "but it'll set our minds at rest if we get you into bed before we leave."

"I don't need to go to bed."

"No weight to be put on the ankle for at least three days!" said Claudia firmly. "I'm going to set up surveillance just to make sure."

They got Nick into the house and to his bedroom with relatively little difficulty but he then made them wait in the corridor while he got into his pyjamas.

"It's not like we haven't shared tents," Stephen shouted through the bedroom door as they listened to the grunts and thumps emanating from the other side.

"A man has his dignity," Nick returned, "albeit not much when he's on crutches. I'm clinging to the few shreds I have left."

Eventually they got him settled and Claudia was content he wasn't going to hare off anywhere, not in the next eight hours or so, at least.

"So much for our night out," he said, a little mournfully, as she sat on the edge of the bed to wish him good night.

She smiled indulgently at him. “There’ll be plenty of time once your ankle is better. Some things are worth waiting for a little.”

She kissed him on the nose and then got up to leave. As she turned she caught a glimpse of herself in the wardrobe mirror. Like Nick had said, there was starlight in her hair as if an anomaly glimmered behind it. She blinked and the image was gone.

Chapter 30

The Web of Time

A Doctor Who Short Story

It was the middle of nowhere and yet someone had created it as a place. A rough undefined place, but a place nonetheless. It had wall and floor, it had air and moisture. But even so it wasn't quite a place. It had no past and it had no future. It was merely a gateway. It was the edge of the cliff from which the traveler must jump before he could soar.

Sam shone the bright beam of her torch around about her. The light reflected back off twisting walls: A kaleidescope of colours leaping out at her from the darkness; flashes of brilliant red and the irridescant sheen of peacock blue, forest greens and traces of gold like a seam of precious metal, intertwined. It was like staring into an oily whirlpool, only writ large so that only the smallest glimpses of it were revealed in the light of her torch at any one moment. To Sam it was a wonder, not knowing that this was the colour and shape of unformed stuff. Not knowing that it would appear to some like gravel and shale, loose rocks and mud, the stuff of which things are made, but not a thing of itself except that it had been grafted into a structure to serve a purpose but no more.

Perhaps, though, she sensed this quality of unfinished clay that some would perceive in the place, for Sam resolved to be unimpressed. "Tunnels," she said, "again."

The Doctor took the torch from her. If he had made note of her words and tone he showed no outward sign of it. He, too, swung the torch across the vista before them, watching the splashes of colour leap out and then fade away into the darkness. "Quite incredible," he murmured. Once again the torch light danced, his head following the motion of the beam to catch the display as it happened. The Doctor might like to think that he was more in tune with the nature of the

universe than those who traveled with him but in this he was often wrong. He was too interested in the new, too ready to be impressed, too oblivious sometimes to the reality over the form. He forgot that what seemed beautiful to him was as nothing to others.

And Sam, her sarcasm forgotten now her point had been made, forgot also any intuition that might have driven that sarcasm and asked, "what sort of rock is it?"

Unseen by her the Doctor smiled. "I've no idea," he confessed cheerfully, bending closer to examine the substance. He brushed his hand over the surface, letting the long elegant fingers trace the turning contours. "It's quite smooth," he said. "It could be artificial."

Sam looked at the contorted twists and turns. At first sight it looked completely random, like a natural formation, but the overall effect was pleasing. An almost spiral of colour and light leading on into the darkness. She felt as if she stood at the lip of a vortex poised to plunge in or hang back. But no sense of giddiness or nausea overcame her, more a sort of exhilaration, like standing in the winds at the top of a high cliff or tall building.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"No idea," said the Doctor again. He turned to her shining the torch on his face so she could see his expression. He grinned. Even with the long shadows cast over his face she saw the excitement and pleasure in that grin. The shadows gave it an edge, or perhaps it was experience that gave it an edge. Whichever or whatever, there was an edge of danger in that grin.

"What do you mean, no idea? what did the instruments say?"

He turned the the torch away again and his expression was once more plunged into darkness. "We're in the middle of an empty region of space."

The edginess increased, Sam felt it and knew they were at the beginning of something, but still she held back, "So it's some sort of asteroid, uncharted space junk."

"No, there's nothing here at all, I checked twice."

He had checked twice. They were nowhere. There was nothing here, except the tunnel and the cliff edge and the vortex of colour. "So what's this then?" Sam gestured around them, flinging her arms wide, encompassing the colours and the contours.

"I haven't a clue," admitted the Doctor happily. He handed her back the torch, "left or right?" he asked.

For the Doctor, this was like the toss of the coin. A random element. Adventure happens when you bow to madam chance, when you let the tide of fortune take you in its grip and carry you where it will. His companions were chance

and fortune and, always, his guides and his strength. Sam more so than others. She flashed the torch up and down the tunnel, past the incongruous shape of the TARDIS, which stood solid and square in the tunnel, rejecting the fancy of the place. The tunnel sloped slightly. She indicated the upward slope.

"This way," she said, "at least we'll be running down hill when we have to escape."

"Excellent," the Doctor thrust his hands in his pockets and set off ahead of her. She watched his shadow against the curved walls. A black Doctor shaped silhouette in a field of swirling colours.

They walked for a short way, the tunnels unchanging in their variety. Then, before them opened a cavern. It was no vast cathedral such as bedazzles the eye and awes the mind, for this was not that sort of place. Instead it was an ante-room. A small bay where the coloured walls gave way to a tangle of glittering threads. These threads spread out into the distance leading the eye into the heights and depths of some vast expanse. The threads twisted and knotted, looped and flowed across each other, some as thick as a human wrist and some fine as gossamer. Caught in the threads were shapes, like the decorations on a Christmas tree, small rotating orbs, figures like people, buildings, continents, suns. A multitude of worlds caught in a web and held. Sam reached out towards it.

The Doctor caught her hand, "don't touch!" he said.

"Why not, it's beautiful," she whispered.

"There's some sort of interface there. You probably can't see it, but it's a kind of temporal shift, I can see its tendrils reaching out like mist." There was wonder in his voice for he could see whirls and eddies of time like another dimension to the threaded web that drifted in and around the tangled skiens reaching into the void between them and curling out into the room where they stood. A tunnel of colours and contours formed from time rather than rock. The Doctor nearly made the connection then, but not quite yet, he hung back and didn't make the leap of intuition. One thread meandered towards them reaching out lazily to curl about their bodies. The Doctor took a sharp step backwards, dragging Sam with him, "best not to get to close," he smiled apologetically.

"What is it?" asked Sam.

"Something to do with time," mused the Doctor.

Sam giggled, "the web of time!"

And the Doctor made the connection. He saw how the colours and the contours in time and in space and on the screen blended into one, "you know it could be! The mathematics needed to create a representation like this would be incredible, but it could be!"

"You mean this is like the TARDIS scanner?" asked Sam. "It lets you look into the vortex?"

"More than that, it's a gateway to the Vortex, if you stepped out into it you would be in temporal free fall, at the mercy of the time winds." The cliff edge.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridors ahead of them. Instinctively Sam and the Doctor ducked back the way they had come. There was nothing really to hide behind, Sam was heading up the corridor, but the Doctor caught her hand and motioned her to remain. They stayed there, crouched in the gloom and the shadows watching the web of time.

Three silver figures approachred the room, they were humanoid, but small and delicate. To a casual observer they were completely silver, their clothes, hands, and features but if you looked harder you would see they were covered with some sort of silver cloth that clung to their bodies. The first one entered, she was more forward thinking and eager than many of her kind, her mind embraced possibilities that their's did not. To her own, had they been human, there was a shiftiness in her eye and her demeanour that discomforted. But they would have rejected conclusions drawn from demeanour. It was her reputation both for brilliance and for the unexpected that unnerved. She was unpredictable, that caused them to shun her. She glanced round the cavern and because she was wider thinking and wider ranging than her companions she also looked up the corridor and in looking up the corridor she looked right into Sam's eyes.

The reader will, no doubt, know already what she saw. The reader will have traveled far with the Doctor and Sam from the wastes of Hirath to the wonders of Hyspero from the dramas of the birth and death of suns to the peace and tranquility of the Eye of Orion. But even so perhaps an introduction is in order. Our silver woman who was, for her race, both tall and devious stared into the face of a woman who was still part girl but these days mostly woman. A certain maturity had entered her features so that while they were mostly unchanged from her sixteenth year she now impressed the viewer with a certain self-assurance, the knowledge that she was resourceful, able and independent. But it was not in our observer's ability to see these things for she was not human, what she saw was woman taller and therefore more devious than herself. A woman with a smooth wide face and close cropped blonde hair. A lithe woman with muscles honed through use more for agility more than for strength. And behind this woman was another. A man with long curling locks of brown hair that among Sam's kind had elicited the words romantic and Edwardian. The Doctor projected presence such that even one of the swimmers was given pause. This swimmer looked at the Doctor and recognised him as a powerful variable, a factor unknown by and unsuspected by

her fellows, a force of time. She looked into the Doctor's eyes and wove him into her plans, slotted him into the many contingencies she had considered. If only he was curious but, she reasoned, he would not be here if he was not curious. She turned her back on them and walked to the far side of the room, so that to see her, her companions would have to turn their backs on this new thing.

But there was little point in the move. Her companions cared not for the tunnel beyond. It was an artefactual irrelevance beyond their calculations. As she took their hands and helped them over the web into the currents and into freefall they might have looked into her face and seen the strange and exhilarated expression there and having seen it they might have wondered what caused it. But this is unlikely, such things were beyond the remarking of the swimmers. The hands parted and the swimmers fell over the edge and fell into the tracery. Once more the first, the tallest and most devious gazed up the corridor once more she looked into the eyes of these new beings and with one of those strange coincidences of nature that bind the universe together she made a gesture that was to both her and to them a salute. The she too stepped over the edge, off the cliff and into the web. And in that moment, though they did not know it, the Doctor and Sam were dragged also over the edge and into to web of the swimmers.

The Doctor hurried up once more, peering into the strands. Sam, beside him. The three swimmers were tangled in the skiens each moving apart, navigating through intersections.

"Surely they should be torn apart?" whispered Sam.

"Those suits are some sort of time suit. I have something similar in the TARDIS for effecting outside repairs in the vortex. I've never used it."

"Who were they?" asked Sam, "Where is this? What are they doing?"

"They're traveling in time without any machinery, a bit like swimming, I suppose, instead of taking a ship. They will end up wherever the time winds take them."

Freefall in the time vortex.

"But why?" asked the Doctor, "they could end up anywhere, they can have no control over their paths, unless," he stopped, looking at Sam, "the maths would be incredible, but the maths for this," he gestured at the web, " is breathtaking. A time lord could do it though."

"Do what?" asked Sam, "were they time lords?"

"No, I don't think so. No. But a time lord could navigate the web by incantation. If they were quick enough could work out the equations for where they needed to go as the time winds shifted. The TARDIS does something similar, but she has a lot of processing power and is more robust, less likely to get blown off

course," he shook his head, "but it is theoretically possible."

Freefall still, but freefall with direction and purpose.

The stayed a while, watching as the swimmers receded and vanished into the web, about their mysterious purposes. A small breeze came down the tunnel, blowing the Doctor's curls across his face. He looked up.

"That's not right," he said.

"What isn't?"

"Most of my cells have just lost five minutes."

The reader will know, as did Sam, that the Doctor, while he existed mostly fixed in time was yet a being of many times and many possibilities. The nature of time was woven into the fabric of his being and the details of his biodata. All his race could see the distortion of time and all his race could feel the pull of the time winds. But experience and necessity and the tangled plots and hopes, reasons and fears of a myriad of beings and forces had forged the Doctor into an instrument of power and sensitivity. The Doctor was a man of peace but he was forged as a weapon of war. To the Doctor the slightest stirring of the time winds pulled at his consciousness and alerted him as a faint call on the wind alerts a dog.

"The time winds?" hazarded Sam, "from that web thing? you said not to get too close."

"No, it wasn't the edge," said the Doctor. "Unless..." he looked worried. And at last he recognised the rock from which the place was built for what it was. The raw unfinished, unsculptured stuff of time. It held, but only weakly, as a mud hut in a rising gale.

"Quickly!" he cried and began to run back down the corridor towards the TARDIS. Sam followed, understanding from his tone that this was no time for questions. Habituated to the sudden crises that beset their lives.

It was an, airlock, mused the Doctor later when he had time to think and the need to explain the situation to Sam. It was mathematical projection of the vortex as had been the web, following a gentle air current which caused the slope of the corridor. One end connected to the place of the swimmers. A stable realization of the vortex, just large enough to get them away from their space and time so the raw power of the time winds couldn't damage it when they crossed over. But a temporary structure as must anything be that opened into the time winds, as the currants shifted it would strain and finally break. It remained a stable structure just long enough to serve as a bridge into the vortex.

Following behind him, knowing none of this as yet, Sam felt a breeze stirring the hairs at the back of her neck and knew in her heart that the wind was a dangerous thing.

"10 Minutes that time," shouted the Doctor, "except my right arm, that just gained an hour."

Sam didn't bother to reply. The TARDIS was in sight. The Doctor reached the door and struggled with the key in the lock. Sam felt the wind tugging at her clothes and as she and the Doctor fell into the TARDIS she felt the crumbling of the ground beneath her feet. The doors slammed shut behind them before they reached the console. The central column moved. The TARDIS was in flight. Silently, they watched on the scanner as the corridor outside began twisting, fell apart and merged into the familiar image of the vortex.

"What about the other travellers?" asked Sam.

"I don't know. There is no way I can trace them from here. Unless we meet them again by chance, sometime in the future, there is no way of knowing who or what they were."

Falling in the vortex, Kelsa smiled as she moved through the ever changing pasts, futures and possibilities. They had been unexpected but not unplanned for. Humming the incantations Kelsa hoped that the predications would be correct.

Chapter 31

PTSD

A Primeval Flashfic

The second psychologist, Dr Bryant, helped. The first was a disaster but then Jenny was such a mess at the time that sticking a pin at random into the Yellow Pages seemed like a good idea.

When Jenny came up out with the phrase 'my Freudian obsession with a father figure' at one of their weekly lunches, Lorraine Wickes quietly but firmly pointed her in the direction of someone else. Someone who was used to working with soldiers and special forces personnel and who knew not to ask questions she wasn't allowed to answer.

Dr Bryant was almost entirely uninterested in Jenny's father beyond assessing how able and willing he was to lend help and support. Indeed, she persuaded Jenny to co-opt what support she could from family and friends. They could help her feel secure in bad situations. They could do a hundred little things which meant Jenny didn't have to deal with quite so much, quite so quickly. She convinced Jenny there was no shame in placing yourself in a room with your back to the wall, so you knew exactly what was behind you, especially if that meant you could get through a social event without jumping in terror and spilling drinks on people.

Dr Bryant's professional exterior slipped when Jenny told her about "the incident". She was always careful never to pass opinion on Jenny's friends and family, she merely advised on coping strategies. On this occasion, however, she was provoked into saying "blithering idiots." Jenny tried to push her into telling Jenny these people weren't really Jenny's friends but the professional barriers had already fallen back into place.

"People can be friends in all sorts of ways," was all she said. "You need to decide for yourself when, what and how much you can expect of them."

Jenny had decided that a friend who knew you had a phobia about being crept up on wasn't really a friend if they told a perfectly nice man to "just tap her on the shoulder, would you?" because they thought it was funny. Roger Jenkins had thought it even funnier when Jenny's instant, unthinking, reaction was swing around, fists clenched and deck the man with a well-aimed right hook.

"Go on! Show the Hoi Polloi their place!" he brayed, while his friends laughed along. Then he ordered more champagne.

Jenny realised she had never liked him that much and wondered why on Earth she'd agreed to be plus one at his dreadful sister's wedding.

The man on the floor was one of the band. Jenny was speechless, her heart racing as adrenaline coursed through her system and the fight or flight response warred with her rational mind.

"Are you OK?" He scrambled to his feet, his face a mask of concern, his rapidly developing black eye apparently forgotten.

As she stammered and apologised and explained, he found her somewhere quiet to sit, ordered some tea (she didn't even see him do it, only noticed the tea when it was brought) and stuck by her until he was sure she had not only stopped trembling but had genuinely found some kind of self-control again. That was when she decided she simply couldn't cope with the wedding any more and announced she needed to go. He asked no questions but found a taxi.

Jenny took one of the band's flyers with her when she left though. She had a suspicion, even in her confused state, that she might have found a keeper.

Chapter 32

Making Teams, Breaking Teams

A Primeval Short Story

Connor sat in the dreary classroom at the training centre. It reminded him unpleasantly of school. A low building with large steel framed windows. The only difference was that instead of walls covered in students' work, there were earnest posters about government initiatives. He glanced round the room. About half the class were in suits of one sort or another ranging from people who seemed to naturally inhabit their clothes to those who looked uncomfortable and awkward. The rest were in a selection of more casual wear. All of them were older than he was.

The teacher was a pretty woman; Japanese to judge by her looks and her name, though he couldn't detect any sign of an accent in her speech. She was younger than he had been expecting. She wasn't wearing a suit, as such, but she was dressed more smartly than most of the "casual" end of the class and she was hiding her looks behind glasses and a severe hair-style. She was, in fact, desperately dull. This was all a monumental waste of time but, according to Lester, he couldn't connect the Anomaly Detector to the network until he'd been trained in information security procedures and this was an official three day government run course in the same. He had to stay until they signed off a certificate for him.

They'd been allowed to bring their own laptops and he'd spent the first hour surreptitiously checking email and reading web pages. But, because he didn't want to be here and because it *was* a security seminar he decided to see exactly what their friendly wireless network gave him access to with a little help from some password cracking software he'd downloaded. Ms. Sato, he observed, had also brought a laptop with her and was using it to display her slides. There were several machines connected to the open network, one was called `Torchwood`

3. Since her name badge said "Torchwood", he set the password hacking scripts onto that machine. Almost immediately the slide show abruptly stopped. Ms. Sato frowned. Nervously Connor watched her restart the machine. She restarted power point and continued almost as if nothing had happened.

Five minutes later his laptop crashed. He restarted it and it crashed again. He tried a third time and then noticed a sudden hush in the classroom. Ms. Sato had stopped speaking and was looking directly at him. He smiled weakly.

"Laptop's crashed," he said.

"Really?" Her tone was acid. "Never mind, you won't need it today," and she continued with the lesson.

It took him all evening to get it running again and he had to do a fresh install of the operating system. When he at last logged in again a message flashed on his screen. "What do you think you're doing?"

Connor spent the second day of the security seminar under Toshiko Sato's steely glare. In a number of exercises on the basics of machine security, while those around him grappled with the complexities of Not Opening Attachments From Strangers, Connor found his workstation under attack from an increasingly sophisticated sequence of worms, sniffing out ports someone had inconsiderately left open, almost as fast as he could find and lock them down. His machine crashed after half an hour. This time he called the Sysadmin over and watched him wrestle with the operating system reinstall while Ms. Sato sat looking smug at the head of the class.

That evening he met Stephen in the pub.

"Couldn't she just leave me alone? It's not like it's supposed to be a serious hacker defence class."

Stephen shrugged. "I bet you're learning more this way though."

"Well, yes."

"So what are you complaining about? It wasn't even your machine she crashed this afternoon. You moaned endlessly before you went about what a waste of time all this noddy stuff would be." Stephen sprawled back in his chair, lanky arms spread out, sipping his beer.

"It's all right, I suppose," Connor conceded. Stephen was right, he had learned all sorts of interesting tricks.

"Email her and apologise," Stephen added, offering a rare piece of unsolicited advice.

"Maybe."

Eventually, later than night after several more beers, Connor emailed an apology to Ms. Sato. He was rewarded with a reply containing most of the attack

programs she had used. He went into the course the next morning eager to talk to her about them only to be met by some faceless suit saying she was ill. Connor spent the morning picking through the code and trying it out experimentally on the local network. The faceless suit, actually a Mr. Grant, caught him at it around midday and raised an eye-brow.

"Ms. Sato sent me some sample hacking scripts." Connor said defensively, "I think she thought I could handle tougher exercises than the others."

Mr Grant grinned falsely, "Ah! You must be," and his eyes flickered down to Connor's name badge, "Mr. Temple. Ms. Sato mentioned you. She did indeed have an exercise for you. How do you fancy hacking something a bit better locked down than these systems?"

"Really?"

"Think you are good enough?"

"Absolutely, I'm a master hacker, me!"

Meeting Stephen in the pub again that evening, he was full of enthusiasm. It had been a lot of fun and very challenging. So challenging, in fact, he'd only managed to access about half the files on the list. He was looking forward to the next day.

"Connor," Stephen said, "what exactly were you hacking into?"

"I don't know, Ministry of Defence I think." Connor looked at Stephen's expression. "What? What!"

"I think you should double check with Ms. Sato," said Stephen seriously.

"You're just seeing conspiracies again."

"Come on, Connor, think about it. Does it seem likely they'd train you to break *in* to the MoD?"

"It's just an exercise."

Stephen stared at him over the top of his pint. "If you say so."

"I'll check with Toshiko."

Connor sent an email but, now anxious, he fretted for ten minutes awaiting a reply.

"For goodness sake!" said Stephen as Connor stopped the conversation yet again while he checked his email. "Can't you phone her?"

Toshiko's email had included mobile number in the signature so he phoned that but was rerouted to answering service. He left a message, then sat drumming his fingers on the chipped varnish of the table top.

"You've done everything you can," reassured Stephen. "It's not like you can pin point her hotel room and then bang on the door."

Several things fell into place in Connor's mind. He'd seen Toshiko's mobile. She'd been using it one lunch break. It wasn't a make he was familiar with, which was interesting in and of itself. He'd bet anything it was ultra-modern and had integrated GPS though and one of the scripts she'd sent him could be used to track GPS devices. He explained all this to Stephen as he opened up the laptop again.

"Don't you think you're over-reacting a bit?" Stephen was starting to get bored. Connor got the distinct impression he would have left by now if they weren't friends.

"What if Mr. Grant is some sort of spy? What if I've been doing his work for him? What if he's kidnapped Toshiko?"

"Is that likely?"

"You suggested it."

"I wasn't expecting you to spend the rest of the evening hacking someone's mobile phone."

"Got it!" Connor said triumphantly. "That's odd," he added, "it's back at the training centre."

"Maybe she's just gone back there to prepare for tomorrow?"

"You believe that?"

Stephen shook his head. "You want a lift?"

They parked in the training centre car park and walked up to the glass swing doors.

"It'll be locked," said Stephen as they approached.

Connor pushed and the door opened. "No."

Stephen shook his head. "The luck of fools. Best be careful."

"There's a security office on the right as you go in."

The security office was empty. The CCTV was working though and on it they could see Toshiko and three men in one of the classrooms. Toshiko sat in a chair looking stubborn. All three men were armed.

"Can we get sound?" asked Stephen.

"I shouldn't think so." Connor hunted through a couple of menus. "Nope nothing here. We should do something."

"Phone the police."

"Oh come on Stephen. How feeble is that. We're professional dinosaur hunters. We should be able to handle a few goons."

"I hunt animals not people, Connor. They're a lot less dangerous for one thing."

"But what if something happens while we're waiting for the police?"

Stephen was already on the phone. While he talked to the police, Connor found his way through the security systems, an idea dawning. First he routed the CCTV footage to an external server and wrote and passed Stephen a note with an explanation and the address. Stephen nodded and started passing on the details. Next Connor started up his own laptop and pointed it at the same external server so he could now see where everyone was inside the building. Then he set the monitors in the security office to display some looped footage.

"Can I have your iPod?" he asked as Stephen came off the phone.

"Is this another of those, if you die can I have your iPod conversations?"

"No, but I'm glad you remember that. I need it now."

Connor connected the iPod into the security systems and set it on random play. "We need to get to the classroom next to where they're holding Toshiko."

"The police said to stay put here. Actually they said to leave the building."

"But something might happen to Toshiko. It doesn't look like she's co-operating."

At that point, as if to underline his point, Grant took the opportunity to hit Toshiko. Stephen flinched.

"We *have* to do something," pressed Connor.

"What's your plan?"

"I get most of the men out of the room. Then we break in, overpower the guard and escape with Toshiko."

"Overpower the guard!"

"It'll be two against one."

"One who's armed."

"Well we ambush one of the other guards and take his gun."

Stephen shot him a withering look. "OK," Stephen winced again as Grant hit Toshiko a second time, "give me a minute and I'll get my tranquiliser rifle from the car."

Once they were secured in the next room. Connor did two things. First, he woke up all the computers in the building. He set their screensavers to show looped footage of Grant and the other men marching Toshiko into the building. Secondly, he connected them all to Stephen's iPod.

Run for you life if you can little girl

"Beatles, nice!" he shouted to Stephen over the din.

On his laptop screen he was pleased to see the men start as the screens flickered on and the music blared.

Hide your head in the sand little girl

Grant was gesturing with his gun. Hopefully ordering the goons to the security office to see what was going on.

Catch you with another man, that's the end, little girl

"Now?" asked Stephen watching over his shoulder.

Connor nodded.

They paused outside the classroom door. Stephen stood braced with the gun. He nodded to Connor who threw open the door. Stephen shot. Grant yelled, his voice just audible above the music, and whirled round to face them. Then he looked down at the dart. Stephen had already ducked to one side of the door. Connor ducked to the other side waiting for the thump.

There was a thump.

"He's out," came Toshiko's voice.

"Thanks!" she said to Stephen, smiling weakly as they entered the room.

"It was Connor's idea," he said.

She smiled at Connor and nodded her head, "Thanks!"

"Now out," said Stephen. He strode to the nearest window, but it was nailed shut. He threw a chair at it, which bounced.

"Security glass," said Toshiko.

"We can't go out the front," said Connor panicking. "They'll be in the security office," he checked his laptop, and felt cold. "Actually, they're on the way back."

At that moment, the door to the classroom opened and the two men tumbled in. One glance at the scene before them and they raised their guns.

I'd rather see you dead little girl

Two shots rang out. Toshiko held Grant's gun. She'd picked it up when he fell and hadn't waited for his henchmen to register the situation in the classroom. Her face looked shocked and scared. So did Stephen's for that matter. Connor supposed his face must look the same though all he felt was a kind of numbed sense of relief that they were all safe.

Two hours later, they ended up in the "gastro pub" across the road from the training centre. Tosh hadn't eaten for twenty four hours and wanted food. Since Connor and Stephen had missed supper they didn't object, especially since Tosh's credentials had bypassed what had looked set to be a lengthy police interview for all of them. Tosh wolfed down a Chicken Kiev with a glass of white. Connor had the Tikka Masala. Stephen opted for steak.

"I thought we were dead!" Connor kept saying, sounding like an idiot even to himself.

"Thanks!" Tosh kept saying, almost as repetitious as Connor. "They were hoping to use my access clearance to get into some highly secret files."

"Which I nearly gave them," said Connor, gloomily.

Tosh waved her glass expansively, her mouth full. ”You didn’t get through to anything very important. I’ll make sure there’s no come back. I owe you that much at any rate.”

”I’m just glad we could help,” said Stephen.

Tosh blushed at that. Women, Connor had noticed, had a tendency to blush when introduced to Stephen. Tosh looked back down at her food.

”I wasn’t going to give them anything,” she mumbled, indistinctly.

”That’s not the point,” said Connor surprised at his own fierceness. ”They might have killed you.”

Tosh looked up at him. ”I know, and thanks.”

The evening went well for Connor after that, though he got the impression Stephen got a little bored whenever he and Toshiko got too involved in discussing operating system specs. Stephen, as the driver, was also drinking apple juice which probably didn’t help either. Connor learned more that evening about both securing and hacking systems than he had in his previous ten years of off and on interest. After the pub closed, they stood in the street for a few minutes still chatting, then Tosh spotted a cab and flagged it down. She pecked Connor on the cheek before she got in. ”My hero,” she said, before blushing again and then she was gone.

”She likes you,” Stephen observed.

Connor straightened his hat. ”Lots of women really go for suave intelligence.”

Stephen laughed kindly and said something which might have contained the word ”geeks”. Connor hit him on the arm.

Stephen grinned, ”Come on, let’s go home.”

When Stephen died, Connor nearly resigned. Wrote the letter and everything. He decided to wait until after the funeral though, unsure if he could cope with that if he wasn’t part of the team. Then after the funeral they rushed off immediately to another anomaly site and were all too busy for a day or so.

When he had finally got back and picked up the letter he wasn’t so sure about sending it. Abby had found him in the centre of their living space, holding it in his hands and staring at it.

”What’s that?” she asked.

”Resignation letter.”

She moved next to him and placed a hand on his arm. ”Don’t go.”

”It’s just... it’s just I don’t think I could bear it if someone else died. I keep thinking what would have happened if we’d phoned Stephen? Phoned him as soon as we knew who the traitor was. Let him know.”

”He’d already resigned.”

”But if he’d known he might have realised it was a trap he was walking into. Why didn’t we phone him?”

”It wasn’t a trap, Connor. Not for Stephen anyway. You know what would have happened if you’d phoned. He would have gone anyway to save Cutter. It wouldn’t have made any difference.”

”We were friends, Abby, and when he died we weren’t talking to him.”

Abby had wrapped her arms around him then. ”I know,” she had whispered, ”but resigning won’t make it any better.”

So he’d stayed, after all, she was his friend too, but he kept the letter in a drawer. He felt apart from the rest of the team, disturbed by how a mixture of hostility and indifference had conspired to bring about Stephen’s death. He sometimes wondered if they were a team at all in anything but name, if they had ever been. If they had been a proper team, Stephen would still be alive.

```
From: Toshiko Sato
To: Connor Temple

Dear Connor

I’m sorry to have to send this to you.  It’s not actually from me but
it’s from a monitoring program I’ve set up.  If you’re getting it,
it’s because the monitor program can’t get in touch with me and it has
detected some strange behaviour in our system.  I wouldn’t send it to
you except I know you have security clearance and experience with
weird stuff (we have access to a lot of files over here) so hopefully
(!)  you should be able to cope with whatever is going on.  At the end
of the message you’ll find details for accessing whatever logs and
files the monitor thinks are relevant and our address in Cardiff.  It
doesn’t look like much from the outside but there should be someone at
the desk.  Ask for me and, if I’m not around, Jack Harkness.  If all
else fails get them to check back with your boss and say I sent you.

Tosh
```

”Ummm, hello?” Connor glanced around himself nervously. *This* was not what he had expected. A tiny tourist office, down some steps, in a back street

(albeit a back street off Roald Dahl Plass). He'd expected a big modern prestige building like the ARC. There'd not even been anyone behind the desk when he had arrived and he'd had to ring a small bell. After what had seemed like an age, in which his confidence in Toshiko's directions had fallen even further, a bored looking receptionist had emerged and sat behind the desk.

The receptionist had looked Connor up and down, a faint smile at the corners of his mouth, but hadn't said anything, leaving Connor to start the conversation.

"Hello."

"Hello?" the receptionist replied to Connor's prompt, giving away nothing.

Connor looked around again, could this really be whatever ultra-secret organisation Toshiko worked for? But then, ultra-secret? Wouldn't this be exactly the sort of front he'd set up if he had an ultra-secret organisation?

The receptionist was still looking at him. At some point the man had raised his eyebrows. Connor felt a bit warm and suspected he had started to blush. 'Remember, Cool, Professional, Discrete' he told himself. 'We're all ultra-professional, super-secret government special projects people here'.

"Ummm," he said and winced inwardly - not a super-cool start. "Is Toshiko Sato here?"

"Who?" deadpanned the receptionist. He'd stopped smiling at least, which made Connor feel a little more comfortable. Connor also noticed, because he was watching out for indications he was in the right place that the receptionist had moved one hand under the desk. Connor hoped he was signalling someone to start watching surveillance cameras and not summoning a SWAT team.

"Or Jack Harkness?" he hazarded.

"I'm sorry I don't think I can help you."

"Look," Connor floundered, "I got an email from Toshiko Sato. It said to come here."

"Really, and what was this email about?"

Connor opened his mouth and then clamped it shut again. He'd looked over the log files he'd been sent and knew what they were telling him. An ultra-secure system, one with more checks, traps and guards than he would have been able to put in, was fighting multiple, increasingly sophisticated hacking runs from an unknown source. If he wasn't in the right place he didn't want to be telling random people about the system. If he was in the right place then he didn't want them to think he might tell random people about their system.

"I think I should talk to Tosh personally, or to Jack Harkness, before I divulge that," he said, and began to wonder frantically how he might identify Jack Harkness if he got to meet him.

The inner door opened. A tall man leaned casually against the door frame, wearing a long great coat.

"I'm Jack," he said in something approximating an America drawl, "how can I help you?"

The man grinned, a smile that was almost an invitation. Connor realised he was blushing again.

"Ummm," Connor repeated; continuing a serious failure of cool. He fished in his bag and produced a print out of Tosh's email. He held it out and Jack took it from him. The man glanced over the print out and then up at Connor.

"Who's your boss?" he asked.

"Professor Cutter, Central Metropolitan University," said Connor automatically. Then his rational brain cut in with the reason for the question. "Oh, she probably meant James Lester, Home Office."

"Probably," agreed Jack. "Wait here!" and he disappeared in a swirl of grey fabric.

Connor looked around. There was a rather tatty armchair against the wall so he sat down. The receptionist smiled at him again, seeming more friendly this time. "Coffee?" he asked.

```
Fax

From: James Lester, Home Office
To: Jack Harkness, Torchwood 3

Captain Harkness

Following our recent phone conversation I attach copies of
Mr. Temple's employment files and security clearance.  I repeat, as I
said on the phone, that he is an enthusiastic employee, valued by his
colleagues, and a talented zoologist, engineer and programmer.
However I should like to, once again, draw your attention to his lack
of formal training in security work or computer systems and to the
fact that his inexperience frequently manifests itself in the
field. Do not give him access to any weaponry.  I am happy to agree to
his temporary secondment to Torchwood 3 for a provisional period of
two weeks, to be revised, if necessary, next Monday.  I should like to
add a request that you do not needlessly put him in danger.  There
would be no end of upset among my staff if he were to get broken.
```

Yours faithfully

James Lester.

Connor didn't usually pay much attention to coffee. It was hot, it gave you a bit of a boost. That was pretty much it. So he didn't pay much attention when the receptionist put a cup down beside him. By this time he had his laptop out and was tweaking some of the programs he'd already written to data mine the full system logs if/when he got access to them. However, when he took the first sip he was jolted out of his concentration in surprise. This was really good. He glanced up at the receptionist and smiled.

"Nice coffee," he said.

The receptionist smiled back, a proper genuine smile this time.

"I had to guess what you'd like. Glad I got it right."

Connor realised he'd never introduced himself, "I'm Connor," he said, holding out his hand.

"Ianto Jones," returned the receptionist. They shook hands and grinned at each other.

Ianto nodded at Connor's laptop. "What are you doing?"

Connor glanced down, "Data mining programs for your log files, that sort of thing. Though, once Tosh gets back, she'll be able to do something much better. I got the basis for these scripts from her in the first place. She's really good at this shit. Where is she by the way?"

Connor glanced up and faltered. The smile had gone from the receptionist's face and he didn't meet Connor's eye. Two months ago Connor wouldn't have been able to interpret his expression. But he'd seen it all too often since on Cutter's face and Abby's, sometimes he'd even seen it looking out from the mirror back at him.

"Oh," he said and put down the coffee cup so suddenly that hot liquid splashed onto his fingerless glove. He looked back at his computer unable to meet Ianto Jones' eyes, remembering that evening in the pub, laughing with Stephen over the absurdities of ARC bureaucracy and swapping tales of idiotic IT directives. His hands, he realised, were shaking slightly. He took several deep breaths to calm himself and then, without looking up again, returned to his programming. Tosh whispered to him in lines of Python.

"Right. Here we go!" Jack burst into the reception area again. "You're on the books."

"On the books?"

"We've got you for two weeks after which your James Lester wants you back."

"Two weeks?"

"Yup! I want you to track down whatever it is Toshiko's system is worried about *and* I've heard lots about your creature database. If possible I'd like you to do something similar with our files."

"Your files?"

Ianto was grinning again, "Creature database?" he asked.

"A database of prehistoric creatures, with a searchable interface."

"Prehistoric? Does that mean you're something to do with the Anomaly Research Centre?"

"Got it in one," said Jack.

Connor glanced between them, "How do you know about the ARC?"

"Oh, we like to be informed," said Jack.

"How come I don't know about you?"

"We don't like other people to be informed," said Ianto, with a smile.

"Come on through," and Jack lead the way into the interior of the building.

"Oh! Wow!" Connor couldn't help saying. He was in a vast circular chamber. Multi-level walkways, computer stations, and simply weird but sophisticated looking machinery filled the space. It wasn't as modern-looking or as sleek as the ARC's minimalist splendour but every corner Connor looked at was stuffed with interesting looking pieces of equipment. A tall central column, covered in switches and dials and exuding a pale light dominated the chamber rising up into the roof. "Now this," he added, "is a secret head-quarters."

"Glad you like it," said Ianto from behind him.

Up above him there was a sudden screeching call and a pterodactyl swooped down and circled around the column.

"That's a Pterodactyl?" Connor said, amazed.

"Do you like her?" asked Ianto. "She's called Myfanwy."

"Did she come through an anomaly?"

Ianto shook his head, "Space time rift, centred on Cardiff."

"Space-time?"

"That's what we do," interrupted Jack. He looked pleased by Connor's reaction. "Monitor the rift, collect, safe-guard and, if possible, return the various time-travellers, aliens and inter-dimensional beings that come through it."

"Aliens?... and inter-dimensional... This is amazing! You have files on aliens!"

Jack grinned at him. "All yours, Connor Temple, if you can get them into a searchable database for us."

"I most certainly can."

"And these," said Jack, "are Mark Blackwell and Fiona Bishop." A tall blonde-haired man and woman were standing together at a desk. They both looked up in unison, "Mark is our computer expert and Fiona's our Doctor. This is Connor Temple. He's going to provide some extra assistance on the computer front while you get up to speed Mark."

Mark didn't look all that happy but he held out a hand nevertheless. "Pleased to meet you, Connor."

"And you."

"There's one other member of the team, Gwen Cooper, but she's on a week's leave. I imagine you'll meet her in due course."

So Connor started digging around inside the Torchwood computer system. To say it was labyrinthine was an understatement. On the face of it the set up was all pretty straightforward and standard but the logs Tosh had caused it to send him gave him an idea where to look and there were whole extra layers of security under the standard stuff. Innocent-looking extra lines inserted in system scripts that redirected the security systems elsewhere. No wonder Mark wasn't seeing anything. Connor wondered idly if Tosh had left a guide somewhere that had got misplaced or if she had simply assumed that her successor would be good enough to follow the bread-crumb trail. It was possible she'd never considered her successor, but he thought that was unlikely. Ianto had told him about her farewell message that first evening when they'd gone out and got drunk and Connor had pressed for details, asking "What happened to Tosh?"

Going to the pub with Ianto became a regular part of Connor's day. He caught himself texting Ianto around five thirty, as he had once been accustomed to texting Stephen: `fancy a swift half?`. A couple of times Jack joined them, making the trips considerably more drunken and riotous that they were otherwise. Connor was amazed by Jack's management style. It was a startling contrast to Lester's harried disdain and Cutter's driven intensity. Torchwood was easy-going and relaxed. People had fun. They formed a *real* team. True, Mark and Fiona were less friendly but they were always polite and never hostile. They had an immaculately dressed, socially refined, aloofness that Connor found a little intimidating. Mark was a good programmer but not inspired, something Connor took quiet pleasure from. He had an impressive CV (the Hub's systems made most hacking ludicrously easy and the first place Connor looked was its own personnel files which Tosh had obviously never considered important enough to lock down) but Connor rapidly knew more about the system and could do more with it than Mark. He harboured vague ambitions to get Mark's job.

It was Monday morning: his second week at Torchwood. He hadn't yet managed to get them to let him out on a mission but he was working it. Reading Tosh's shell scripts was making his head hurt so he had turned his attention to the creatures' database. First he ripped out the bits that were specific to palaeontology. Then he designed an interface to let him import all the Torchwood data.

"What do you think you're doing?" He looked up to see a dark-haired woman in a leather jacket staring at him across the screens he was working behind.

"Who the hell are you?" she added, pointing a gun at him.

"I'm Connor. I'm doing some security work?" Carefully he took his hands away from the keyboard and held them up.

"Jack!" she called.

Jack emerged on the upper balcony. "It's all right, Gwen. He's with us."

"Who is he? What's he doing?"

"Someone's trying to compromise our systems. Tosh left a program in the network and it contacted him."

"Is that why he's at her desk?"

Connor looked anxiously between the two. Jack had actually assigned him a desk on the other side of the room, "Tosh keyed the security system to this location. You can only access the super-user from this desk," he said. This was true, but he was suddenly uncomfortably aware of the way he'd spread his personal belongings, a mug, three photos, Stephen's iPod, a hand-held and a laptop, around the area. The empty, pristine shrine had become a Connor place. He wondered when it had happened and whether anyone else had noticed. There was a small fluffy ball with eyes and a "Welcome to Cardiff" ribbon stuck to the corner of the screen. Ianto had given it to him on his second day. "To make you feel more at home," he had said.

Gwen glared at him and then tucked the gun back in its holster. She marched up towards the balcony. "Jack, I need to talk to you!"

Jack rolled his eyes at Connor but followed her into his office. Connor thought maybe it was time to get back to the security logs.

"Don't worry about Gwen. She gets a bit suspicious of strangers," advised Ianto appearing at his side with one of his customary cups of coffee. Connor had a nasty feeling he'd be right off Nescafe by the time he finished this job.

"That's all right. I dread to think what would happen if Abby walked in and found a stranger at Stephen's desk... or what Cutter would do for that matter." He thought about Jenny. That probably wouldn't be pleasant either, but at least violence wouldn't be involved. "I'm probably lucky all she did was point a gun at me."

”She and Toshiko were good friends. She found Mark and Fiona turning up hard enough, took a week’s leave to get used to the idea.”

Gwen emerged from Jack’s office.

”Mark, Fiona, you got any lunch plans?” She didn’t even glance at Connor.

He watched Mark and Fiona look at each other, then Mark said, ”No, you have any ideas?”

”I thought I might check out that new Bistro. You coming Ianto?”

Ianto shook his head, ”No, I’m good. I’ll stay here.”

Without a glance in his direction Gwen stalked out of the hub. Mark spared Connor a rueful grin before he and Fiona followed her.

”Well, I suppose, at least you’ve made her happier about them,” Ianto observed.

”That doesn’t really help.”

”No I suppose not,” said Ianto. ”Anyway, what are you doing?”

”Trying to work out what your hacker is after.”

”Any ideas?”

”Well,” he started, and then glanced anxiously at Ianto to see if he really meant it.

Ianto sat down in the chair next to him. ”Go on.”

”Well the attacks are coming in waves. Most of them don’t get anywhere at all, just a lot of false login attempts. Early on they cracked Fiona’s password and a whole lot got into the system.”

”What did they do?”

”Not a lot, to be honest. They simply tried to get deeper into the system by over-riding her access permissions or stealing the login of another user. They managed to copy a few files. All text files so I did a keyword breakdown.”

”And?”

”They were copying anything that contained the word ‘rift’ ”.

Ianto’s mouth formed a silent ”Oh”.

”Yeah,” Connor nodded, ”by this point Tosh’s security systems had got Fiona to change her password, but they managed to guess it again and this time they went for a very specific bunch of Word Perfect files. Torchwood briefing minutes from the eighties.”

”When they got the rift manipulator!”

”Ah,” said Connor. He’d skimmed some of the files but they were incredibly dull, managing to make even foiled alien invasions sound like administrative exercises. Mostly they just detailed arguments over office budgets and the minutiae of

who was responsible for keeping the fridge clean. He'd given up before he figured out their significance.

"Then what?"

"Not a lot. They've been trying to break into some files that Tosh had secured personally. That's what triggered the email I got sent."

"What's in those files?"

Connor shrugged. "I can't get at them either but I'm working at it. No security measure can hold out Connor the master hacker for long."

Ianto smiled. "You're enjoying this."

"A little, it makes a change from the basic systems maintenance work I do normally. It's not as fun as going out in the field though."

Ianto looked serious. "Since the public never dress up as weevils so far as we know, I suppose you wouldn't pose a threat to civilians."

"Oh, you heard about that?"

"I believe James Lester went into considerable detail."

"Oh," was all Connor could think of to say.

Ianto nudged him, "Don't worry about it," he nodded at the screen. "We should talk to Jack about those files. He may be able to access them."

"I hear my name?" came Jack's American drawl. He wandered over from his office door and dropped an arm round the shoulder of each of them. "What have my boys found?"

"Tosh had a folder," said Connor. "It contains something of interest to our hacker."

"Really! Where?"

Connor typed in the location and a `Read Permission Denied` message flashed up. "Are you super-user?" asked Jack.

"I should be but I think she made some changes to the user hierarchy in the operating system."

"So who is the super-user?"

Connor typed in a random sequence of alphanumerics and a password prompt flashed. "Only user the super-user can't access."

Jack stared at the screen a moment then cautiously leaned over and typed in a password. The directory listing flashed before them.

"Oh!" said all three of them at once. It was the number of executable files with the word `RiftManipulationSystem` in the title that sprang out at them.

"Ah!" said Jack. "When we first got the rift manipulator our computer officer was supposed to write some software that could actually control the thing properly. He never got it to work. It was too complex. I wonder if Tosh did?"

”Could it bypass the retinal security system?” asked Ianto.

”Toshiko’s code,” said Jack, and shrugged.

Suddenly Connor’s monitor flashed red.

”What’s that?” asked Ianto.

”Someone’s hacking in. They must have noticed the file access or something.”

”Stop them,” said Jack.

”What do you think I’m trying to do?” said Connor irritated. The programs were accessing the system through Fiona’s account, again. He’d already had a word with her about password security. It appeared another was needed. So far the programs weren’t getting anywhere, so Connor began trying to trace them back to source.

”They’re coming from Mark’s machine,” he said in surprise. They all looked over at Mark’s chair. It was empty; Mark was on that lunch break with Gwen and Fiona. Jack walked over and jiggled Mark’s mouse. A locked screensaver popped up.

”Could someone be accessing it wirelessly?” asked Ianto.

Connor shook his head. ”No, no wireless ports. Security measure.”

Jack was now levering the side off the computer box.

”Hello!” he said and reached in. Abruptly the red lines on Connor’s monitor all dropped back to green. Jack stood up holding a small blue half-sphere.

”What’s that?” asked Connor.

”A hacking device. Very common in the next century.”

Jack tossed it up and down thoughtfully. ”I’m going to go and ask a few questions around and about. Ianto, you and Connor stay here. When the others get back from lunch tell Gwen and Fiona to come out to join me. Tell Mark to stay here and help Connor monitor the system.” Jack pointed at Connor, ”Don’t let him see too much.”

Left alone, Connor and Ianto paged through Tosh’s files.

”I don’t suppose they work,” said Ianto.

Connor shrugged. ”Hard to say. She’d obviously been working on them.”

”How do you know?”

Connor pointed at the screen.

```
// Tosh: This is a hack to increase the speed -
// should be a better way to do this.
```

”That’s a comment, she was leaving reminders to herself in the code.”

”If the hackers want these files should we delete them? If we don’t want to or can’t use them?”

Connor and Ianto looked at each other helplessly.

”Where’s Jack?”

It was Gwen. She was flanked by Mark and Fiona. She had her gun out again and once again Connor raised both his hands cautiously.

”We found a hacking device planted in Mark’s computer. Jack’s taken it,” Connor petered out realising how inadequate his answer was going to sound, ”somewhere.”

”Where?”

Connor shrugged, ”I don’t know.”

”What’s all this about, Gwen?” asked Ianto. Out of the corner of his eye Connor saw Ianto casually log out of Tosh’s super-user account.

”There’s no such person as Connor Temple.”

”What?” asked Ianto.

”What!” repeated Connor stupidly as the remark sank in. ”Course there is.”

”We double-checked with the Home Office,” said Ianto. ”James Lester. He’s all cleared.”

”Mark’s been checking deeper. There’s no Connor Temple. There’s no James Lester and there were no hacking runs until he arrived here.”

”That’s not true,” protested Connor.

”Oh, you’ve been very clever,” said Mark, ”fake phone directories on the government intranet, intercepting our outward calls. The little friendship with Toshiko Sato was a particularly nice touch, playing off everyone’s grief.”

”But the Anomaly Research Centre! You can’t just fake something that big.”

”Really? I’ve never seen it, never heard of it before you showed up. Had you Gwen?”

”No.”

Ianto raised his hand. ”I had.”

Gwen glanced at him a minute. ”OK, so the ARC’s real but we have no way of knowing he works there. We lock him up,” she said firmly. Then, catching Ianto’s eye, ”At least until we find Jack and,” addressing Connor directly, ”you better not have had anything to do with his disappearance.”

”He just went out. He’s not been gone 10 minutes.”

”That’s the truth,” Ianto backed him up.

”Whatever,” said Gwen gesturing with her gun. ”Lead the way Connor Temple.”

Once she’d locked him in she stood and stared at him through the clear screen.

”This is all a big mistake,” said Connor.

”You’d like us to think that,” she said.

”I really did meet Tosh. She,” but she’d never mentioned Gwen. He had no message to give Gwen that might convince her he was telling the truth. ”She was quite small, about so high,” he gestured with his hand. ”She could be quite stern, but I think she was mostly shy and she was really fun once you got her talking. She liked Chicken Kiev and white wine.”

Gwen’s face was expressionless, ”That could be anyone.” She turned and left one hand pushing her hair out of her face, or possibly wiping her eyes. He couldn’t tell.

She passed Ianto coming down the stairs, bearing more coffee. ”Don’t let him talk you into anything,” Connor heard her say.

”It’s all a mistake,” said Connor.

Ianto glanced up at the prison camera. ”I know,” he said quietly.

”You know?”

”Sssh!”

”You know?” Connor whispered.

”If this is a deception what’s the point of a Monster database?”

”Could be deep cover,” Connor said, in spite of himself.

Ianto shook his head, ”and I remember Toshiko teaching that training course.”

”That doesn’t prove anything!”

”And it takes more than a faked phone directory to fool Jack.”

Connor opened his mouth and then shut it again. Who was he to argue if Ianto was on his side?

”Are you going to let me out then?”

Ianto shook his head, ”I need to get Gwen alone and talk her round. At the moment I’m out-numbered.”

”If you let me out and called Jack we would be evens, that’s got to be worth chancing right?”

Ianto shook his head, ”I don’t know enough about what’s going on. They’ve scrambled the communications somehow. I can’t get a signal on my mobile and the Internet is down. The satellite phones are still working though.” He fished a ludicrously small device from his pocket.

”So phone Jack on that.”

Ianto shook his head. ”Can’t, Jack’s not carrying one. We don’t normally. They’re pretty power hungry. I’m going to go out and find him. Then he can phone back and reason with Gwen.”

”But they want Tosh’s files! They must have a plan they think will work before Jack gets back.”

”And we know they’ve not succeeded in getting them despite easy access to the systems for several weeks. Nothing’s changed there. Maybe Jack finding the hacking device has forced their hand. They could just be desperate.”

Ianto suddenly raised his voice.

”I’m sorry Connor,” he said in a clipped tone. ”Right now I see no evidence you are who you say you are. Once Jack gets back I’m sure all this will be resolved.”

Connor banged the glass door to the cell in frustration as Ianto walked away.

Suddenly he was alone, ignored, mistrusted while everyone carried on without him. He thought of Stephen, alone on that beach, armed only with a harpoon. How come no one had thought to phone him except Helen? Connor rested his head against the cool plastic of the cell door uncomfortably aware that there was no one here he really knew or trusted.

Half an hour he was still there, waiting because there was nothing else he could do. His mind rehearsing, yet again, all the events that had led up to Stephen’s deaths all the ways in which a word here or there might have made a difference.

”Connor!”

It was Abby, large as life, outside the cell. Connor could hardly believe his eyes.

”Abby! what are you doing here? how did you get here?”

”James intercepted some outgoing email activity and realised something was up. He sent us to get you out.” It was Cutter.

”Great! who else is here?”

”Just us,” said Abby, ”James wanted to keep it low key so he sent me and Nick. ‘Less conspicuous,’ he said.”

Connor frowned. This didn’t add up.

”You going to get me out then?”

”Give us a minute,” grinned Abby. She walked over to the control panel, all self-assured grace, and typed in the combination. The door slid open.

Cutter draped an arm round him as he left he cell. ”James thinks Torchwood has been infiltrated by aliens, in the form of Mark Blackwell and Fiona Bishop.”

”That’s what I think too!”

”He reckons they’re after some files, for a rift manipulator?”

Connor nodded.

”Which he thinks could be useful at the ARC. He wants you to take a copy of the files and delete the originals from the system.”

”Right,” said Connor carefully, ”that’ll take some time. Aren’t they all upstairs still?”

”No,” said Cutter. ”We manufactured an emergency. They’re all out on wild goose chases. The place is deserted.”

Connor thought hard. None of this added up but if this was really Cutter and Abby he didn’t want to place them in danger. He didn’t want any more deaths. Not after Toshiko and Stephen.

”Do we have back-up nearby in case of trouble? Captain Ryan?” he asked. He would have asked after Stephen but guessed that even a cursory glance at the ARC’s files would have revealed Stephen’s fate.

”Ryan’s on stand-by,” confirmed Cutter. ”He’ll extract us if we give the signal.”

Connor nodded, ”OK! let’s get going,” and he left the room Cutter before him and Abby behind, almost co-ordinated in their movements.

Connor had done this before. Well, that wasn’t strictly true. He’d *thought* about doing it before having read about it in a book. He’d planned how he’d do it, just in case. He’d even written a few scripts which were on machines inside the ARC. First he fired up the hacking monitor and explained what it was to Cutter and Abby.

”We should keep monitoring, just in case,” he said.

Cutter, sat on one side of him, nodded sagely. Abby was hovering behind him. He couldn’t see her reaction. Hopefully they would enjoy watching the pretty bars bob up and down. He’d certainly found it distracting enough over the last couple of weeks. He then tried to log in to the ARC to get his programs: no connection. He swore.

”What’s the problem?” asked Cutter.

Remember Connor, act natural. ”Ummm, well, I’ve spent the last two weeks trying to stop people breaking into the system. Not the same as breaking in myself. If I’m to go poking around the internal security I’m going to need some of my code from the ARC. Can’t seem to get a connection though.”

Cutter looked behind him, presumably at Abby.

”I’ll have a fiddle with the network router, see if any wires are loose,” he volunteered. Cutter stood. Abby slipped into his place beside Connor.

OK, so Cutter was the computer literate one. Hopefully he was off undoing whatever it was they had done to block all outward communication from the Hub. In the meantime Connor set a few fruitless searches and hacking attempts running where he was. It generated plenty of output to keep Abby amused. Then, in

another window, he opened a command line interface to his new aliens database and started randomly browsing.

"What are you doing?" asked Abby.

"Waiting really," he explained. "We'll see if we get any output from those searches and whether Cutter can get the Internet up again. In the meantime you should look at these. I can't believe all the great aliens they've encountered. You'll love them."

Abby nodded slightly. Her attention, he hoped, wandered back to the search output. Connor input a new search term and piped the output to a file on his palm pilot, docked next to the machine.

"Maybe I have something on my palm?" he said brightly, picking it up. "I sometimes take files home on it." He scrolled through the file output, relatively confident Abby couldn't really see the screen.

```
Species Name: Noruien
Status: Mythical
Features: Shape Shifting, Mimics, Telepathic communication.
Details: The Noruien are an ancient species allegedly trapped in the
space time vortex.  Tales tell how they once ravaged planets, swarming
the surface, surfing on the time winds feeding of paradox until the
planet was gone, no past, nor future remaining.

A hive creature, individual Noruien were reported to be relatively
harmless, choosing to blend into the local surroundings until the
swarm arrived.  When adopting the form of a local species they posses
the same weaknesses and vulnerabilities as the species.

Legend tells that the Noruien were trapped in the vortex during a Time
War, endlessly seeking release by exploiting rifts in time.
```

Not so good.

"Nothing," he said to Abby, putting the palm back in its cradle.

"We've got Internet," called Cutter suddenly from across the room.

Connor logged in to his file-space at the ARC and copied across his scripts. He ran the first program. Immediately his desktop switched to a random pattern of numbers.

"Sorry," he said to Abby and Cutter, who was now leaning over his shoulder, "I thought it would be cool to show the algorithmics at work."

Cutter shrugged. "No problem."

Connor set some more, hopefully useless, hacking attempts running. Then carefully he moved the cursor to the top corner of the screen. There should be a hidden window there. He watched the bottom left as he typed, the letters going past showing his input. He felt a small flush of triumph as the letters appeared in response to his key presses. He had made it work. He was going to fix this. First he uploaded the Noruien file to Jack's email drop box. Then he connected to a remote email-to-SMS service and texted all the Torchwood satellite phones.

N o r u i e n @ h b = M a r k / F i o n a n o w C u t t e r / A b b y. S e e e m a i l. C o m e b a c k p l s.

Now all he had to do was keep up the pretence, wait, and hope Ianto found Jack soon.

Half an hour later he noticed the letters at the corner of the screen winking back at him.

t s i d e d o o r . l c k d . O p e n p l s.

Quickly Connor brought up the main security console.

"What are you doing?" asked Cutter.

"One moment please, I've had an idea."

Pulling down the emergency situation menu he hit the "Fail Safe" button. Sirens sounded an evacuation signal. He could hear locks opening with heavy clunks, including, probably, the cell doors - that would keep the team busy hunting weevils for a bit. Cutter rounded on him.

"What have you done?" he grabbed Connor. There was a knife in his hand. Connor froze. Now he was going to die.

Two shots rang out. Connor blinked. Almost in slow motion Cutter collapsed back. A small red hole in his head. Next to him Connor heard Abby fall to the floor. He looked down. She was face down on the grating, blood leaking from the back of her head. Connor thought about the path of the bullets and was glad he couldn't see her face.

Slowly he turned round. Jack and Gwen stood side by side, each holding a gun. Ianto stood behind them.

Connor was packing his bag, "You could stay, you know." Jack was leaning against the next desk. "We need a new computer specialist, more than the ARC does. Dinosaur's don't try to hack your systems. Not in my experience anyway."

His mind's eye flashed back to the fallen bodies of Cutter and Abby. He'd not seen Stephen die, or Ryan or Toshiko. It might not have actually been them but he still felt his heart-beat quicken when he thought of the scene and had to fight back tears. He'd tear up that resignation letter when he got back. He knew, now, where it was he belonged.

Ianto obviously spotted the answer before Connor said anything because he patted him on the back.

"Good luck," he said. "We'll miss you. Don't forget you have friends here."

"I won't forget." Connor shook Ianto and Jack's hands then he headed out of Cardiff and back home.

Chapter 33

Ghost in the Library

An Urban Dead Short Story

"It's DCC," I muttered looking through my binoculars.

"I told you so."

I shrugged. "We head over to Broadbelt and tell them. Good hunch of yours."

"You won't get there and back in time. You'll also lose any chance of following her and finding where the Dead are gathering."

I couldn't help scowling. "You engineered this situation."

"If you'd done as I asked in the first place and gotten Delta squad up here, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"No one, least of all Delta squad, is going to follow a random hunch of mine."

Bryn tutted. "Could have told them it came from me."

"We've been through that already."

She shrugged. "Well Purple Cat, time to pick up a gun and show what you can do."

I don't free run quietly. I wasn't, therefore, all that surprised when DCC looked up as I followed her. She ducked into the building below me.

"That's torn it," I said.

"Not at all," returned Bryn. "You can shoot straight. All you have to do is hold your nerve."

"We'll lose the location of the Dead."

"True, but DCC won't be talking to them."

"Bryn, I'm not a Delta."

"You can do this. Put down the pack. It'll slow you up. Check that gun I made you bring."

I was standing on the roof of Garland library. It was a small building on two floors. Once inside, I ducked behind a fallen shelf. I closed my eyes and listened. I couldn't hear anything.

"She'll still be downstairs," said Bryn. "Wait here, I'll take a look."

I stared at the pistol in my hands and reminded myself that DCC would be up again as soon as she found a revive. Murder is a game in Malton. There was a check out desk at the head of the stairs. It would provide better cover so I stood up and headed over to it.

Naturally I trod on a pile of colouring pencils which scattered and rolled. One tipped over the top step and clattered and bounced down the stairs.

I cursed silently and ducked behind the desk. Bryn reappeared next to me.

"Well she's on her way up the stairs now," she drawled sarcastically.

I listened but still couldn't hear a sound. Damn! DCC was good, but then she would be.

"I'm watching," said Bryn. "When I give the word all you need to do is stand up and shoot. She'll be on the third step down. You have a clear shot from where I am. All you have to do is hit her."

Dust motes danced through the pale light of Bryn's body as she watched the stairs.

"On my mark," said Bryn. "Remember look before you shoot. One well-aimed shot is worth six wild ones. Now!"

I stood up, pointing my gun. I saw DCC. She stood on the third step down and she held some kind of rifle. I took the moment to aim and then pulled the trigger.

The first shot hit her in the leg. I adjusted my aim and shot again. The rifle was pointing at me. The check out desk splintered. She staggered back. I'd hit her in the chest. I aimed again, the shot went wild, aimed once more and pulled the trigger. Something hit me, slamming me against the wall. I slid down to the floor.

"You killed her with that last shot," said Bryn.

"Good!" I felt at my chest. It hurt like hell. My hand came away covered in blood. "I thought this thing was supposed to be bullet-proof."

"Not against rifle ammo, hon."

I thought of my pack on the roof. I wasn't going to be making it up there.

"I'll be back," whispered Bryn.

I managed to tear a wad of cloth from my shirt to press over the wound but the pain prevented me being effective. After a while I passed out.

I struggled back to consciousness through a haze of morphine. BD was sitting next to me.

"You made it then," he said.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"You'd never believe me if I told you."

Behind his shoulder I could see Bryn's ghostly form. She grinned at me and made as if to ruffle his hair. Her hand passed through his solid form and it didn't look like he could see her. However she'd obviously communicated with him somehow which was progress. I smiled at them both, closed my eyes and fell back into sleep.

Chapter 34

Fire and Ice

34.1 Fire

a Primeval Challenge Drabble

"Abby!" Abby turned back, and her mouth gaped.

Out of the anomaly poured a bright, orange liquid. A wave of heat hit her. She scrambled into the Hilux and gunned the engine. The... the lava spread out behind the truck as Connor and Ditzy started to run towards it, liquid rock at their heals.

She drove.

They stopped on a small hill. They could see a large, red pool, darkening to black in the middle. It was still growing.

"What about Cutter and Jenny?" whispered Connor.

"Those two?" said Ditzy. "A little bit of fire won't even slow them down."

34.2 Fire and Ice

A Primeval Short Story

Jenny sat in the Toyota Hilux, dressed only in a base layer of clothing. Anything more and she would to sweat in the bright spring sunshine. The survival expert Lester had drafted in to train them had been adamant about the dangers of getting wet, so they had developed a protocol which involved dressing once they were through the anomaly. A thin dusting of snow from the far side drifted incongruously amid the grass and meadow flowers.

Abby climbed into the driver's seat and flashed her a happy grin.

"All set?"

"All set," agreed Jenny, putting on her sunglasses. Abby started the truck and they drove through the anomaly.

Jenny was still amazed by the vista each time she saw it. A cold summer sun blazed down on a white ice field that stretched as far as the eye could see. They were in the foothills of a long mountain range which Connor had christened "The Mountains of Madness" although Nick had more prosaically identified them as the Cascades.

Abby stopped the car and they pulled on the other layers of clothing, with much giggling and wriggling in the awkward confines of the truck's cabin.

There was almost a small roadway in the snow where the souped-up Hiluxes had driven back and forth between the anomaly and the makeshift research station. They'd been here a month now while the team enthused about and observed a teratorn colony they'd found. At least Connor and Abby enthused. On the few occasions Jenny had visited the camp, Nick had been businesslike but withdrawn. She'd hoped the unique opportunity to do some actual research would put the fire back in his belly, to adopt a phrase her father used. It was, in fact, one of the reasons she had talked Lester into agreeing to the project. It didn't seem to have worked. Nick was as intent and focused as always, but the spark of enthusiasm appeared to be lacking.

She shuffled the papers and graphs she held in her lap.

"Are you worried about the anomaly?" asked Abby.

"Not really," said Jenny. "Dr. Mortimer assures me the decay will be slow, but it's definitely decaying. She was right when she said it would stay open at least two months, so I'm trusting she's right about this. There's no rush, but it's definitely time to pull out."

"Worried about Nick, then?"

"A little, I expect he'll want to hang on until the last minute and the colony is just too far away from the anomaly and this environment is just too dangerous for that."

"He'll see sense," said Abby. "We've got loads of data, enough to keep the entire zoology team occupied for years. It's been an amazing opportunity, so often we don't dare to do more than stick our heads through an anomaly." She grinned. "I've had a fabulous time, but I'm cool about pulling out. If nothing else, if we lose anyone on the wrong side of this anomaly, Lester will never let us set up an observation post again."

"True enough," agreed Jenny.

The camp was a rough half hour drive over flattened snow. Abby kept the car's heater down low in order to prevent perspiration.

They were about halfway there when Jenny felt the Hilux beginning to shake. Abby braked and wrestled with the steering wheel, while Jenny hung on to her seat. They slowed to a halt as small lumps of snow and ice pelted the side of the truck. Jenny peered through the window, anxiously fearing she would see the plume of an avalanche plunging down the rocky slopes towards them.

Gradually the shaking stopped and Abby let out an audible sigh of relief.

"Another good reason to go," she said. "Those earthquakes have been getting more frequent this last week."

Jenny looked up at the mountain towering above them, its summit wreathed in smoke. "I thought the chances of an eruption were small?"

Abby shrugged. "They are. That doesn't mean there won't be one, though. That's the third earthquake this week and we only had one in the previous three weeks."

"Aren't you worried about avalanches?"

"We haven't had any fresh snowfall and we figure the first earthquake dislodged most of what was going to move. It was a nasty one. That was just a little shake."

"If you say so."

Although Jenny found the landscape beautiful and arresting, she was glad she'd only ventured through for the odd quick visit. She wouldn't have wanted to be camping here the way the scientists were.

The observation camp consisted of a second Hilux and a tent. It was placed at the base of a rocky outcrop. The teratorn colony nested on the cliff-face. The camp was neat and tidy, something that had surprised Jenny, each time she'd seen it, because Nick's office was generally such a disaster area. The survival training had placed a lot of emphasis on knowing where things were and being able to reach them quickly and easily. It seemed Nick had taken the briefing to heart.

In fact, she realised, it was tidier even than normal. Nick and Connor were tying down several boxes of equipment onto the back of the second truck. It was difficult to differentiate them in the bulky outer clothing and their faces were concealed behind balaclavas and snow goggles. They were just two figures hefting boxes in the snow.

Abby halted the truck and Jenny put her hand on the door to get out.

"It's blowing quite a wind out there," observed Abby. "Best protect your face."

Jenny sighed in annoyance, but Abby was right. She could see the snow blowing along the ground. She taped her nose and cheeks, pulled on her snow goggles and balaclava and put up her hood. Abby had taken similar precautions so they, too, became anonymous, swaddled human shapes. Nick and Connor walked towards them and they ended up standing in a ragged line, their backs to the wind. Nick hauled up his balaclava to speak.

"Time to go?" he asked.

Jenny nodded. "How did you know?"

He gestured at the monitoring equipment on the back of the second Hilux. "We get the anomaly readings same as you, and Connor's been through the theory with Angela."

"The anomaly's starting to decay," said Connor. "We've got a week left, plus or minus a couple of days."

Jenny nodded again. "Yes! That's what Angela says."

"Besides," said Nick, gazing thoughtfully up at the mountain above them, "I don't like the earthquake activity."

Jenny wondered why she'd bothered coming at all. Sergeant Jones had been supposed to return with Abby and relieve Connor for a couple of days off. He wasn't a scientist, but he had experience living rough in extreme conditions and experience in rock climbing, which was useful given the teratorns' cliff top home. Jenny had thought, privately, that Jones would also prevent the scientists getting too carried away and managing to kill themselves. Since they needed a minimum team of four - in order to allow time off, Jones had been assigned. When she got the readings in from Dr Mortimer, Jenny had decided to send Jones home. It was partly a ruse, without Jones, Nick would be forced to break protocol and have only two people in camp that night or forbid Connor his day off. She now regretted the decision. If Jones had been here, he could have helped with the inevitable heavy lifting. Nick gave her a half grin.

"Wasted journey?"

"Seems so," she admitted. She was sorry there was no fight in him, even though it was making her life easier.

"Never mind," he said. "You and Abby can take that second truck back. Connor and I will load this one, fetch down the cameras and then we'll be on our way too."

Jenny saw Connor glance at his watch, pulling back the outermost layer of clothing awkwardly, with heavily gloved hands, in order to see it.

"I had a gig to go to tonight," he said a little plaintively.

Nick sighed. "OK. You take Jenny back. Abby and I will finish up."

"With Abby!" protested Connor.

"We thought you'd be OK here with just Jones for one night," explained Abby. "Connor was supposed to tell you earlier."

Connor shrugged. "Since we were going anyway there didn't seem much point."

"Look!" interrupted Jenny. "I'll stay and help Nick pack up. You two go."

"Are you sure?" asked Nick. "It's hard work and we need to get the cameras down from the cliff."

Jenny looked up at the icy cliff. "I'll be fine," she said. "My Dad used to take me rock climbing as a girl. I went to the survival training too, and it's not like we're miles and miles away from help if there's a problem."

Nick still looked doubtful, but Connor and Abby's grateful smiles obviously won him over. Jenny waved them off and then turned back to the remains of the camp with a sinking heart. With difficulty and a lot of miming they dismantled the tent and packed it onto the back of the pickup. With it went several boxes of provisions, medical supplies, a small generator and two tanks of the special, freeze resistant, fuel mix.

Once everything was stowed they clambered inside the vehicle. Jenny gratefully removed her balaclava.

"No rest for the wicked," said Nick, starting the engine. "I'm going to drive a bit further along to where the ridge meets ground level. Then we'll double back along the top. There'll still be a bit of a walk to get the cameras but it won't be so far."

Jenny nodded gratefully. Packing up the campsite, in the bulky arctic clothing, had been a lot harder than she'd anticipated.

Fortunately the car's heater was working. Like Abby, Nick was keeping it down low but even so Jenny welcomed the absence of the bitter cold and the biting wind.

"Why are you so prepared to leave?" she asked suddenly. "You could get several days' more readings before we get anywhere near the theoretical danger point."

"I've got loads of data," he said, "and I don't want to risk any lives."

Jenny digested that in silence.

Nick stopped the car when they reached a boulder field that tumbled haphazardly down the side of the mountain. When he'd first come up here with Connor and Abby, they had discussed clearing some kind of a road through to the cliff top, but in the end had decided it wasn't worth the effort. Nick sort of wished they had. It wasn't that he mistrusted Jenny, but she'd really only come through the anomaly on a couple of sight-seeing visits. She might have attended the survival training, but she hadn't been living in the hostile environment ever since.

"It's not far from here to where we put the cameras," he said. "We didn't have much enthusiasm for walking long distances."

He pulled the climbing equipment out from under the seats. "Before we get out, let's go over this equipment. See how much you remember."

To his relief, she remembered a lot, was able to demonstrate the use of the reverso and knew the safety checks and calls. He wouldn't have trusted her climbing the cliff - but then he hadn't trusted Connor on the cliff either, but he was reassured that she would be a reliable belay partner.

"I'm not entirely decorative, you know," she said a little frostily when he complimented her on her memory. Her lips slammed shut in a tight line, a splash of bright red lipstick in her pale face.

Nick permitted himself a small sigh as he stepped from the Hilux. Claudia would have leavened that remark with a smile and wouldn't have held his eyes so directly. In his mind's eye, Claudia's lipstick would have been less strident and her cheeks full of soft warmth, a glow of autumn compared to Jenny's icy winter.

Together they lifted a sledge down from the back of the Hilux. Jenny helped to fix it to Nick's belt. If she had been Claudia, he'd have flirted slightly, even in three layers of clothing and snow goggles. But she wasn't Claudia.

They set off through the boulder field, dragging the sledge behind them. They hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when there was another earthquake. Nick felt Jenny grab hold of him for support, or possibly he grabbed hold of her, and they crouched together while the ground shook beneath their feet. The quake seemed to last a long time and Nick realised, with concern, that his feet were starting to sink into the snow as it shifted about them. More snow and ice was flying through the air and hitting him as he struggled to pull free, hampered by the heavy mukluks. He signalled to Jenny and saw her realise the problem as well. She struggled to lift her feet clear of the snow.

Just as suddenly as it started, the shaking stopped. They stood up carefully. Nick was relieved to find he could free his feet easily. He'd read somewhere about

ground liquefying during earthquakes. He really didn't want to experience that first hand.

He glanced speculatively ahead of them, towards the cliff face, aware that he wanted out of here badly. Four months ago he would have insisted they collect the cameras, to avoid leaving behind any trace that might alter history, but then four months ago Stephen had been alive, and he didn't feel much like getting anyone else killed because of his stubborness. He realised Jenny was staring at him and there was a look in her eyes he would have described as fear, if he had dared. For a moment the cool exterior was cracked open and she looked so much like someone else.

"Claudia," he began.

The shutters fell down and she turned, stamping her feet as she headed off along the ridge. That had been more than usually tactless of him.

Jenny stomped through the boulders, aware her behaviour wasn't entirely rational. Some part of her mind was weighing up the costs of those cameras on a mental balance sheet and mostly concluding they weren't worth the risk. Another, more frightened, part of her mind was thinking of a woman named Claudia and the urgent need to leave as small a footprint on the past as possible.

Ten minutes later Nick called a halt. They detached the sledge, ready for the cameras. Nick slung a rope round a large boulder and attached the other end to one of her belt loops. She attached a kearabiner to the front of her belt and a reverso to that, pleased that Nick wasn't having to do all of this for her. Nick attached a second rope to his climbing harness and passed her the end. They checked the rope fed through the belay device correctly and that it locked as it was supposed to in response to a sudden jerk.

Nick gave Jenny the thumbs up and then walked backwards over the edge of the cliff. She glanced up anxiously at the volcano towering above them and prayed there would be no more earthquakes. Thankfully, there were only a couple of cameras on the cliff, fixed to what Nick had described as a small ledge. Jenny concentrated on paying out the line slowly - a bit too slowly it seemed. There were a couple of calls of "Slack" from below. Then, almost predictably, the ground began to shake again.

Jenny forced herself to lock the belay, fighting the instinctive urge to crouch with her hands over her head. There came a shout from below that could have

been “Falling” but sounded more like “Aaargh”. Then a sharp jerk on the rope pulled Jenny forwards suddenly, so she landed face first in the snow, arrested by the anchor in the rock behind her. Frantically she tried to push herself upwards against the shaking ground, the shifting snow and the taut rope. She was terrified that she would somehow sink and suffocate.

Then there was the most almighty bang. She felt a blast press her flat into the snow once more. Struggling to a sitting position, Jenny turned to look at the mountain behind her. Bright red fountained from the top in a spectacular display. Her blood chilled as she saw it fall on the slopes of the mountain.

“Take up slack!”

Jenny blinked and the call came again.

“Take up slack!”

Hurriedly, she struggled to her knees and began to pull in the slack on the rope. It felt like agonising minutes before Nick’s head appeared above the top of the cliff. She kept looking behind her, although she was fairly sure no lava was coming towards them, directly anyway.

Nick scrambled over the edge. He unhooked the ropes from her belt then grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

“The ropes,” she began.

“Fuck the ropes,” he said, “and fuck the cameras before you ask. Run!”

Jenny found herself stumbling behind Nick’s indistinct shape, as snow whipped around them and, she gradually realised, not just snow but ash and rocks. She was both hot and cold as she ran. The wind was no longer biting and icy but a choking hot breeze. Somewhere behind her the molten heart of the mountain was spilling out and melting the snow.

The Hilux loomed before them and they struggled inside. Jenny found herself coughing and gasping in the passenger seat as Nick turned the vehicle and began to drive.

“Where are we going?” asked Jenny.

“Away from the mountain,” was his terse reply.

Jenny turned in her seat to stare behind them. There seemed to be a lot more lava about now, several streams and rivulets pouring down the sides of mountain cutting them off from the route back to the anomaly. Nick was driving faster than Jenny would have liked and she found herself thrown about, despite the seatbelt. She watched the mountain anxiously as they pulled away from it, expecting any moment to see a river of fire spill out of the top and head in their direction.

“Do you think Connor and Abby got back OK?” she asked.

Nick nodded. “They had plenty of time.”

"What about us?"

"Right now we want to put some distance between ourselves and the volcano and, if possible, keep upwind of any ash fallout. Then we'll try and work our way round the far side and get back to the anomaly that way.

Jenny nodded mutely and kept watching the mountain as it receded behind them. She started coughing again, ash trapped in her throat and lungs.

"There's some coffee in the thermos," said Nick.

Jenny stripped off her outer gloves and struggled with the thermos flask, eventually managing to pour a small mug while slopping a fair amount of coffee onto her clothing. It was barely luke-warm and she grimaced at the bitter taste.

"Sorry about the temperature," said Nick, seeing her expression. "The thermos doesn't hold heat all that well around here. We've been calling it iced coffee."

Jenny chuckled and downed the rest of the mug. "I expect it has psychological benefits," she said, putting the lid back on.

Nick had slowed down to a calmer pace and began to drive the Hilux upwards. Jenny assessed the geography. She wasn't sure they could claim to have placed a valley between them and the volcano. The words "secondary cone" floated uncomfortably across her mind.

"Higher ground should keep us out of the path of any lava flows," said Nick.

"Unless this erupts as well," commented Jenny.

"Oh aye! Unless this erupts as well."

He pulled the Hilux up next to a small hillock on the secondary cone/small mountain/whatever it was. They were upwind of the eruption now and the hillock acted as a partial windbreak. It was getting dark.

"Stay here until daybreak?" asked Jenny.

"Blundering out there in the dark is probably suicide," agreed Cutter.

Tiredly, Jenny followed Nick out of the car. He pulled one of the equipment boxes down from the back. The one which, Jenny recalled, contained the short-wave radio they'd been using. A receiver was set up near the anomaly and a wire threaded through to the other side.

Jenny watched silently as Nick switched it on.

"Hello! Hello! Anyone receiving me?" Nick called.

"Hello! We have a minor situation here."

Jenny giggled in spite of herself.

"This is Professor Cutter. If anyone is hearing this, Miss Lewis and I are safe but cut off from the anomaly by lava. We are going to try to drive round to the north of the volcano tomorrow and find our way back that way. We will keep this channel open."

Jenny frowned. “Why aren’t they answering?”

“Something must have happened to the receiver.”

Jenny didn’t like the sound of that at all. If something had happened to the receiver that meant lava at the anomaly site surely, and if that was the case how would they get through?

“Let’s put up the tent,” said Nick.

It was difficult work, Jenny was unfamiliar with its set up, tired and oh so cold. As soon as she stepped out of the car she felt a chill wind that seemed to cut through her clothing. As they struggled with unloading the truck and erecting the tent the bitter wind seemed to just seep the life from her. Her arms, in particular, were achingly cold. She struggled with the poles and guy ropes, her hands shaking in the bulky gloves.

“Jenny, you’re shivering,” said Nick’s voice suddenly.

“What?”

“You’re shivering.”

Jenny realised she was. Her hands were trembling most, thanks to her cold, cold wrists, but the rest of her was shaking as well. She frowned at her arms and then a horrible realisation dawned.

“I spilled coffee on my clothes.”

Nick stopped absolutely still from a moment and then began to push her back into the Hilux.

“Strip,” he said once she was inside.

“What?”

He turned the key in the ignition, starting the engine, and pushed the temperature control up to maximum.

“Strip,” he repeated. “I’ll find spare clothes.”

Still shivering, Jenny struggled to remove the layers of clothing. She realised she was blushing at the mere fact of getting undressed, in the open, in a car. Nick was intent on unloading the back but she still wished she’d opted for something a little more practical than her normal lacy underwear.

Nick opened the driver’s door and dumped in an equipment box.

“Spare clothes,” he said, then shut the door again. She watched him return to pitching the tent. She was still shivering as she struggled into the new clothes. They must have been Nick’s and felt big and baggy on her. She examined her lower arms, where the coffee had spilled and was alarmed to see white patches on the skin.

It took longer than she’d anticipated for the shivering to subside, all the while watching Nick outside, struggling with a tent that clearly required two people to

erect. She flexed her fingers, relieved to find them still working, although it sent shooting pains up her arms. Then she turned down the heat, hauled on her parka, boots, snow goggles and balaclava and struggled out of the Hilux once more.

With two of them, it didn't take long to finish putting up the tent, although Jenny's arms were agony. Nick indicated she should get into it and then he started pushing various boxes of equipment through to her before clambering in himself and sealing up the entrance behind them.

He shrugged off his parka and grinned at her as he emerged from the thick layers of clothing.

"Let's warm this place up a little," he said, "and then sort you out."

He fished out a small stove and lit it. Jenny occupied herself stowing the other boxes down the centre of the tent.

"Any signs of frostbite?" he asked.

Mutely, Jenny pushed up her sleeves and displayed her wrists. Nick held her hands and turned them over.

"It's where the coffee spilled," she explained.

He nodded. "Well, it doesn't look too serious," he gave her a reassuring grin. "Frostnip not frostbite."

He put a kettle on the stove and then opened the first aid kit.

"You'd better take some pain killers," he said. "I imagine, now you've warmed up, that's starting to burn."

Nick brewed them some "proper" coffee - which meant Nescafe, it appeared. Then he slapped a frying pan on the stove and began cooking vegetables and diced beef.

"Where did those come from?" she asked.

"Tescos," he said. "I still smile every time I think of that survival chap going on about good nutrition and standard rations and thinking, 'but Tesco's will only be an hour's drive away'".

"A bit further now."

"We've enough food to last several days. There was always the risk of a blizzard. Don't worry."

Jenny smiled weakly at him over the top of her coffee. "I'm more worried about lava."

"Either it comes this way or it doesn't," said Nick, fatalistically. "In the dark we're as likely to drive into a crevasse as we are to get overrun by lava if we stay here."

The tent wasn't toasty warm, but the cooking stove prevented it being unpleasant. Through the canvas walls, Jenny could see that it was dark outside but a dull

glow in the distance reminded her of the erupting volcano. Nick hung a lamp off a hook above them, bathing the interior of the tent in a warm glow.

"So what do you guys do in the evening?" she asked.

"Make notes mostly. We had a go at story telling but none of us were much good at it."

Jenny chuckled quietly and imagined Connor telling a story, endlessly getting ahead of himself and losing his way, or Abby, all sharp sentences that were to the point, full of passion but lacking in slow description. As for Sergeant Jones, she doubted he knew any stories that weren't X-rated.

"Did you tell any stories?" she asked.

"Only one that my Nan used to tell me."

"How did it go?"

Nick looked across at her.

"Let's clear up first," he said.

Jenny found herself waiting impatiently as he stacked the dirty plates in a box ("We can wipe then down with snow in the morning") and rearranged the boxes out of the centre of the tent and round the edges.

They climbed into sleeping bags and sat shoulder to shoulder.

"If we stay close, it'll help keep us warm."

"Really?" said Jenny. She distinctly remembered the 'How to organise your tent' diagram which had had boxes arranged decorously down the centre.

"Really," he said putting an arm round her.

Grateful for the comfort, if nothing else, Jenny snuggled closer. "The story?" she prompted.

He grinned in the lamp light.

"Once upon a time there was a wee lass and a wee laddie called Jean (that was my sister's name, by the way, my Nan was a little transparent) and Nicholas. They lived on the edge of the Cairngorms where the rolling heights come down to meet the central plain. They were a sister and brother who loved each other dearly and looked out for each other well and *never* argued over who was going to get the last Jammy Dodger."

Jenny snorted quietly.

"My Nan was always very particular about the Jammy Dodger point."

"I imagine she was."

"Now, it was about this time that the troll king's mirror was carried by goblins into the sky and got broken as it approached the sun. The troll king's mirror was a terrible thing that distorted everything seen in it so that it became ugly. When the mirror broke, tiny shards of it scattered all over the world. When this happened, a

tiny splinter lodged in Jean's eye and another in her heart and she became cold to the world and harsh with her brother. She called him ugly names and refused to play with him."

"Your Nan had it in for your sister a bit, didn't she?"

"Not really, I gather Jean got told the same story but with the roles reversed.

"Jean carried on with her life, going to school and kirk on Sundays but there was no joy in it, for everything she saw was twisted and ugly. Because her tongue was sharp and bitter her friends deserted her and she oft' times played on her own.

"That winter was particularly cold. Jean took to walking by herself in the foothills of the Cairngorms because the cold was not so harsh as the piece of troll mirror lodged in her heart and the bitter wind did not sting so much as the splinter in her eye. It was then she saw the only beautiful thing she had witnessed since the mirror broke.

"The Snow Queen rode down from the sky in her ice sledge. This was no wee sledge you drag up a hill and ride back down again, but a large horse-drawn chariot, like you can see in the shopping centre come Christmas-time, with Father Christmas in it handing out presents. But the Snow Queen is not Father Christmas. She is more real and more terrible and far, far more beautiful. Her skin is so pale it is almost the white of ice and her hair is black like the coal we used to light fires with when I was a wee lass (that's my grandmother, by the way, I was never a wee lass). She had long fingernails like icicles and her cloak sparkled with starlight and was lined with fur.

"When Jean saw the Snow Queen her mouth dropped open and she stepped up to her with one thought in her mind and one question on her lips.

"'Take me with you.'

"So the Snow Queen took Jean into her sledge and whisked her away to her castle at the North Pole."

"You know," said Jenny, "I think I've heard this story before."

"I have a strong suspicion my Nan had been reading Hans Christian Anderson."

"Now, young Nicholas, who was a strong, brave laddie and true of heart..."

"Was he now?"

"Are you doubting the word of my grandmother?"

"I wouldn't dare."

"Good. So young Nicholas, who was strong and brave..."

"And true of heart."

"And true of heart, vowed to find his sister where so e'er she had gone.

"He packed a rucksack with food for the journey and headed north from home, for his heart told him that Jean could be found in that direction. Wherever he went he asked after his sister, bonnie, blue-eyed Jean, and everywhere he went, in Crianlarich, Fort William, Gairloch, Ullapool and Thurso he heard the same story of how the Snow Queen had driven past in the night, leaving the frost behind her and how there had been a blonde-haired blue-eyed lassie in the sledge beside her.

"When he came to John O'Groats, young Nicholas was stopped by the sea. So he called out the ancient rhyme of his family

> "Oh far and wide my feet have strayed
> So far from shore and sea
> But my folk of fishing made their trade
> So selkie come to me.

"The sea at the shore's edge frothed and foamed and a large pointed head emerged. It was no selkie that answered Nicholas's call, but a moasaur."

"A moasaur?" interrupted Jenny.

"A predatory aquatic reptile from the Cretaeceous. My Nan knew her audience well.

"The moasaur carried Nicholas across the sea to the arctic wastes of the North Pole and the Snow Queen's palace. Inside the palace, Nicholas found Jean seated on the cold hard floor, her face creased in concentration. The Snow Queen had set her the task of assembling a puzzle from shards of ice. Once assembled, Jean would be freed.

"Jean hardly looked up as Nicholas approached, for the splinter of the mirror was still lodged in her eye and another in her heart. Nicholas knelt by his sister and begged her to come with him but she hardly glanced in his direction. He wept tears of sorrow that he could not reach her heart and eventually he kissed her forehead."

Nick paused expectantly.

"Go on!" said Jenny.

"At this point you're supposed to say, 'Oh Yuk! Girls have germs and boys *never* cry.'"

Jenny gave him a hard look. "Oh Yuk! Girls have germs and boys never cry," she repeated, without enthusiasm.

Nick grinned back at her.

"When the situation is truly serious and truly hopeless a young man who is strong and brave,"

"And true of heart?"

"Indeed, and true of heart, may weep just a little,"

"In a manly way?"

"In a manly way, and may bring himself to make an exception, just for once, and kiss his sister.

"A single tear dropped to her face and washed the splinter of mirror from her eyes. And the warmth of his heart, because he loved her so dearly and kissed her, even though she had germs, reached out and melted the shard embedded in hers. She looked up at him and saw him truly for the first time since the mirror fell to earth.

"She smiled then, the first smile that had crossed her face in many months and the joy of that smile was so beautiful to behold that the pieces of the ice puzzle got up and danced and then settled into place, freeing her from the servitude of the Snow Queen.

"Then Nicholas and Jean ran to the shore, where the moasaur awaited them, and they returned to bonny Scotland and eventually to their home."

Jenny woke up several times in the night with a burning sensation in her wrists and the heavy weight of Nick's arm about her. She wondered, idly, if he had also taken to cuddling Connor and Abby in the night but she doubted it. Her dreams were haunted by the white, white face of the Snow Queen, her hands grasping Jenny's wrists and burning them with the cold of her touch.

When she awoke in the morning, it was to the smell of frying bacon. Nick was seated decorously across from her. If he was embarrassed about or even aware of the midnight intimacy, he didn't show it.

Jenny gratefully took a bacon butty from him.

"All this fried food is going to do desperate things to my figure," she joked. But she remembered the briefing only too well and the emphasis on plenty of energy and carbohydrate intake.

"You won't be wanting any of the chocolate then," joked Nick, producing a large bar of Fruit and Nut from the food box.

"Don't push your luck."

It was still early but neither of them wanted to wait around longer than necessary. Once again they donned the heavy arctic clothing and left the tent. It

was about ten minutes work to collapse it and stow everything in the back of the pickup.

As they did so, one of the huge teratorns appeared, as if by magic, and sat on the back of the truck. It was a large ugly-looking bird, nearly a metre tall with a featherless neck and head. Jenny thought the teratorns looked like vultures, but Nick had said vultures were already around. The teratorns died out when the climate warmed up.

"Go on! Get away!" Nick shouted at it and flapped his arms. It rose up into the air and circled forlornly above them. With its wings outstretched, it dwarfed Nick and Jenny was surprised that a bit of shouting was sufficient to drive it away.

"That's a little harsh," said Jenny.

"It's number 13, a trap-happy menace. Skews all the data." Nick sounded grumpy.

"Trap-happy?"

"It worked out that one of our traps is a free meal. Soon as it sees one it hops in, eats the bait and then sits around waiting for us to release it. We've caught it nearly every day for the last two weeks."

"Well, it's gone now," said Jenny.

Nick grunted and climbed back into the truck.

Jenny looked across the narrow valley to the volcano beyond. It seemed quiet at the moment, but the plume of smoke rising from the top didn't reassure her.

"What will happen to the teratorns?" asked Jenny, as she climbed in beside him.

He shook his head. "I think the early lava flows will have washed straight over the colony. They may migrate and set up elsewhere. We don't really know enough about them to make a guess." He sounded depressed.

Jenny peered out of the window again but the unlucky number 13 was nowhere to be seen.

Nick set up the radio between them on the front seat of the car and tried once more to make contact with the other side of the anomaly. They were greeted by silence and static.

Getting to the north side of the mountain proved to be an arduous task. They had to drive the Toyota up a ridge that linked two mountains together. The far side took the brunt of the prevailing wind which left deep drifts of snow piled up

against the slope. In the end Jenny took over the driving. When they got stuck, beyond the magic of the "rocking trick" Jenny recalled from *Top Gear*, Nick dug them out with spade and ice axe. Progress was slow.

The shortwave radio remained resolutely silent. They put out calls every hour but now with little expectation of an answer. Jenny tried not to think too hard about what they would do if the way to the anomaly was blocked.

By midday they had reached a valley bottom where the snow was more compact. Neither of them liked it much, though the going was faster. They were at the very foot of the mountain. No lava appeared to have come down this side, but they were uncomfortably aware that that could change any minute. They were at risk from the rock and debris that was being thrown out of the mountain. There was a continuous rattle on the exterior of the car and, every so often a loud bang as something heftier than a pebble landed on them.

After an hour or so, Jenny saw more teratorns circling in the air.

"Is that significant?" she asked, pointing through the windscreen.

"Hard to say. They're scavengers. There might be a dead or injured animal there."

They drove on, over the snow. As they drew closer, Jenny began to make out a creature, or rather two creatures on the ground below.

"What are those?" she asked.

"The upright one's a Giant Bear," said Nick. "It's the largest known carnivore from this era. I've been keeping an eye out for one, but this is the first I've seen."

"Oh great!" murmured Jenny.

"I'm not sure what the other is. Another large mega-fauna, possibly a Megatherium."

"What's one of those? It looks almost as big."

"Bigger. It's a giant sloth, believe it or not."

"It looks dead."

"Probably, people have often thought the bears might be scavengers and the teratorns certainly are."

"So we're probably all right, as long as we give it a wide berth?"

"I don't see we have much choice. It's about the size of this truck though, so we're in trouble if we do catch its attention. Stop and let me out. I'm going to get the rifle from the back."

Jenny stopped and watched as Nick went round the back for the rifle. He climbed back in and sat with it loosely gripped on his knee.

"That's not a tranquiliser gun," she observed.

He shook his head. "We probably won't have the time to mess around with tranquilisers. Hopefully the noise will scare it."

"And if it doesn't?"

He sighed. "I'll have to shoot it." His voice was flat and unemotional.

Carefully Jenny eased the car forwards. She edged it up the far side of the valley to give the animals as wide a berth as possible. The bear rose up and watched them and it really was, she realised, the size of the truck.

"Just keep going slowly," advised Nick. "Right now it's probably most concerned about whether we are going to compete for the prey."

Jenny kept her eyes on the ground ahead of them but couldn't help occasional glances out of the windows at the huge beast. It took several paces towards them, but the teratorns took the opportunity to land on the carcass themselves and with a roar it turned back to scare them away.

A rumbling sound started up. Glancing at the mountain Jenny saw a plume of steam and smoke billowing down its side. Almost without thought she floored the accelerator and swung back across the valley. They lunged forwards with a roar of the engine. Ahead of her, she saw the great beast turn and start loping towards them but she paid it little heed as she rushed across the valley floor, struggling to control the car as best she could.

"You're taking us towards the landslide," shouted Nick, in alarm. "Turn back!"

"I'm not letting it get between us and the anomaly," Jenny shouted back.

"You're mad!"

Afterwards, Jenny was able to pick apart her thought processes, an awareness that whatever was coming down the mountain towards them would flow along the floor of the valley and would be entirely impassable. In the moment, however, she was simply aware of a desperate need to be on the *other* side of the valley, on the lower slopes of the mountain and then hope to drive fast enough to let the deluge fall behind them. Nick eyes were wide and staring as he was bounced around the cabin.

"The bear thinks you're going to attack it."

"Well shoot it then," said Jenny crossly. The giant bear was really the least of her worries.

Nick scrambled into the back, where he could get a clear shot, and wound down the window. In her mirrors Jenny saw him aim, but the fingers didn't pull the trigger.

As their paths crossed, Jenny swerved to avoid the bear. It reared up on its hind legs and lashed out with a swipe of its giant paw. The Hilux rocked under the

impact of the blow. Jenny struggled with the wheel. A second blow caught them as they moved past and the read window smashed. Then it was behind them.

A billowing cloud seemed to be pouring down the mountain but they were close to the far edge. Jenny drove upwards and sideways. Everything become dark as if a cloud had crossed the sun and she knew the great plume was almost on top of them.

"We're going to make it. We're going to make it." She muttered the mantra under her breath as though merely saying it would help.

A flurry of snow and sleet rattled across the windscreen and in through the broken window at the back and then they were out.

In the mirrors she could still see the great bear bounding after them. She watched with horrified fascination as the snow and sleet cloud overtook it, followed by a vast tide of mud, meltwater and debris. She slowed slightly to a more controllable speed. A new-born river swirled in the valley below.

Nick was breathing in short noisy breaths that were rapidly dissolving into laughter. "You are completely, and certifiably, crazy," he gasped.

Jenny found herself laughing with relief too. "Well, we're not getting off the side of the mountain now," she said.

Nick actually whooped even as he shook his head.

"No, we're stuck with whatever it chooses to throw at us." He carried on chuckling. "Just remind me never to get involved in a game of chicken with you."

He struggled back into the front seat, still hanging onto the rifle. "Sorry I didn't shoot it."

"Doesn't matter," Jenny felt sufficiently exhilarated to be magnanimous. "I know you don't like killing things unnecessarily."

"No, I don't, do I? Not that it made much difference on this occasion."

He stared soberly out of the window at the swirling river below them.

As it grew dark, they drove onto a rocky outcrop that jutted out from the side of the volcano. Once more they pitched the tent and settled down for the night.

Nick watched Jenny cautiously, as she rooted through the food box. She'd taken more pain killers, but she'd managed to drive most of the afternoon, so he wasn't overly worried about the frost bite. She was bearing up remarkably well, he thought, given she hadn't expected to spend more than an hour out here, and it had now been a day and a half. Her make up was smudged and patchy and her

hair was windswept and tangled. He rather liked her like that. She looked even less like Claudia, but there was something vivid and wild about her, as if, once you cracked the outer icy shell, something terribly alive and dangerous burst out.

"Stir-fried chicken?" she asked brightly.

"Sounds good."

She peered at the label on a packet of diced chicken. "Sell by date today. Have you been keeping it cold?"

Nick chuckled hollowly. "We've kept it outside mostly, if that's what you're asking."

She tapped the packet with a fork. "Frozen solid. Oh well, the frying should thaw it."

She pulled off the top of the packet and emptied the contents into the pan with a little oil, followed by a packet of diced vegetables.

"I'm glad I don't have to try to chop anything," she said.

"We worked that out pretty quickly. Pre-diced is the way to go out here."

"No soy sauce," she said, "it'll be a little bland I'm afraid."

"You could try one of the packets out of the pot noodles."

Jenny made a face. "We can do without, I think."

She tossed the chicken and vegetables about with a spatula for several minutes. Then she added a packet of instant noodles and tossed the contents together once more, until the noodles separated.

She placed the pan between them on an upturned box and handed him a fork. "Let's not bother with plates," she said.

When she had driven into the path of the meltwater she had had a wild, fiery expression on her face. The smile she gave him now had something similar in it, as if eating out of a pan was as exciting as a brush with death. Nick was aware that he, too, had been enervated by the rush of adrenaline, even though that had long worn off. He felt a strange lightness and joy. He was glad, he realised, that he was still alive. The simply cooked chicken and vegetables were delicious and the company was lively.

"Can we talk about the radio receiver?" she said, over the coffee that followed.

"It could have been hit by a rock."

"They'd have set up another by now if it had. I think we have to assume a mudslide or lava flow."

"Where there's life there's hope," he said gently.

She shook her head.

"Look!" he improvised, "if we're close enough we can transmit a signal through the anomaly."

"You don't know that."

"No," he admitted, "but I'm pretty confident."

"Why would being close to the anomaly make a difference? The whole point of short wave was that it carries a long way, wasn't it?"

"Hey! I wasn't the one who trapped us on this side of the valley!"

"Point taken."

"Once they know we're close," said Nick, warming to his theme, "They will be able to get through to us from their side. Fly a microlight, perhaps. It's a big anomaly."

Jenny grinned at him and there was an amused twinkle in her eye.

"What?" he asked.

"I'd forgotten what one of your mad ideas was like."

"It's not a mad idea!"

"Fly a microlight, through an anomaly, over a lava flow?"

"That may be a little far-fetched, but we should still contact Connor. He's bright and they have resources."

She shook her head again but was smiling now.

"I think you like my mad ideas," he teased.

"Don't count on it," and she gave him the stern look that she usually reserved for recalcitrant reporters. It worked better when she was wearing a smart suit and immaculate make up.

She gave her head an abrupt toss, as if dismissing speculation for the present.

"My turn to tell a story," she said.

"Agreed."

"Once upon a time there was a girl called..."

"Jenny?"

"No actually, Akinyi."

"Akinyi then, where did you hear this story?"

"A Rupert Bear book, if you must know. Akinyi was a girl at my school."

"Where was she from?"

"Cheltenham," said Jenny and sniffed in a way that indicated this was the end of that line of conversation.

Nick considered himself suitably chastised.

"One day Akinyi found a spark of sunshine that had fallen to Earth. It lay in among the roots of a tree stump in the wide savannah and the grass around it smouldered in the heat. Now Akinyi knew that fire in the grasslands can be a dangerous thing and she approached the spark, thinking that she would stamp it out. But then the spark spoke to her.

”‘Help,’ it said. ‘I have fallen down from the sun and now I am lost and alone. I can feel myself growing cold and dying, will you help return me to the sun?’

“‘Of course,’ said Akinyi, ’How can I help?’

“‘There is a great rock in the middle of the savannah, not far from here. When the last sunbeam of the day strikes the rock then I can travel on it back up into the sky. If you can carry me to the rock, then I can return back to the sun.’

“Akinyi approached the spark but it was so hot she knew that, if she picked it up in her hands, they would be burned.

“‘Wait here,’ she whispered to the spark and then she ran to the farm of...“ Jenny hesitated.

”Mr. Lester,“ suggested Nick.

Jenny scowled at him. “Mr. Lester. Once at the farm Akinyi asked ‘Please Mr. Lester may I borrow a spade. I promise I will bring it back.”’

“And Mr. Lester said, ‘you can, as long as you fill five forms in triplicate and sell me your soul.”’

“Hey! Who’s telling this story?”

“Sorry.”

“Mr Lester said, ‘Of course you can borrow a spade because I know you’ll be responsible, bring it back undamaged and won’t cause any PR crises with it.’

“Akinyi ran back with the spade to the tree stump where the spark waited.

“‘Here!’ she cried. ‘Jump on the spade and I will carry you to the rock.’ ”

“‘Very well,’ said the spark and it jumped on the spade.

“Akinyi picked it up and began to carry it to the rock. She had not gone very far when a troupe of monkeys leaped down and surrounded her.”

“What sort of monkeys?”

“I don’t know! Lemurs!”

“You don’t get lemurs on the savannah.”

“A troupe of special heretofore-undiscovered-by-man-savannah-dwelling lemurs surrounded her. The lemurs called Akinyi names and pulled faces, because they are very naughty monkeys. They danced around her, tugging at her clothing, and she was afraid that she would drop the spark. But suddenly, the spark jumped up from the spade and it whizzed around the heads of the lemurs. It sparked and fizzed at them and singed their fur so they ran away squeaking and chittering among themselves.

“Then Akinyi caught the spark once more on the spade. It lay there panting and glowing only very faintly like the final ember of a fire.

“‘Hurry!’ it whispered to her, ‘Hurry!’

"So Akinyi hurried with the spark until she came to the great rock in the middle of the savannah. She walked carefully up the great rock, as the sun was setting, and she placed the spade with the spark at its summit. Then she stood back and, as the last ray of the sun struck the rock, before it sank beneath the horizon, she saw the spark lift up. It flew upwards along the ray towards the sun, shouting its thanks as it went."

That night Jenny did not dream of the white, white face of the Snow Queen who gripped her wrists with a touch of ice. Instead she dreamed of hot African skies, warmth, friendship and dark faces. Her wrists still burned where she held the bright but fading spark that was Nick Cutter and she heard him shout his thanks as he raced away from her and back towards the sun.

In the morning she awoke to find her own arm around Nick. However, if he could ignore such embarrassment, then so could she.

After their morning bacon, Jenny made coffee. There was a half-used pack of Rombout's individual filter coffees at the bottom of the food box and she was tired of Nescafe.

"Those are Connor's," observed Nick.

"I don't suppose he'll mind."

When they'd finished Jenny opened up one of the little packets and dumped the coffee grounds into the thermos flask.

"What are you doing?" asked Nick.

"Good luck charm. If we get back I'm going to show you real iced coffee."

She opened the front of the tent, scooped some of the snow into the thermos and then gave it a shake. "Let it brew cold for a few hours and we should have the real deal," she said.

When they struck camp, number 13 came to visit them again. This morning Nick didn't scare it off but, instead, fed it the remains of the bacon.

"He really is a splendid animal," he mused to Jenny. "Have you seen the size of the wing span? It's not so obvious when he's seated like this."

"I did notice it yesterday. How on Earth did you guys ring him?"

"Well, as I mentioned yesterday, trapping this guy is all too easy and he's mostly pretty docile. Some of the others were trickier though, we had to tranquilise them."

"Weren't you worried about leaving the rings behind?"

Nick shook his head. "We chose a bio-degradable variety. I'm sorry, Jon," he added, crumpling up the empty bacon packet, "that's the last of it."

"Jon?" queried Jenny.

"Short for Jones. Abby named him, said his stomach was larger than his brain and that reminded her of someone else she knew. Sergeant Jones wasn't impressed."

Jenny laughed, "I'll bet he wasn't."

"Anyway," confessed Nick, "mostly, I'm not in favour of anthromorphising wild animals and giving them names but, given he keeps showing up, we might as well call him something a bit more friendly than number 13."

The great bird began nudging one of the food boxes.

"There's only chocolate left in there, mate," said Nick. "You'll have to fight Jenny for that and somehow I think you'd come off worst."

Jenny whacked Nick on the shoulder. "Watch it you," she murmured.

About an hour later they rounded the edge of the volcano and were in line of sight of the anomaly.

"Oh shit!" said Jenny.

A tall trail of black rock led down the side of the mountain and through the anomaly. Only the top of the bright circle of sparkling light was still visible.

"That's lava isn't it?" she added.

"Yes," agreed Nick.

"Well, we're in line of sight now. Let's try the radio."

Nick picked up the speaker. "Hello, is there anyone receiving this, hello? Hello?"

"Nick! Can you hear us? Come in!" It was Connor's voice.

Jenny was amused to see a look of surprise on Nick's face. She couldn't resist muttering, "You were right... again."

"Yes! I hear you!" he said.

"Oh good! We've been transmitting for days but the anomaly's a fairly narrow window to transmit through, you have to be lined up right. We got your messages 'cos we've got a ring of receivers set up round this thing but we couldn't seem to get any back to you."

"That's good to hear. We seem to be a bit stuck here though."

"The lava flow?"

"You'd noticed that then. Is it doing much damage your end?"

"Enough to have Lester demanding Jenny's immediate return, but no lives lost and not much property damage."

Jenny winced. From Connor, "not much" property damage probably just meant it hadn't reached a major city yet.

"We can still see the top of the anomaly but I'm not sure how we're going to get to it," Nick continued.

"The lava should have cooled enough to form a crust you can walk on."

"What?"

"The lava should have cooled enough to form a crust you can walk on. I googled it."

"He's been trying to persuade Lester to let him come back through," broke in Abby's voice.

"You stay exactly where you are Connor! You hear me?" said Nick. "Jenny and I are going to go take a closer look at this lava flow of yours."

"Be careful!" said Abby. "Most of the lava is coming through some kind of tunnel in the middle, but we don't know how thick the crust is."

"We'll get back to you," said Nick.

He started the Hilux. "Let's see how close we can get before we have to set out on foot."

"Do you think I could claim a freak volcanic fissure?" mused Jenny.

Nick laughed. "I think you'll have to. The geologists will have a field day though. There really shouldn't be anything like that in the UK."

They drove closer to the lava flow, near a rocky ledge that seemed to be about the same height as the lava. They parked on the edge of the snow line. Between them and the lava, all was bare rock.

"Well," commented Nick, stepping down from the Hilux, "here goes nothing."

He put the radio in a rucksack, with the aerial sticking out and the microphone draped over his shoulder, so they could keep in touch with Connor. Jenny added the thermos flask and the remaining chocolate, on general principles, and they set out for the rock.

The closer they got to the lava flow the more uncomfortably hot it became. Standing on the rock, Jenny found she was sweating freely.

"If we have to retreat," she said, "we'll both have to strip - frostbite city otherwise."

Nick laughed. Jenny bent down and picked up a pebble. She tossed it out onto the lava flow. It bounced and rolled but didn't noticeably melt or fall through the crust.

"Me first, I think," she said. "I'm lighter."

Nick held her hand as she cautiously stepped down onto the top of the lava flow. It seemed to hold her weight. Carefully, she let go of his hand and took a few further steps out onto the flow, gaining confidence. She could feel the heat through her boots but, presumably, if she kept moving fast enough it would be OK. She recalled that was the trick for walking on hot coals. She hopped from foot to foot and turned back to call to Nick. Before she said anything though, she became aware of a slight stickiness. Glancing down she saw back goo dripping from the soles of her boots. They were melting. Throwing caution to the wind she ran at full speed back to the rock. As she got close a hot squelchiness developed around her socks.

Nick looked confused but caught her, nevertheless, as she threw herself off the lava flow and onto the rock.

"What is it?" he said anxiously.

"They're melting!" She ripped off the boots and then her socks. The boots lay on the rock between them, an oozing ruined mess.

Nick switched on the radio. "Connor! We have a problem. The lava's too hot to walk on. It's melting our boots."

"OK! Let me think about this."

"Maybe you could check on the Internet how long it takes to be cool enough to, you know, actually walk on?"

"It's not his fault," said Jenny.

"I'll make it up to him when I get back. I'll buy him the Star Wars Director's Cut or something."

Jenny struggled to her feet. The rock they were standing on was hot and she limped off, hurriedly, distancing herself from the lava flow. "I hope you've got a spare pair of boots in the car somewhere."

Connor was back in radio contact almost before they'd got the spare boots unpacked.

"Turns out," he said, "when they souped up the Hiluxes they installed extra insulation in the bonnet. If you open it up and look at the firewall, you should find

it. You could wrap it round your feet for protection."

"OK, we'll take a look," said Nick.

"We've got a chopper this end. All you have to do is get through the anomaly."

"All we have to do is get back through the anomaly," muttered Nick to Jenny. She couldn't help grinning back at him.

When they opened the bonnet, the extra insulation was visible, stuck to the back wall, between the engine compartment and the cabin. Nick shook his head.

"What did they put it in there for? Why would I need extra fire protection on field trip to a glacial period?"

Jenny shrugged. "You know the engineers, they had so much fun souping this thing up and pretending they were Jeremy Clarkson. All eventualities covered."

Nick shook his head. "Well, there's a toolbox in the back. Let's see if we can get this insulation off."

They hauled down the toolbox and opened it up. Nick found a small crowbar and started trying to lever the glued-on rockwool away from the interior of engine compartment. Jenny sorted through the rest of the tools, in case there was something better.

"There's a fire blanket in here," she called out.

"Could be useful. We should bring that as well."

The insulation was difficult to prize away from the casing, but eventually they had four reasonably sized pieces. Jenny bored holes through the corners with an awl, grateful that it was warm enough this close to the lava flow to dispense with the bulky gloves and parkas, and they threaded wire through them which they attached to the top of their boots. They looked bizarre, with the thick insulation attached to their feet like giant slippers, but hopefully it would serve.

They tramped back to the anomaly and out onto the lava flow. Even with the insulation, Jenny could feel the warmth seeping through.

"Best not to hang about," she said nervously.

They were about halfway to the anomaly when there was a boom from above them. They both paused to look back. A new fountain of lava was spewing upwards from the top of the volcano and then pouring down on top of the lava flow on which they were standing.

"Oh shit!" said Nick.

Jenny grabbed his arm and started to pull. "Run!" she shouted.

They ran for the anomaly, the small sparkling light just visible above the hot black rock. Jenny threw down the fire blanket. There was a singeing smell, but it didn't obviously melt or combust. Nick made a "you first" gesture, which almost started her arguing until common sense asserted itself. She crouched down on

hands and knees and crawled across it, through the anomaly. The fire blanket was burning hot under her palms.

She stood up and gaped at the scene before her. She was standing in the centre of a black and steaming landscape. The lava had clearly poured through the anomaly and then spread out in a circular fashion from that point. There had been a small copse of trees at the edge of the farmer's field. That was gone, under the expanding rock. Jenny judged the lava extended for maybe a quarter of a mile from where she stood, in all directions.

She started to run away from the anomaly, scanning the skies for the chopper. She spotted it hovering to her right and started to wave her arms and jump up and down.

"Where's the chopper?" shouted Nick from behind her.

She pointed and saw him beginning to run towards her. There was a loud squawk. Nick turned round. Jon's head was peering through the anomaly and squawking in an interrogative fashion.

"Go back! Go back!" shouted Nick, frantically running back towards the anomaly while waving his arms about.

"Nick!" Jenny shouted, torn between exasperation that the blithering idiot was about to risk his life for an extinct bird and overwhelming relief that the blithering idiot was about to risk his life for an extinct bird. "Nick!"

The chopper dropped low enough for her to grab hold of the wire ladder. She climbed on, hooking one arm firmly around a rung. Then she gestured frantically at the pilot in a way that, she hoped, conveyed, "Get me closer to the blithering idiot, I'm going to have to grab him."

Jon had now walked through the anomaly. Its head came up to Nick's chest and was cocked on one side, eyeing the man curiously, while Nick made herding gestures back towards the anomaly.

The helicopter swept her closer and she managed to grab Nick's arm. He was an incredible weight but, as his feet left the ground, he appeared to come to his senses and managed to grab the wire ladder as he did so. Apparently of the opinion this was great stuff, Jon opened his vast wings and rose into the air beside them. He continued squawking enthusiastically, circling them in wide loops, while a red sea surged through the anomaly below.

Sitting on the terrace of the country house hotel which Lester had somehow managed to both evacuate and commandeer, Nick found it hard to believe that a mere couple of hours before he had been running for his life. A good shower had made him feel much more human and he was looking forward to a cool beer.

Jenny appeared opposite him on the terrace. She held a tray containing a pot of coffee, a battered thermos flask and two ice-filled glasses. She had a mobile pressed to one ear.

"No! No!" she was saying. "Don't say unexplained about anything. Use words like unusual and unexpected."

She switched off the phone with a smile and sat down opposite him. She was wearing a strange outfit that seemed to consist of a tracksuit top, ra-ra skirt and tights. Abby and Connor had been despatched to Tesco's to get clothing for them. Nick had got a pair of non-descript jeans and a plain shirt but it seemed Abby had felt the need to put more character into her choices. Jenny's face was clear of any make up. In fact, Jenny had appeared more concerned by her two-day old make-up than her two-days worn clothing and had demanded make-up remover and a brush almost as soon as she stepped off the chopper. Whatever make-up Abby had purchased, Nick mused, Jenny had obviously deemed unwearable.

Jenny placed the glasses on the table, and poured the coffee into them.

"What's that?" asked Nick.

"Iced coffee, made from unsullied Pleistocene snow and brewed slowly and lovingly over 6 hours. I just filtered it to get the grounds out."

She flashed him a bright and vivid smile and raised her glass. "To fire and ice!" she declared.

"Fire and ice," echoed Nick.

34.3 Undercover Lyle

A Primeval Crackfic

There was a loud banging on Sanctuary's front door.

Reluctantly, Stephen and Ryan broke out of their clinch.

"I'm beginning to miss the days when it was just you and me and the occasional visitor," said Stephen. "Lately it's been like Piccadilly bloody Circus round here."

"We could always not answer," murmured Ryan, his eyes drifting towards the stairs that led up to the bedrooms.

The knocking came again.

"You're thinking of screwing me in time to the banging?" asked Stephen. "A deep thrust for each pound... on... the... door," he said pausing for each thump that sounded from outside.

Ryan's breathing speeded up noticeably. "Upstairs!" he said firmly.

They had reached the halfway landing when Lyle's voice echoed through the letterbox. "Will you two buggers stop shagging and open the bloody door? My balls are freezing off out here and that makes me irritable."

"How bad can an irritable Lyle be?" asked Stephen, pushing Ryan up against the wall in a deep kiss.

"Do your balls hang low?
Do they wobble to and fro?"

Lyle's off-key singing was hard to ignore. Nevertheless, Stephen manfully continued kissing Ryan, a look of intense concentration on his face.

"Can you tie them in a knot?
Can you tie them in a bow?"

"I'll give him balls," muttered Ryan, through gritted teeth.

"Can you toss them over your shoulder like a regimental soldier?"

Lyle paused and repeated the line, warbling, almost entirely without artistic merit, on both *shoulder* and *soldier*.

Ryan sighed. "We'd better let him in."

They opened the door. Lyle strode into the house, armed with a large carrier bag and a manila folder.

"After your singing, that had better have beer in it," said Stephen, eyeing the bag.

"Nope! My disguise. I'm going undercover. Can I use the bathroom?"

"Undercover?" questioned Ryan. "Where?"

"In a ficathon entry. Look here," Lyle thrust the manila folder into Ryan's hands. "The job advert and my CV are in there. I'll be right out. I just want to start bleaching my hair." The bathroom door slammed shut behind him.

Ryan pulled a sheet of paper out of the file and walked into the kitchen.

"You're not eligible, mate," he called out. "It says 'strictly no fanon OCs'."

A muffled shout emerged from the bathroom in reply.

"What's that?" called Ryan.

More muffled shouting.

"He says he knows," reported Stephen, who was hovering in the hallway. "That's why he's using a disguise."

"I could have sworn he said something a bit more colourful than that."

Stephen walked over and took the other piece of paper out of the folder.

"Sergeant Jones," he read out. "Place of birth, Somerset."

"Why Somerset?" asked Ryan.

Stephen shrugged languidly and helped himself to a beer from the fridge. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

"Oi! Super Secret Squirrel!" shouted Ryan. "Why Somerset?"

The bathroom door opened and Lyle emerged with a plastic bag over his hair.

"Very convincing," observed Stephen. "No one will recognise you like that."

"Why Somerset?" asked Ryan again.

"I do a good Somerset accent."

Lyle stood up straight and cleared his throat. "Ooh! Arrr! That be lovely zzider that be. Ooh! Arrr!"

Ryan and Stephen exchanged glances.

Stephen looked back down at Sergeant Jones' CV. "You've missed out Pirate from previous career."

"You go to Somerset a lot?" asked Ryan.

"Used to, but I got banned."

"Banned from Somerset?"

"Got into too many bar fights. Scrappy buggers down there, always picking fights for no reason."

"You don't say," said Stephen blandly.

"Fortunately, the advert says 'non speaking role'," said Ryan.

"If you're going to take the piss, you could at least offer me a beer," said Lyle, sounding aggrieved.

Ryan took two more beers out of the fridge and tossed one to him.

"Skills: Taking it up the arse like a man," read out Stephen. "Not a conventional CV entry."

"Ah but it's fanfic," said Lyle confidently. "Pretty much a job requirement that."

Ryan looked at the job description. "It says gen or het here. I don't think your ability to take it up the arse, like a man or otherwise, is actually going to help."

"Oh!" Lyle looked crestfallen. "Might as well cross that out then."

Stephen grabbed a pen from the counter-top and drew a line through the statement.

"But I need to show I'm experienced at this fanfic thing," said Lyle. "How about putting 'manly, yet sensitive' down?"

Ryan almost choked into his beer. "Do you even know what sensitive means?"

"I write poetry!"

"You write doggerel on the walls of the men's bogs. It's not the same thing."

"I do not write on toilet walls."

"A Private just lately enlisted
Made a gesture described as limp-wristed
Behind Lester's back
So I gave him a slap
If he does it again he'll be fisted,"

recited Stephen.

"...and don't try to pretend someone else wrote that," put in Ryan.

"It was just some friendly advice! I was being sensitive, like I said."

"Moving swiftly on," sighed Stephen. "You can't put down 'caving' as a hobby. They'll be bound to spot it's you."

"But the job description says, 'experience in rock climbing an advantage' "

"Just put 'rock climbing' then," said Stephen, making more notes on the CV.

"What do you want this job for anyway?" asked Ryan. "It's not like you have to be in every piece of fanfic written, some of them are pretty extreme. Believe me, we know!"

Stephen shuddered. "We've still got the eye-liner somewhere."

"That could be handy," said Lyle. "Sergeant Jones could be sort of gothy. Maybe he has a crush on Abby?"

"No!" said Stephen and Ryan in unison.

"But it says het."

"It says het and non-speaking," said Ryan. "How do you jump from that to a make-up wearing Sergeant with a crush on Abby?"

"It fleshes out the prose and adds depth to the world-building."

"You read primeval_denial too often," opined Stephen.

"Didn't your mother tell you that you'd go blind if you wanked off to porn about yourself?" asked Ryan. "Anyway, you've still not said what's so important about this piece of fanfic?"

"Lester asked me," said Lyle. "There's been a drabble already and he's worried about Cutter and Jenny."

The sound of a loud ping came from the bathroom.

"My hair!" shouted Lyle and rushed back.

While the sound of banging and cursing echoed from the bathroom, Stephen and Ryan helped themselves to more beers.

"There'll be water all over the floor," said Stephen gloomily.

"Management can send the bill to Lester," said Ryan. "Hear that Management!"

"*What was that?*" came a female voice

"Send the bathroom clean up bill to Lester," shouted Ryan.

"*Will do,*" said the voice.

"What's got into her?" asked Stephen. "They're usually a bit chattier than that."

"Lyle's taking a shower."

Stephen nodded thoughtfully. "We should invite him round to shower more often. Then we could shag unobserved for a change."

"Ta da!" Lyle leaped from the bathroom with hair that could charitably be described as dirty blond, with streaks.

"You're doomed, mate," said Ryan. "You still look like you."

"Ah ha! But I have a secret weapon."

Lyle reached into the plastic bag and produced a large, bright blond, fake moustache. He stuck it firmly on his upper lip and grinned hopefully at Stephen and Ryan. It didn't match his new hair colour, and neither hair nor moustache matched his eyebrows.

"It's certainly distracting," Stephen managed after a moment.

"And there's more!" Lyle added suddenly. He reached into the plastic bag and concealed something in his hand.

He dropped the bag, stood up straight and saluted. At which point the moustache began to whirl.

Chapter 35

Strange Meeting

A Doctor Who Short Story

Achmael drifted. The Pirate ship hung in space, hollow and seemingly empty, its movement invisible in the vastness that surrounded it. Achmael lay on his back and watched the ceiling. His inner eye seeing many places, many lives. He flexed his hand and shadow fingers danced. It was not a very spacious craft but it was his own, there was no one else there but himself, no one to shout or plead, to fight and die. Inertia enveloped him. He got up.

He wasn't going anywhere. At one point he'd thought of going to one of the major libraries on a civilised planet, downloading the information and then setting off again before anyone noticed, to peruse it at his leisure. He'd considered wiping out the entire planet in the process. But his appetite for death was strangely satiated. It would take time and he would have to cope with people trying to kill him which meant swapping bodies frequently. He rather liked this body. It was compact and powerful.

He'd been drifting for days. Every so often he'd make a plan to go somewhere and do something, but he didn't. He sat down at the table. It was littered with the debris of this body's life. Keys, tickets, currency, he rifled through it idly wandering why his body's former owner had chosen to keep all this stuff. A hologram had been tacked to the mirror, the body and a girl, somewhere sunny. Achmael had pulled it down. It meant nothing to him. A folded paper caught his eye, that he had not seen before. He spread it out before him. Words.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped

Achmael frowned over it.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

The words echoed in his mind. He understood them and yet it what as if there was another meaning to them. It spoke to him of regret but he could not understand what was regretted. It was another of these human things. Love and pity and a hundred meaningless words that had been thrown at him over the aeons. With sudden decision he crumpled it in his hands and placed it in an ashtray. In seconds it burst into flame and burnt away. He ground the ashes to dust with the end of a deodorant can.

Days later he was still adrift. He could not quite remember the poem, he had tried writing down what he could remember, but it was not the same. The words had been lost.

He was sitting in the cockpit staring at the instruments and the stylised display of where he was. He glanced idly at the star charts. He needed to get out he decided, unconsciously echoing a phrase he had heard somewhere, sometime. He traced the nearest planet which was marked as inhabited and set course. He'd take a look around, see what it was like, see if there was any fun to be had. He drew a circle round it in red pen. Earth Colony No. 24601 Valjean, was printed neatly by the co-ordinates. Earth Colony, humans had become a remarkably abundant species, who would ever have thought it. He tapped his pen on the surface while thinking about this. This body was that of a human. His mind drifted back to the poem and Wilfred Owen. Then he wrote LIBRARY in tentative capitals by the planet.

Juliet sighed as she laboriously worked through the translation of yet another piece of nonsense. Whoever had written it, she was beginning to suspect, had been far more influenced by the book of revelations than by any actual experience. Then again maybe the experience had so turned his mind that the only frame of reference he had for it was the book of revelations. She stared at the printout for a while and then consigned it to the junk heap with a sharp slam. Whatever it was that was loose in Mertonia it wasn't a beast that 'looked a bit like a leopard' always assuming that leopards had two heads, six feet and a mouth like a lion.

"No luck ?" asked George cheerfully from across the room.

"Not much, I sometimes think its a waste of time insisting that every community keeps a proper record of local folktales and accounts of any strange occurrences in the area. Their hearts aren't even remotely in it. Look at this!"

Angrily she brandished a piece of paper that had been stored along with the rest. George walked across the room, looked at it and laughed "Oh, no! the moose is coming!, how did that get in there ?"

"Someone must have put it there as a joke, probably hundreds of years ago and no one has read them since. Well, at least they used Standard, if I'd had to translate it from the local dialect I think I'd have screamed."

George laughed again, "You take things too seriously, it'll sort itself out down there, these things always do, you know."

"Not always, we've lost two communities in the past five years for one reason or another, not good statistics."

"We got the demon responsible for New Kent, though. And it wasn't a demon that blew up half of Yewdale. That made me laugh that did! 50 merchants frazzled in one fell swoop."

"I'm sure they thought it was hysterical."

"Died laughing! Died laughing", George cackled shortly and grinned.

"You have no sensitivity whatsoever, George."

"That's me! Earth Colonial Bastard and proud of it."

Juliet shook her head, "I don't know why I argue with you. I've never met anyone so generally unrepentant."

"It's the charm of my personality."

"Yes, George."

"Tell you what, dear. You make me a cup of tea and then I'll leave you alone."

Juliet gave George her best Paddington stare. He laughed once more and threw up his hands, "Just going, just going."

He wandered off. Juliet turned to the next piece of paper and settled down to translation once more. Dimly she was aware of voices and footsteps. Activity carried on around her amongst the shelves and terminals. A shadow fell across her page and she glanced up. The angular figure of the director loomed over her and next to him a short slight man, probably about her own height with delicate features and hands that were carefully holding a sheet of paper in a slightly nervous fashion. Thining blonde hair revealed a high, wide forehead shadowing a pair of intense blue eyes. He had a striking look which would perhaps have been fey and beautiful on a younger, less weathered man.

"This," said the Director, "is Achmael Winters, Mr. Winters, our chief demonist, Ms Juliet Walters."

Juliet smiled and held out a hand, his grip was dry and firm but his eyes looked startled. "Pleased to meet you," she smiled.

"Mr. Winters is here to study, I'm putting you in charge of overseeing him and generally helping him."

"You're a demonist ?" asked Juliet.

He shook his head, "I'm not sure what I am."

Juliet looked enquiringly at the Director.

"Mr Winters has paid to study, but is a bit unclear as to his area of interest, I'm sure between you, you can sort something out."

"Why me?" she had a hard edge to her voice.

"Ms Walters," began the Director firmly,

"I do have work to do, you know. Important work. Saving people's lives type work."

"I do appreciate that Ms Walters.."

"Do you? sometimes I wonder. Just because I don't sit round here on my backside all the time debating on the correct placement of an iota, but actually go out there and do something with my skills makes you think I'm somehow second rate. An unsound scholar."

"Ms Walters," interrupted the Director, "everyone else takes students. You don't because, frankly, you're not here half the time and we can't guarantee them proper tuition. Mr Winters simply wants some general advice and guidance. I do hope that won't prove too much."

He turned sharply on his heel and left them together.

Mr Winters opened his mouth as if to say something but was prevented by the appearance of George.

"Halleluiah! I never thought I'd see the day when someone got the better of you. Neat footwork, didn't you think?" he asked the unfortunate Mr. Winters, "sashayed between the random blows," George danced forward "and administered the fatal thrust. All comes of giving women an education you know, overheats the brain."

"You'll get in trouble for eavesdropping one of these days."

"Begging your pardon Mr. Frodo, sir, but there's no eaves at Bag End and that's a fact."

"Go to Hell, George."

"You're just sore because someone else got the last word for once. She's just sore because someone else got the last word for once. You remember that. Just nod politely and say "Yes, Ms Walters" and you'll have her eating out of your hand."

"I didn't hear anyone asking you for an opinion."

Mr Winters looked distinctly nervous, "I didn't want to cause lots of trouble."

Juliet took pity on him. She was aware that her manners were leaving a lot to be desired, “You’re not, honestly. I just get up tight when people are dying and I’m trying to find out why and how to stop it. I tend to act as though the fate of the world rests in my hands. Hence, I get really short with people when there’s a crisis going on.”

“Really ?” interrupted George, “and I always thought it was PMT.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“On my way Ma’am.” George made a pantomime exit, bowing and scraping.

Juliet looked at her student, his hands turned anxiously, folding the paper he’d been holding into small pieces.

“So Mr. Winters.”

“Achmael.”

“So Achmael, you’ve really no idea what you want to study.”

He shook his head unhappily.

“Science? Languages? Art? Literature?”

“Poetry,” he said suddenly, “I’ve read some poetry.”

“Who?”

“Wilfred Owen.”

“Well. that’s a start!”

“Well, ” his hands continued to twist nervously, “I don’t want to do just poetry. I want to know about how the world works, science and technology and things as well.”

Juliet ran a hand through her brown hair and frowned. “OK, tell you what we’ll draw up a timetable, Poetry on Monday, Physics on Tuesday, Philosophy on Wednesday, that sort of thing and see how we go from there.”

He nodded. The expression on his face was a strange mixture of anxiety and hopefulness, like that of a young child. Juliet pulled a sheet of paper towards her and wrote ‘Educating Achmael’ across the top.

So Achmael became a part of the library, settled amid the shelves and terminals, imbibing the smells of leather, paper and plastic that pervaded the place. Three millenia and more of human endeavour lay at his fingertips stored in the data discs that had arrived with the colony ship. Dull treatise on science, the ruminatings of a thousand philosophers and moralists. Sometimes he became overwhealmed by

the imagined sounds of pens scratching and keyboards clattering. And everywhere imagined voices whispered

"What is it you want to know? How to build a spacecraft ? a gun? How the minds and emotions of these humans work ? How to destroy them all, each one differently and individually? Who are you? Why are you? What are you going to do ?"

It was as if something waited on the edge of his vision, but everytime he turned to confront it, to catch it, it slipped away, dodged from under his grasp.

"Stand back," advised Juliet, "Books cannot tell you how to run your life. They can only tell you how others have run theirs."

So he put aside his notebooks and his pen and he walked out into the countryside. That famed source of inspiration.

I wandered lonely as a cloud

He found it empty. Nothing spoke to him. Nothing stirred. There was a bitter dry taste in his mouth.

"Science is my domain."

He could comprehend the intricate laws of physics and mathematics. He could even understand why some might call them beautiful or elegant. The scientific universe lay before him certain and sure, mapped out and definate. He learned fast, he was at genius level he knew and yet he was unable to experience even the beauty of the countryside.

Subjectivity was closed to him.

That is what he said to himself in one bleak moment. It was a sham, an illusion, there was no beauty or ugliness, no good or bad, no right or wrong. No evil. It should have given him a sence of relief that. Wasn't that what he was doing here ? trying to reject this label that had been attached to him. Evil, there was no such thing, therefore he was not, could not be evil. But the bitterness remained.

"I should feel triumphant," he told himself.

One bright day in the early spring, Achmael climbed the low hills that encircled the town. High up among the trees, he stopped to listen to the silence. He thought deep down into his own nature, the sweet taste of death, that tiny cry of a mind as it was crushed out of existence. The silence would not speak to him, he was not a creature of silence. He summoned a storm and stood amidst the thunder and lightening, feeling the blood quicken in his heart as the rain beat upon him.

“Achmael !”

He turned, Juliet was climbing up the hillside towards him.

“Isn’t it splendid !” she said as she reached him. She was flushed and smiling.

“How did you know where I was ?”

“George saw you heading up here,”

She stood in the rain, water running down her face and laughed at his surprised expression, “There is beauty in the bellow of the blast, there is grandeur in the growling of the gale,” she shouted at him and then began to run up hill towards the summit. Achmael ran after her pounding up the slope, until they stood side by side at the top.

“Very silly really,” she said, “not to say downright suicidal, standing here in this weather.”

Achmael simply stared at her a revolution taking place in his world. There was beauty in the storm. He thrilled to the sound of the thunder. It was magnificent. Lightening tore across the sky illuminating the world before him, the low buildings of Barnston sheltering in their circle of hills. Realising how he had been experiencing emotions all along and yet telling himself he was not.

Human emotion, it seemed, was not beyond him. He was not human. His emotions were not human, but he had emotions none the less. Some of what the centuries of writers had scrawled would never apply to him. Some he had always known, but not recognised as such. Joy, he had experienced, the joy of destruction. He realised now, that there were other joys and emotions, above that basic level, that he could come to feel.

¡ht¿ In the midst of that strange environment through which it travelled the TARDIS spun and tumbled. Briefly, like a glimpse of someone’s life through a train window it passed through the different aeons and centuries. It traced its way backwards and forwards across time like thread in a tangled skein, and one of those threads passed through the 26th century close enough to register the flare of radiation as Achmael summoned his storm. Various programs installed by the Doctor noted and cross-checked the readings. The TARDIS systems registered an approximation for time and place of origin, though by this time light years and millennia separated them. A light on the console began to flash, indicating information. The Doctor wasn’t looking. The TARDIS had just landed and he stood in the terminal building at Heathrow.

Juliet had become Achmael's yardstick. He tried to understand humanity through her. She had taught him physics. She had taught him mathematics. She had opened the door to the world of the objective could she also guide him through the subjective maze ?

"I like to believe that killing is morally wrong," Juliet said once after some prompting by himself.

"So you believe in some sort of absolute morality."

"I don't know. Somehow I don't like to think that I do things because of some big sign which says "Thou shalt not", but out of some basic sense of goodness. Maybe that is my absolute, I have some measure of what is right which I consider it natural to follow. I don't consider it to be natural to kill people, I suppose. I'm not making much sense am I? morality is not my strong point."

"For me, I think," he returned with a worried frown, "killing is natural. Does that mean that for me it is right ?"

She fell silent. Outside there was the faint roar of the traffic.

"Would you enjoy killing me?"

"That's different."

"In what way am I different from any other person ?"

"I would gain pleasure from the kill, but I would miss your company."

"You know, sometimes, Achmael, you give me the creeps."

He raised his eyebrows, "only sometimes?"

Juliet's attitude puzzled him. To him, knowing what was right was desperately important. Juliet had some kind of hazy morality that had little to do with careful thought. He still sought rigour in his ideas. He might yet accept or reject human values but he wanted to know that he had thought through the issue carefully. He saw Juliet's fuzzy morality as a failure. She did not like the consequences imposed by any rigorous system, so she hid behind feeling, emotion and naturalness. The clarity and harshness of any sort of absolute morality disturbed her, as did the chaos implied by relativism. He challenged her with this.

"Maybe, you're right," she conceded, "the problem with designing any sort of morality is that you will shape it to your own prejudices. I believe killing to be wrong so I will reject any morality that cannot encompass that. I also believe sitting back and allowing others to die is wrong. Basically I do not have the time to devise my own morality since I have other things to do. I am not a philosopher. Which is more of a cop out ? to say I am not a philosopher therefore I will play with morality only as a pass time, or to say defining morality is of major

importance therefore I will ignore calls to what my intuition of morality is in favour of philosophy. Each person must decide that for themselves. I would make a mediocre philosopher, at best, whereas I happen to be a rather good demonist. I am true to myself which is what counts in the end, I think. I trust my own judgement."

"You don't seem very perturbed about it though."

"I have better things to do with my life than worry. What you have said is perfectly true. And like many truths it is uncomfortable. It is a something about the truth. It makes a hard master."

On another occasion he tried another tack.

"You kill demons, right ?"

"Sometimes, I generally try to act more as an observer than a soldier."

"But, in principal, you are prepared to kill another sentient creature."

"It's a matter of basic self defence, I suppose. They kill us, and they never seem to stop to negotiate."

"But do you ever give them the chance ?"

"It's not that simple. Every time you get into one of those situations you know that the demon has you out gunned. Trust, could well be your undoing."

"So you never give them a chance. But they are sentient, so you don't believe even in the sanctity of sentient life."

"Like I said when it comes down to him or me, principles tend to fly out the window."

"So, if, for instance, it should turn out that I was a demon, you would not hesitate to destroy me."

Watching her face, he saw that she took in the full import of that. By this time she knew him too well to be surprised that he was not human.

"No," she said slowly, "I would not."

Silence hung between them a moment.

"Are you a demon ?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes."

"I suppose in the end," she said after a moments thought, "I believe in adhering to some kind of personal integrity. My conscience is all part and parcel of who I am and I cannot separate the two. I don't make hard and fast rules for myself. THIS IS RIGHT AND THIS IS WRONG. But I trust myself to make my own judgements as situations arise and I shall accept any responsibility or guilt that comes with those. So long as I am myself and don't wimp out of what I think is right then I believe I shall be okay. That said some of the worst atrocities in history have been caused by people who genuinely believed themselves to be in the right.

It's hard, but I see no other way to conduct my life." She grinned suddenly, as she always did when dismissing something hard from her mind, "Maybe I'll think about talking to them next time. Who knows."

And that was that. Yet Achmael was growing in understanding all the time. When he learnt that his hard truths of science were as open to debate as the questions of morality he was not thrown into despair as he would have been at first. He welcomed it as a challenge. He was not human, and never would be. He was going to be something altogether new. There would be no simple dogmas in his universe. Some ideas he would lift from humanity and some he would not. He would be true to himself, whatever that was supposed to mean.

"What is love ?" he asked curiously, in the end, "it figures so predominantly in all these texts. What do humans mean by it ?"

"No one really knows. Look at one person and then look at the next and you'll find they use it in very different ways. That it's used in such different ways suggest there is a good deal of confusion."

"Well, what do you mean by love ?" he asked, pushing for specifics.

"I don't know. Just someone you can see yourself being with for the rest of your life, I guess. They are surprisingly few on the ground."

"But there is someone," he dug deeper.

"Yes, a Doctor, another of the demon fighters," she smiled to herself "Dr. Mike Stuart," she gave small jerk of the head pulling herself up straight and there was a note of pride in her voice.

"I don't know him, do I?"

"No, he works a way from here, in one of the big hospitals to the North, we don't see each other often, mostly when there's trouble brewing."

And with that he had to rest content. As usual Juliet had only given him half an answer.

Juliet could feel her nervousness as a tight, nauseous sensation. It was the tension she always felt before embarking upon an expedition. She was trying to read but her mind was not really on the book. She was waiting for Mike. Irritated with herself she banged the book down on the desk and went to make coffee. She paused hearing quiet, yet heavy footfalls among the shelves. Mike rounded the corner, a familiar figure in black leather and large boots. His helmet hung from one hand so she could see all of his square teutonic face and the locks of red hair

that he steadfastly refused to either grow properly long or cut short. She thought, not for the first time, how boylike he looked. He smiled quietly and bent down, brushing her lips slightly with a kiss. He smelt of soap.

"I was about to make coffee, want some ?"

"Please."

He sat down on a chair unzipping his jacket, revealing a loose white shirt. Juliet sometimes wondered if he had anything else in his wardrobe. His large hands idly picked up her book and turned it over. The hands had always surprised her. So large and big boned, she found it hard to imagine them engaged in the delicate work of dissection.

"So what do we have ?" she asked.

"Not a lot. A few ideas have been thrown around based on what you wrote in that report but, as you said, we've hit the usual problem of disentangling truth from legend. We'll basically have to wait until we get there."

"The message said there'd been a new attack."

"A small farmstead. There was a message through on the radio link, that they were under attack and then nothing."

"Heigh ho and it's off to risk our necks once more."

"No one forces us."

Mike was staring at one hand that rubbed the edge of the table, not at her. Juliet hesitated over the coffee watching him. It was so hard, meeting like this, with death looming like a shadow over the next day. He glanced up and caught her eye, smiling his deceptively shy smile.

"Take your risk of life and death
Underneath the open sky
Live clean or go out quick"

He paused caught by the end of the rhyme, "it's not so bad you know," he added, "it's a dangerous world out there, people are being killed all the time."

"Lads you're wanted. Come and die." Juliet finished the stanza. And poured the coffee noisily banging down the mugs. "You pseud, quoting poetry at me. As if that could make the situation any better."

He smiled once more, his answer to any problem. It irritated her sometimes, that he always seemed so at ease, so relaxed. It was high summer and a window had been left open. The evening sunlight dropped onto the floor between them.

"Richard will be coming with us, bringing a small military unit." He lent back in the chair, as he spoke, looking at her once more, a wisp of wind stirred his hair. The dust danced. The small knot inside her loosened slightly. Richard was an

old friend. She placed a lot of faith in his competence. She nodded briefly as she brought the coffee over and placed it on the table. Close to, she paused, noticing the slight tension in his arm, that appeared to rest so casually on the edge of the table. He glanced up at her, all heavy jaw and inquiring blue eyes. Unbidden Auden drifted across her mind.

Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

She stood there with the tight smile she had when anxious. Mike, watching her, thought it so uncharacteristic of her usual breezy manner. He saw her thus, more often than he liked, between them they seemed to have so little time. He slipped his arms round her waist burying his head in her chest. He felt her arms round his neck entwining her fingers in his hair and knew without looking that her head bent over his. They stayed like that a long time while the coffee grew cold.

The Doctor and Nyssa stood in the empty farmyard.

"There's something about the call of seagulls that always makes a lonely spot seem lonelier still," commented the Doctor.

The farm lay in a circle of low hills, a flat valley running gently down to the sea, good farming country. So far the birds were the only sign of life they'd come across.

"What are we looking for ?" asked Nyssa curiously.

The Doctor glanced at the tracer in his hand "flangey ray emissions. I have a standard process rigged on the TARDIS to warn me if it detects any," he gazed abstractedly around him.

"Why ?"

"An old enemy of mine. His presence generally registers as several high fluctuations in the flangey ray levels," the Doctor walked in a slow circle, "there are traces of recent activity around here but I can't fix a direction."

They both stood silent, listening to the gulls. The Doctor dropped the device into a coat pocket and stared out across the sea. "I'm sure I've heard of this planet before somewhere," he murmured frowning at the horizon.

"What do you suppose happened here ?" asked Nyssa at length.

The Doctor looked round at he farm buildings behind them and then down at her, “I don’t know.”

He walked across the yard examining the ground and the surrounding buildings, “No blood, no blaster marks, nothing, as if the occupants just upped and left.”

His gaze swept over the hills, was arrested and held by the sight of of a small trickle of men working their way down towards the farm.

“I think, maybe, it’s time we moved on, ” he said quietly, taking Nyssa’s arm.

She glanced up, following his gaze and moved back towards the barn and the TARDIS in agreement. There was a flash on the hillside and a whumph as the ground between them and the barn exploded.

“Then again, maybe not,” he murmured.

Juliet watched the two people with the telescope option set on her helmet’s eyepiece. A man and a girl. His hand resting lightly on her shoulder, more in a gesture of companionship than possession. He had a resigned and patient look on a rather bland oval face, blonde hair, cream coat, pale striped trousers, very pale altogether. She caught sight of a cricket jumper beneath the coat.

“Richard, I absolutely refuse to believe in a demon dressed in a cricket outfit.”

Richard looked at her over his still smoking bazooka, “Improbable,” he conceded, “but not impossible.”

The girl was a good deal shorter than the man. A petite figure in red velvet holding herself very upright. A pretty round face framed by loose brown curls. Some people have all the luck, thought Juliet to herself contemplating her own heavy locks.

The expedition had halted. Richard was planning.

“I think,” hazarded Juliet, her mind straying back to Achmael, “we should try and talk with them.”

Richard gazed at her. His brown eyes spoke of mild disbelief and deep concern. “What makes you say that ?”

“Well,” Juliet took a deep breath, “they appear to be wary of the bazooka, and, you know, they could be human.”

“You saw the census,” he rested his bazooka on the ground. “They aren’t from any of the local communities, and they certainly aren’t the farmers.” He paused

and glanced down the hill. "Do you want to go down there ?" he asked. "We'll cover you. Keep the recorder on and transmitting."

She could tell that it was to be her decision. He could sympathize with her reluctance to open fire, but they had both seen demons in action. Lost friends to them. They could be very swift and very deadly. If she chose to take the risk, she would be going on her own. He was too good a commander to let more than one person take the chance.

She nodded tensely, "OK."

"Juliet," she heard Mike behind her.

She reached out and squeezed his arm, "Any better ideas? I'm open to suggestions."

Looking at her, he had a sudden presentiment of doom. He knew that she would walk down that hillside alone and he would have to stand back and watch, helpless to do anything. He shook his head. "Good luck."

From experience Juilet knew how much that cost him, having been in the same situation herself before now. Then she set off, a small lonesome figure walking towards her fate.

The Doctor watched Juliet approach. Seeing the light female figure, not too tall, wearing combat fatigues. A helmet covered one eye, no doubt providing her with extra information. He wondered, idly, if she'd noticed he'd got two hearts yet. The details of her face became clearer as she approached, sharp lines shaping the nose and chin, a wide thin mouth, the one eye he could see was pale brown. Wisps of hair escaping from the helmet showed brown with dyed in red tints. She stopped before them and shielded her eye from the sun.

"Hello!" she said, "would it be impertinent to ask what's going on here?"

Juliet paused uncertainly. What exactly do you say to demons ? Richard was talking in her ear, ordering her out, as he had been ever since she'd reported the second heart. His voice becoming more urgent now she was standing too close to the strangers for him to use the bazooka safely. The man and the girl exchanged glances that said this was not entirely the reception they had expected.

"Hello," he said in a slightly reproachful tone, "I'm the Doctor and this is Nyssa and you are?"

He held out one hand with an enquiring expression in his blue eyes. Gingerly Juliet shook it, "Juliet."

"I don't bite you see."

"Well, you never can tell with demons, can you?"

The mild expression changed dramatically and darkened. He lent forward hands thrust into his pockets, "Demons?" he demanded, "plural?".

Juliet shrugged, "Well, it depends really doesn't it. There's two of you, though only one of you appears non-human at first analysis, so you could be demon singular or demons plural," I'm babbling she thought. This talking to demons idea of Achmael's is rather nerve-racking.

"Are we looking for a demon?" asked the girl.

"Well, yes. But it all rather depends on what you mean by demon." He turned to face Juliet, "We're looking for a demon in a rather technical sense, he's characterised by fluctuations in flangey rays which register on this ."

The Doctor pulled the tracer out of if pocket and it lay in the palm of his hand winking balefully. Richard was still talking in her ear urging her to get somewhere safe. She could feel his fear for her.

"Juilet please!" broke in Mike's voice.

"Oh do be quiet both of you, I think he's a friendly demon or at least a not totally psychotic at this precise moment in time type demon." This produced considerable sarcasm from Mike. She smiled to herself that meant he was relieved.

"Actually I think alien might be a more correct term," said the Doctor.

"Ask him how his race developed a bicardial system," asked Mike through her headpiece.

"Why don't you come down here yourself and ask him, and we can check out what has become of the farmers at the same time," she retorted sharply.

Juliet turned and glanced up at the others as they began to walk down the hill. Suddenly the Doctor's tracer began a high pitched shriek. His reaction was immediate.

"One of your demons is about to do something," he said urgently, grabbing both her and Nyssa by the arm, "I suggest you tell your friends to take cover."

"Did you hear that ?" Juliet shouted into the commlink over the noise.

Richard's reply was a muffled affirmative and she could see the rest of the expedition fanning out and taking up position on the hillside. The Doctor shoved her and Nyssa behind a tractor and switched off his device.

From where they were watching three small creatures appeared in the farmyard. They were a pale yellow colour with red glowing eyes and sharp claws on the ends of their hands, but otherwise looked like small humans.

"Looks like demonkin," crackled Richard's voice over Juliet's headset, "lets mop them up."

Several shots came down of the mountain. Those that hit the demonkin knocked them backwards, but they remained standing.

Juliet watching, felt uneasy. Demonkin usually fell to a couple of shots. One of them looked towards the soldiers like a cricketer judging distance. His arm raised and he hurled what appeared to be a small ball of light. A trooper rezzed for a few seconds and then vanished. There was a stunned silence over the headsets. Then renewed shooting while the expedition on the mountainside took better cover.

"Whatever they are, they're not demonkin," said a voice.

The Doctor next to her was wearing a slightly glazed expression.

"I don't believe it," he whispered.

"What ?"

"Nothing, some history has just slipped into place."

He glanced at the device he still held in his hand and moved several dials, the display flashed ablaze suddenly.

"Ah ha!, they're using flangey alpha rays"

With sudden energy he began fishing objects out of his pocket and laying them out on the ground. He was conducting a hurried, whispered conversation with Nyssa, who was already dismantling some of the strange pieces of electronics and wiring them into the tracer he had carried. He began to cannibalise the parts of the tractor that were accessible to him.

Juliet heard Mike's voice coming over the transmitter, "I'm going to try that tranquiliser drug we developed for the demonkin."

Peering cautiously out from behind the tractor she saw him run a a short way down the slope to bring him within range for the dart gun he carried. Kneeling, he took aim. His arm jerked and and he paused looking for a result. Juliet saw one of the demons look in his direction and the arm began to rise. Her heart thudded. "Mike!" she began calling into the headset, but he had already dropped into the cover of the undergrowth.

"So much for that," commented Richard wearily, "any other suggestions?"

"They may need more than one dose," returned Mike, "I'll keep taking pot shots at them."

"Well be careful, you're a bit close down there."

"Done," the Doctor's voice drew her thoughts back down to the situation at hand. "Nyssa, help me with this. We're going to have to get fairly close," he was continuing.

They were creeping round the edge of the tractor. A tangle of wires strung between them, with his tracer blinking in the centre. On a thought Juliet moved to the other corner. The Doctor looked her way and she saw him realise her intention.

He nodded slightly in acknowledgement, though concern was etched into his face. Not a man who risked others easily. Juliet darted out into the open.

"Oi! you!" she shouted. The demonkin turned towards her and she began running, heading for the relative safety of the barn. Mike was calling her name. She let off a few random shots as she ran and tried to weave and dodge as she had been taught. There was a sudden silence. Turning, she saw the Doctor and Nyssa standing alone in the empty yard. There was an expectant look on his face, awaiting congratulation.

The Doctor watched the expedition as they loaded themselves into various transporters and bikes that had been left by the road. They were rather subdued, he sensed quiet mourning for the lives that had been lost.

Juliet was perched on the bonnet of a transport. Mike stood next to her, leaning against the side, one arm curled about her. Between them hung quiet and suppressed relief that they were both still alive. Captain Turner stood to one side, slightly apart from them. He shared their happiness, but he was also keenly aware of the lost men. The Doctor had watched him giving the orders for departure and sensed his mixed emotions. Matters arranged he had walked over to join their small group. Juliet had been doing the talking.

"How did you know about the flangey rays" she was asking.

"It's a long story, but in summary, my race created the demons for a variety of gladiatorial game. When the games were finally ended, the remaining livestock was sent here, rather than being put down. Unfortunately they used some rather primitive time travel technology, so your demons have appeared in groups over the centuries. I'm attempting to trace one such creature called Achmael who uses flangey rays. I simply guessed that your demons probably used something similar."

He braced himself for accusations and recrimminations, waiting for the military mind to start issuing orders. He glanced at the Captain and was surprised to see him looking into the middle distance with and expression of deep sorrow on his face. When he spoke there was a trace of bitterness in his voice but no threat.

"Could you tell us how to deal with the problem permanently?"

The Doctor shook his head, "I'm afraid not, no. Very little knowledge has survived from those days, I only found out about the flangey rays quite by chance."

Richard shook his head.

The Doctor felt a surge of guilt. This man had been fighting demons all his life; losing friends and colleagues to a piece of Time Lord carelessness; walking in on deserted farmsteads like the one they'd just seen, all that remained of someone's life. He had to admit this Captain Turner had taken him by surprise. He had none of the usual military bravado he had experienced from such people in the past. But then the situation on this planet was very different from that anywhere else. This Captain was used to having to work with and rely on non-military personnel, and he was used to the unexpected. Once out of battle he seemed a quiet, deep man, not very showy. He had a tapering face, framed by black hair out of which dark thoughtful eyes regarded the Doctor. Not a body builder, but well-muscled all the same. He was sizing up the Doctor in his turn, arms folded, one hand holding an elbow, the other his shoulder.

"Could you at least let us have your tracing device ?" he asked at length. "Any possible warning we can get could save lives."

"Yes, of course," meekly the Doctor handed it over.

Apparently dismissing the conversation the Captain turned, smiling fondly at Juliet.

"And just what did you think you were doing, going and talking to him like that?"

"It was something" she hesitated ever so slightly, "a friend said, about maybe some demons, though powerful, are not always evil. He suggested we try giving not obviously aggressive ones the benefit of the doubt and it paid off, you see."

He shook his head, "You could have been killed," but his tone was not one a reprimand, just of concern. Juliet smilled back understanding and managed a combined nod and shrug. What was she to do ?

The Doctor was puzzling over that hesitation though. He realised that she had been watching him with a slightly frightened expression, almost like a child that is afraid of being caught misbehaving.

"So," she said suddenly, "Your Achmael demon is round here somewhere?"

"Not necessarily, I may have picked up other random demon activity."

"So you'll be off now."

That surprised him, he felt somehow as though she was hoping that he would leave, which contrasted strongly with her previously friendly manner.

"I was wondering," he said, "if I might look at your archives. I thought they might contain some clue about how to kill storm demons."

"Oh," she said, "sure, no problem, though I don't suppose you'll have much joy."

She looked more worried than ever.

"We can give you lifts back to the Library on our bikes," said Mike. He was too engrossed in the fact that they were both still alive and more than prepared to be generous. The Doctor picked up the tension in Juliet's shoulders, however, and felt a vague foreboding.

Achmael was waiting on the edge of the town for Juliet's return. He'd found a cryptic note on his desk that morning 'Gone Demon Hunting. Sorry, but a farm has sent out a distress call. Didn't tell you before so as not to cause a conflict of interest. Juliet.' He wished she had told him. In fact he wished she had taken him along, he was fairly sure that no harm would come to her if he was around. He saw the dust trails of the bikes and other expedition vehicles approaching. Someone was riding pillion behind Juliet, he realised. He drew back into the shadows cast by the town wall, troubled. Juliet was driving at a slow pace, so he could study her passenger as they passed. His heart grew cold, the form might have been different, but he would have known the Doctor anywhere.

He followed them carefully to the library. Juliet and the Doctor went inside. Another bike with two riders pulled up outside as well. Two people he didn't recognise, a man and a girl. The man said something. Then hanging up his helmet over the handlebars and strode into the centre of town.

Achmael needed a new identity fast. What's more he needed to get his books and notes out of the library. He had no desire to fight the Doctor in this place, it meant too much to him. He just wanted to get away, to consider the implications of the Doctor and Juliet. He watched the man as he walked across the street. A new identity that wouldn't be questioned if he walked into the library. Achmael began to follow him.

Richard Turner carried the Doctor's tracer with him through the town to the barracks. Not where he would have chosen to stay if he had the choice, but Juliet wanted to analyse the tracer, before he took it off for practical application.

He turned the tracer over in his hands and idly switched it on. It let out a high pitched squeak and began flashing urgently. Puzzled and anxious he turned it until he located a direction. With swift steps he rounded the next corner, drawing his

gun as he did so. Mike stood there with a man in his arms. Richard paused in doubt. The beeping of the tracer subsided gradually.

Alerted by the noise Mike turned to look at him, dropping the man's body onto the ground. The next moment the air seemed to rise up around Richard. The gun was knocked from his hand. He found himself battered by hard buffets of wind like invisible fists beating him. Through a bloody haze he saw Mike's face looming over him. The tracer was plucked from his hands, then Mike turned and disappeared round a corner. The beating stopped, Richard dropped to the street, barely conscious.

Achmael hid in a doorway. Curled up tightly in a ball. He had trusted Juliet and she had betrayed him to the Doctor, sent a soldier out to track him down. He rocked slightly on his heels. The tracer lay at his feet its delicate electronics fused by intense heat. He could destroy them all, the town, and the library in one blow. He could simply leave, slip away unnoticed and unmourned. The temptation to destruction was amazing. About him, the wind rose. He had to get to the library. He had to retrieve his books and his notes. Then he would leave this planet. Leave the humans and his demon brethren to fight out their squalid little battle. The universe was his domain and he had all to time to explore it in. There was a crash as something nearby was overturned by the storm. They would know he had been here. This town would never forget the treachery of Juliet.

Juliet and the Doctor were pouring over a computer terminal. Once involved in her work Juliet had lost all the reserve she had previously displayed. The Doctor regarded her eager face as she explained the information it contained and how it had been collected painstakingly over the centuries by herself and others like her.

"Haven't you ever made contact with Earth and requested relocation for the colony ?" asked the Doctor.

Juilet shook her head, "The records are unclear, so much was lost in the confusion of the first few years of the colony. The demon attacks were so sudden and unexpected that the only thought most people had was survival. However, it is clear that the original colonists thought that staying here was preferable to return-

ing. Since those times we have occasionally attempted to make contact but with no success, some think there may have been some kind of war or plague and that the human race as such exists only on isolated colonies like our own. Others think that we ended up in a backwater galaxy and no space traffic comes this way. There are a dozen possibilities. The colony itself simply doesn't have the manpower or the technology for much space exploration so we have no way of finding out."

"I'm amazed," confessed the Doctor, "that you survived at all."

"So are we. Every few years we seem to be on the brink of disaster but somehow we pull through. It's a close thing though. We know that the key will be amassing and storing the knowledge of how to deal with these things. However, in truth nearly all the manpower is required for farming and the like, even the military forces, as such, are very small. Basically, we are stretched very thin. In the early days each farmstead or small community kept their own records, now we are trying to collate all that folk knowledge together, its a hard task but we're getting there," she grinned up at him.

"Would you mind if I stayed here a few days and looked through it all?"

Once again her face fell, as if she had re-encountered some forgotten objection. She shrugged. "If you want," she said apparently indifferently.

Nyssa had been working through Mike's anatomical records.

"For one species," she remarked, " these demons show remarkable variation in form."

"That's because they are not, strictly speaking one species," said the Doctor, "they are biologically engineered weapons and playthings. My people didn't even refer to them as demons, the only ones they labelled as such were the Storm Demons. Only one of them was ever created, and that not at our instigation."

"Achmael," said Nyssa.

The Doctor stared abstractedly into the distance, "yes, and he is infinitely more dangerous than any of these others." Suddenly he dropped out of the reverie "however, the principles involved in his creation and that of these creatures may have been similar so I'm hoping to find clues embedded in the records."

The radio suddenly burst into life. It was mounted by the main desk nearly every building had one. Immediate relay of news sometimes meant the difference between life and death.

A freak storm has just developed around Barnston. Several houses have been struck by lightning and it is believed some deaths have occured. Demon activity has not been ruled out.

Juliet's head lifted, like a hound on a scent.

The door of the library banged open. Richard lent against the frame, his shoulders slumped and his head bowed. When he looked up there was a deepening bruise across the side of his face and a small trickle of blood from a cut above his eye. He staggered forward breathing heavily. Wind curled around the interior from the doorway whisking papers from desks.

"Richard!", Juilet scrabbled in her desk for a first aid kit.

He sank into a chair, the dark eyes, full of concern, watching her. "Something's happened to Mike," he said.

"What ?"

She stopped short, but the Doctor was already examining his face, and he simply opened the first aid kit in her hands and helped himself, while she watched Richard with frightened eyes.

"I don't know, some sort of possession I would say at a guess."

"Possession ?" demanded the Doctor suddenly. He stood up, hands thrust deep into his pockets, gazing intently at the Captain.

"I don't know, I was using your gadget and I picked up a reading of some sort. I tried to locate the source and found Mike. Then suddenly I was... attacked by buffets of wind, it's the only way I can describe it, but I got the impression that Mike was definitely controlling it somehow."

The frown on the Doctor's face deepened. Juliet was perched on the edge of the table still holding the first aid box, but one hand was rubbing her forehead. A habitual gesture she used when thinking. It obscured her expression.

Most of the East Side seems to have unaccountably caught fire.

"I think," the Doctor's words dropped into the silence, "that Achmael may be here after all."

"Why ?" Juliet's voice was small.

"He is a storm demon, fire and wind are his weapons. He also has no physical form of his own." The words came out slowly, "he exists by occupying the bodies of other creatures." The Doctor paused and looked at his feet, "I'm afraid to say, that the host rarely survives."

The tears were already beginning to flow thought Juliet was not, herself aware of feeling any kind of emotion at all. No emptiness, no grief, just tears that seemed very separate from her. There was the scrape of a chair. Richard hand fell down rather heavily on her shoulder and squeezed it slightly. So much, she thought vaguely, for all the years together. So much for all the risk and danger they had survived.

"We don't know that it's this Achmael," Richard said, interrupting her thoughts.

Juilet shook her head, “Achmael’s been here for months, reading up on Physics and Philosophy and just about everything. His books are over there.”

The Doctor’s head swung round sharply and he moved over to the desk, turning the books in his hands and flicking through the notes, reading the careful round hand of a child. Richard watching him, one hand still with Juliet thought he made a rather mournful figure standing with the small notebook in one hand with a slightly lost look on his face.

The wind has built up to hurricane force in a remarkable short space of time. The eye is centring on the library in the centre of Barnston. It is feared this may be a specific attack, an attempt to destroy the knowledge we have gathered and the people who have gathered it

Mike appeared suddenly in the doorway. They all looked up at him pale and frightened faces. Juliet’s streaked with tears. He took a step towards her and her tears started once more, despite angry attempts to wipe them away. The Doctor cleared his throat.

“Achmael ?”, it was a query.

Achmael looked at him a second, then replied, “Doctor,” a statement, the tone inexpressive.

The Doctor thrust his hands deep in his pockets and raised his eyebrows slightly.

A bolt of lightening appeared out of nowhere and struck the floor where the Doctor had been. He had seen the dancing of Achmael’s eyes and dived to one side. Richard grabbed a chair in the same instant and brought it down hard across the back of Mike’s head. A gust of wind plucked him off his feet slamming him into the far wall. The temperature of the wind became chill and then cold. A light frost began to form over Richard’s body.

“No!” Juliet began to cry out, “What have we ever done to you ?”

There was a sudden silence. Achmael turned and stared at Juliet. She felt the tears spring to her eyes once more. So like and yet so unlike. Mike had had a kind of loose limbed ease which was no longer in evidence. Achmael dominated the room though, he seemed taller than Mike had ever been and his eyes were dark and terrible.

“You have betrayed me to him!” he cried. “What have I ever done to you?”

Reports from nearby First Settlement describe a vortex of wind hovering over the town

The Doctor had bent over Richard feeling for a pulse. The first time he reached out he snatched his hand away because of the cold, but he reapplied it almost straight away, wincing slightly.

"He's alive," he reported, "just". He snatched off his coat and wrapped it around Richard's body. "We have to get him somewhere warm fast."

Richard stirred slightly, somehow the Doctor got him to his feet and began to move towards the door and Achmael, watching the latter with a wary eye. Achmael remained still, framed in the doorway until they stood before him.

"Juliet had not betrayed you," said the Doctor reproachfully, "it was only just now, when Captain Turner came in that she told us of you."

Achmael hardly seemed to hear. He reached out and touched the battered, frost-bitten face before him. "So strange," he said, "they will keep coming back though you hammer them into the ground. Do you think," he looked at Juliet,"he'll come back and try to destroy me."

"If I knew how, I'd destroy you here and now, whatever the cost to myself," Richard whispered through clenched teeth. "Mike was my friend."

All medical volunteers in the area are called to assemble at First Settlement Church to move into Barnston as soon as the winds die down a bit

Achmael was still talking to Juliet, "As you once said, it's a basic matter of self-defence. " He had barely begun to turn back to Richard, his intention only to clear to Juliet who knew his gestures. She cried out and sprang upon him. Though unarmed she beat at him with her fists and wept. Almost instinctively, like a man swatting at a fly, a wind sprang up. Juliet was lifted off her feet and flung against the far wall. Her head jerked back against a beam and she dropped motionless to the floor.

We have lost contact with Barnston station

She came to slowly, through a murky haze.

The library is still unreachable. However, relief teams have penetrated other parts of the town.

Carefully she opened her eyes. She was still in the library, the dark wooden ceiling rose gloomily over her and she was surrounded by the towering legs of tables and chairs. Mike/Achmael was sitting in one of them regarding her anxiously, looking more like Mike than she cared to think. Juliet turned her head away, already beginning to cry once more.

"How are you feeling ?"

"Bloody awful. What's happened to my leg ?"

"The Doctor says it's broken. You should lie still."

He got up and paced agitatedly round the room. Juliet closed her eyes once more. She felt rather muggy. Painkillers, she decided.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, you know," he said after a while.

"That so!"

"It was like a reflex reaction, or something. When you jumped me I didn't think."

"Never occurred to you, I suppose, that killing Mike might hurt."

Achmael looked down at his new body, surprised and arrested.

Juliet closed her eyes once more. She was crying in earnest now. She heard Achmael sit down in the chair beside her.

"I, " he paused anxiously, "I was just trying to escape the Doctor. I didn't realise he was a friend of yours."

"Oh! Achmael, we were rather more than friends."

And then it suddenly all slipped into place in his mind. Mike, Dr. Mike Stuart, his eyes widened in realisation and then his head fell slowly into his hands.

The hospital has been completely destroyed. Makeshift facilities are being put into place as we speak, but it is feared that many will lose their lives through lack of swift medical attention. There are reports that looting has already begun amongst the debris.

"I am a storm demon," he whispered, almost as a litany, "I was created to destroy, my function and nature is to destroy, my fate and destiny is to destroy, I can do no otherwise."

"That doesn't have to be true," despite herself she was moved by his despair.

"No? I was trying here, really trying, for the first time the universe was unfolding before me but you can only deny your nature for so long, it will come and get you in the end."

"I've always believed in free will myself, depending on how you choose to define free will. But I do believe in taking responsibility for my actions not blaming blind fate."

"Maybe humanity has free will, but I am not human. I am a weapon, a sentient weapon, I can not deny my nature."

"You condemn yourself to harshly."

"No, for the first time I see myself truly."

Outside, the wind began to pick and howl once more. Achmael stood up. Juliet watched him from where she lay. There was a bitter sadness round her heart. The brave and the dangerous, these people are glorious to admire and view from afar, perhaps, but now caught up in the tangled web they had woven between them, she wished that she had not been one of them.

"The Doctor will be back soon. He and the girl are just getting Captain Turner to the hospital," Achmael was saying, putting on Mike's jacket that had rested by him on a table.

"Where are you going ?"

He smiled, "Out." He crouched down by her, "I haven't a clue. I promise you this, I will try to be true to myself but I fear the fates are against me."

"We are not living in a greek tragedy you know !"

"No? maybe not."

"Besides, you shouldn't live to an ideal just because it is mine."

"I'm not. I agree with you. Be true to yourself."

"At whatever the cost to yourself or to others?"

"Perhaps. Like you said, the truth is a hard master."

A chill filtered into Juliet's mind as she contemplated the implications of a demon who believed both in being true unto himself and that his fundamental nature was to destroy. Achmael still stood over her.

"Farewell," she said at the last, "I wish it could have ended some other way."

"So do I," he turned and left.

Here, then, at home, by no more storms distrest...

She closed her eyes. Achmael was gone. Mike was gone.

Achmael plunged through the storm heading towards the ship. He still didn't know what he wanted from the universe, but he knew he stood on the brink, "when I was a child," he murmured to himself as he opened the hatchway.

Drifting once more, he emptied out Mike's pockets onto the pile of paraphernalia littering the desk. Pens, a note book and a scrap of paper. Achmael's hands hesitated before unfolding it. It was a picture, a rough sketch of Juliet. Mike had had talent, Achmael thought, in a few swift lines he had captured something of her spirit. She was laughing. He tacked the picture to the mirror and looked at Mike's face staring back at him sadly.

"Strange friend," he said, "here is no cause to mourn."

In his mind Mike spoke "None"

save the undone years
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it greives, grieves richlier than here.
For of my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now.

Chapter 36

Primeval Drabbles

36.1 Nanites for Helen

"The point is that the nanites calculate your optimal visual appearance and then adjust your physiognomy to suit."

Helen studied herself thoughtfully in the gilded mirror.

"Take, that short hair for instance, much more practical for your lifestyle, I should have thought. Yet appropriately stylish for all social occasions. Your previous look, if you don't mind my saying so, lacked a certain refinement."

Helen's smile could have been a simper. Nick Cutter, however, would have backed off cautiously had he seen it.

"And these?" Helen asked, casually thrusting the offending items forward.

"The nanites obviously anticipate they will prove useful."

36.2 White Landscape

Connor stood in the snow and rubbed his hands together.

"What are we doing out here again?" he asked.

"Having fun." Abby trudged up the slope behind him, dragging the plastic sledge.

"But its *dark* now."

"Look at the stars though."

Connor looked up into the sky. It was devastatingly clear and out here in countryside there was little background light to obscure the view.

Abby came up beside him and took his arm.

"Happy Christmas, Connor," she whispered. Then she stood on tiptoe and her lips brushed against his.

Up above them a shooting star shot across the heavens.

36.3 Just Us

For "How many people can you kill in 100 words". Technically I get 6.7 billion here. 14 people are name checked but there are only 4 confirmed kills, 3 if you want to be really picky.

"According to all records 4th January 2009 was the human race's last day," the aggressors helpfully announced over hijacked airwaves.

Jenny, Lorraine, Abby and Lacey were on their monthly, girls-only lunch break. Lester refused to wait before sealing the ARC. That was when Cutter took a pistol and shot him. Lyle gunned Nick down and ordered the shutters closed.

Ditzy and Finn died protecting Connor while he sought to jam the enemy weapons. Blade was AWOL somewhere, armed only with knives. Lyle didn't expect to see him again.

"Just us," he said to Kermit as they waited in the dark.

36.4 Food of the Fairies

(Set in the same world as *Head, Hand and Heart* (Chapter 3))

Nick coughed as smoke caught in his lungs and winced at the sight of blood in his palm. That couldn't be good. He struggled to sit. He wouldn't be going any further.

Amid the acrid smells there was a faint hint of Jasmine and Honeysuckle. He must be getting delirious. The sound of distant music hung in the air. The corridor shimmered and glowed as if an anomaly lay beyond the smoke.

Something rolled along the floor, stopping just by his hand. It was an apple. When he lifted it close, it smelled of oak moss, wisdom, compassion and Claudia.

36.5 The Listeners

(Set in the same world as *Head, Hand and Heart* (Chapter 3))

"Did you find them?" Stephen asked.

Ryan's cloak was made of a black velvet that seemed to absorb the light. It turned him into nothing more than a shadow, lurking in the centre of the forest path.

"Maybe," Ryan's head turn to stare back the way he had come.

"You came as soon as you could." Stephen could hear a certain shrillness in his insistence.

"It wasn't enough."

A flock of ravens suddenly rose up from the forest depths, the air echoing with their harsh cries.

"It's all you have to give," Stephen offered and wished he could offer more.

36.6 Primeval 100 Challenge Drabbles

Most of these drabbles were written for prompts from the primeval100 community on livejournal. In a lot of them I presume "fredbasset"s Primeval stories are canon. The details of her stories are not important but, in them, Stephen Hart and Tom Ryan are a couple, as are James Lester and Jon Lyle (a soldier character, invented by Fred, who looks like Daniel Craig).

You probably also need to know about Santuary where the denizens of the primeval_denial community put Stephen and Ryan after they died.

36.6.1 Challenge 1: Introductions

James Lester was stiff and formal.

The team were mad. Maitland was mad and intense and sharp, like light shining through crystal. Connor was mad and geeky. Cutter was mad and Scottish.

They didn't return in good order. It was a chaotic tumble.

Becker realised his HR paperwork was still incomplete.

He found an angel who took it from him, checked it over, explained the mysteries, corrected the mistakes, assured him she would handle it from here and then smiled the most beautiful smile.

"Who are you?" he blurted out.

"Silly of me. I should have introduced myself. I'm Lorraine."

36.6.2 Challenge 2: Lost

1988, at university, their first meeting The motion for debate was "This house believes there is no place for privately funded education in a fair society". She had spoken against, he had been for. She won.

2003, choosing schools: He was a high flying Home Office official. She had just made partner. So the question was: which was more important, his principles or their children? She won, but something in him died.

Lunchtime: She can see him over the road: a working lunch with a blond man. Problem is she knows how James Lester looks when he is in love.

36.6.3 Challenge 5: Moonlight and Forgotten

Here, high up in the mountains, the air was cool and fresh. Abby stood on the balcony of their chalet. Moonlight picked out her features, in silver and deep blue, against the silver and deep blue of the snow and pine trees beyond.

She breathed deeply, her eyes closed. "It's so strange," she whispered. "It was horrible and hard and frightening but I'd forgotten it could also be like this."

Connor nodded. The trees were a newer species and he could smell oil and grime on the air, but this was as close as they'd get to their virgin landscape.

36.6.4 Challenge 10: Claudia Who?

Claudia struggled back across the dry terrain. Every few steps the tears blurred her vision but the hot dry wind evaporated them from her face.

In her mind's eye the terrible visions played over and over as first Ryan and then Nick fell to the savagery of the beast.

She stumbled through the anomaly and stopped short.

"Nick!" she cried and, temporarily abandoning all rational thought, threw herself into his arms. "Oh my God! I thought you were dead!"

He pushed her back gently and frowned. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Claudia! It's me, Claudia."

"I'm sorry, but Claudia who?"

36.6.5 Challenge 11: Surprise

"This is not *at all* what I expected from the afterlife," said Sarah.

"What *did* you expect?" asked Claudia.

"Not listening to Nick, Stephen and Ryan having a threesome."

They both gazed upwards. The noise left little to the imagination.

"I'm going to spend the afterlife being frustrated and horny."

"You know," said Claudia softly, after a pause, "sometimes a girl's just gotta do what a girl's gotta do."

The open top of her blouse revealed the curve of a perfect breast.

"My thought exactly," Sarah found herself saying, a little breathlessly.

Clearly sanctuary had even more surprises on offer.

36.6.6 Challenge 13: Camping

Danny tossed uncomfortably in Helen's salvaged bed roll. "Bloody rocks!" he murmured and hoped there would be an anomaly home soon.

"Blood snow!" he muttered. He had no idea when he was. Hopefully it was winter and not an ice age.

"Bloody insects!" It was a swamp full of big trees. He'd never paid much attention to Connor's lectures but the phrase Carboniferous hovered in his mind.

"Bloody heat!"

"Bloody wet socks and bloody giant psychotic birds forcing me to run through a stream."

"Bloody politicians!" he couldn't help muttering behind Burton's back.

"Bloody family!" and he headed after Patrick.

36.6.7 Challenge 21: Devastation

The day Tom Ryan died, the first thing that happened when Stephen, feeling drained both emotionally and physically, opened the door of his flat was that it jammed against Ryan's toolbox. Ryan was *supposed* to have taken it home weeks ago. The paint on the door was getting chipped it had banged against the bloody thing so many times. In the living room Ryan's magazines were on the table, a stray army regulation sock was on the mantelpiece, his CDs in a pile by the stereo. Stephen fell to his knees in the middle of the floor, dropped his head in his hands and cried.

36.6.8 Challenge 29: Kindness

Katerina Dobrowski was twelve, cheerful and brave. She had enough english for Patrick to work with. He tried be her big brother in their scary world.

Then she fell and broke her leg. The wound went bad. She screamed with the pain for days and raged in feverish russian. Patrick whispered useless comfort. When she started coughing up blood in great hacking spasms that shook her body he could stand it no longer. It was simple to place his hand over her mouth and nose and hold it there until the pain was gone.

He never mentioned her to anyone.

36.6.9 Challenge 31: Diligence

Connor is fascinated by the way Ryan cleans his gun. He takes it apart on a table in the armoury. His motions are business-like, but Connor can tell that he's being careful and concentrating from the way a small wrinkle furrows up between his eyebrows. Once every part is laid out, Ryan examines and then cleans each one in turn. His eyes are sharp and focused. Then he reassembles the gun and returns it to the secure locker.

Finally he gives a little stretch, a roll back of the shoulders, turns, and smiles a radiant smile at the waiting Connor.

36.6.10 Challenge 40: Dialogue

"Good beer they serve here."

"It's OK."

"You know of a better place nearby?"

"No."

...

"Jess seems like a nice girl. Very efficient."

"If you say so."

...

"Now it's your turn to say something."

"Sorry?"

"Your turn to say something. It's called a dialogue. It's what people do in pubs. Or so I am reliably informed."

"Nice weather we've been having."

"Do I have to do this the hard way?"

"Shooting me with an EMD is the easy way?"
"You'd never have believed me otherwise."
"What's the hard way?"
"To stop you sulking? I imagine I'll have to kiss you."

36.6.11 Challenge 41: Romance

Connor and Abby tumbled out of the oppressive coniferous woodland into bright sunlight. They stood at the top of a steep slope that fell in terraces down to a bright ribbon of water. A meadow of flowers crowded the bank in waves of blues, reds and purples.

Connor's eyes lit up in wonder. "Of course, the Cretaceous is when flowers really took off!"

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow over his features. Abby stepped closer. His expression of wonder deepened as his arms went automatically around her and it was impossible to say who had started the kiss.

36.6.12 Challenge 45: The ARC

Nick Cutter had once mentioned the Anomaly Research Group. It had been, Abby gathered, a small room at the home office in which the mysterious Claudia Brown spent her hours.

The Anomaly Research Centre Abby had known, was a large glass and steel structure standing tall, proud and unafraid, full of light and confidence. This new ARC cowered underground and felt full of secrets and mistrust.

Once she drove past the old ARC and found nothing but a building site. In the dead of night, curled up against Connor, together and yet alone, she wondered if it had ever existed.

36.6.13 Challenge 51: Stephen Hart

Helen schooled her emotions into dispassionate study. Even when feverish, Stephen was handsome. Those long eyelashes gave him a gentle, girlish look, while his lean frame and taut muscles spoke of steel beneath the fluff. It would be a shame if he were to die.

Rescuing him was out of the question though. She had no time nor patience for entanglements and explanations. In the grand scheme of things he was already dead, or not yet born.

Anyway, Nick was, no doubt, frantically searching for him. In fact, if Stephen were to survive, then maybe he could make himself useful.

36.6.14 Challenge 55: The Ladies of Primeval

Jenny Lewis took Lorraine and Abby out to lunch each week to escape the testosterone fuelled environment of the ARC.

Today she was frustrated. "We can't keep any more creatures at the ARC?"

"No," said Abby.

"Where am I going to find somewhere discrete for storing dinosaurs?"

"Leek managed," said Lorraine

"He wasn't discrete. I've spent weeks covering that lot up."

"What about this?" asked Lorraine, tapping her paper. "Dilapidated country house, acres of grounds containing disused private zoo."

"Give me that!" Jenny almost snatched the newspaper.

"Glad that's settled," said Abby, "'cos those velociraptors we caught last week... Breeding pair."

36.6.15 Challenge 59: Joy

It had been a long, slow descent into darkness. It had started with a moment of surprised and unadulterated joy. Who cared what Helen thought? or that Lester stood by disapproving. For that one brief moment, Nick thought only of Claudia and her lips on his and the promise of a future.

Then there was a long trek through death and disorientation. He had floundered in a morass of confusion and betrayal, more death and the reality of Helen's descent into darkness.

Connor, ever faithful, was close at hand. Nick closed his eyes and allowed himself the memory of joy.

36.6.16 Challenge 61: Pollen

"What's that lovely smell?" asked Claudia, breathing deep.

"Pollen?" hazarded Nick, staring at the anomaly.

Claudia placed a hand on his arm. She couldn't resist stroking upwards, caressing the skin and muscles.

Then suddenly there were hot lips on her own, and a breathless need. Hands scrabbled at the buttons on her blouse. She was aware of his closeness, his smell,

his chest pressed against her own and then the blessed relief as he buried himself inside her.

Afterwards, Nick sat up, his hair dishevelled, surprised and upright. A slight smile quirked the corner of his mouth. “Aye, definitely pollen.”

36.6.17 Challenge 67: Picture Prompt (From the Summit of White Hause)

Helen sailed the Lapetus ocean in the bright noonday sun and imagined the silt, sandstone and mudstone building beneath her.

She sailed it again, millenia later. No lazy afternoon this, she dodged flying volcanic rock.

Mere tens of millions of years and she could walk the arid land. There were no eruptions that day.

Then it eroded into the Carboniferous seas where she snorkled among the brightly coloured fish.

The ice ages rolled over it, carving curves into the sediment and volcanic rock. Helen watched the Lake District change and knew she could never again remain shackled to one time.

36.6.18 Challenge 68: The Ocean

Stephen looked out of Sanctuary window. Rain was washing down the glass; typical British summer; typical British view; a suburban garden, houses, a few trees.

Stephen thought of the ocean, of towering waves and blustering gales. He remembered surfing the barrel of a double-overhead. He remembered sailing single-handed through an unexpected squall. He remembered the thrill and the adrenaline and simply feeling alive.

Ryan's arms snaked round his waist as he, too, gazed out of the window in silence. Ryan was the same. He'd lived a life defined by action and danger. Here they were safe, but they weren't alive.

36.6.19 Challenge 69: Comfort

The team went drinking but she's an outsider. Jenny's been allowed to know she isn't real, a poor copy.

If we had looked past the facade of her home would we have seen her take off her face, let down her hair and curl up on the sofa with chocolates, wine and a book?

Did she phone family or friends (no fiance now) and say "we buried a colleague today"? Getting support from those who know she is strong, loyal and resourceful, qualities "the team" barely see.

Did she hear her answer-phone message from Cutter?

"Thanks for being there. Appreciated."

36.6.20 Challenge 70: Behind the Scenes

"Should we help?"

"We've not be asked."

"But we're porters. It's from the French to carry. I learned that in school."

"Are you trained in lifting?"

"No."

"That cage looks heavy. It could contravene Health and Safety if we tried to lift it."

"But Miss Maitland's only a slip of a thing."

"Tough though, and very independent. It probably contravenes Health and Safety to offer unwanted assistance. Chauvinism is a dangerous activity."

"Urrgh! What was that!"

"Projectile vomit by the looks of it. Good thing we didn't offer to help. There's forms to fill in if our uniform gets soiled."

36.6.21 Challenge 71: Family

"I never liked him much anyway," said Jenny's mother as she opened a fourth bottle of wine. Jenny was always amazed by her parent's ability to out-drink her.

"Couldn't stand the man," agreed her father.

"Why on Earth didn't you say?" demanded Jenny and laughed, shaking her head at them.

"Didn't want you to stop talking to me," he said, winked, and poured her another glass.

"Plenty more fish in the sea," added her mother aimiably.

Jenny thought of stubborn Scotsmen with wild hair and enthusiastic hands, not to mention a strong stomach for alcohol. They'd like him much better.

36.6.22 Challenge 72: Kisses

Nick Cutter walked in the Permian, his mind revolving around a Rabbie Burns song.

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, and then for ever!

”Don’t go,” she had said.

Three kisses they had shared. The first a pretext, the second a sudden impulse followed by embarrassment and the last?

Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met - or never parted,
We had ne’er been broken-hearted.

Nick Cutter shrugged off the words and the melody. He’d be seeing her again soon and then, he decided, there would definitely be more kisses.

36.6.23 Maisy and Daisy (Challenge 73: Lazy)

Lazy Maisy, feeling hazy,
Walking to her hall,
Spies a grand thing, six foot standing,
By the campus wall.

Nutter Cutter storms and splutters,
“A lion from a zoo.”
Pesters Lester who phones Chester,
“Say it is one too”.

Sexy soldiers with thigh holsters
(Maisy starts to flirt)
Find the grand thing needs some handling.
Maisy’s almost hurt.

Honour Connor, she’s near a gonner.
He hides her in a duct.

Spry man Ryan tames the lion.
Stephen looks well-... relieved everyone's OK.

Crazy Maisy, not so hazy,
Talks of what she's seen.
Dozy Daisy, feeling lazy,
Doesn't tell the Dean.

36.6.24 Challenge 74: Armed and Dangerous

The geek hindbrain has a way of cataloging information even when it is of little interest to the geek in question. Simply by hanging around Ryan, Connor knew there was a choice between armour piercing and stopping power. An armour piercing bullet could pass straight through a target doing comparatively little damage. Bullets that exploded or expanded within the target were banned by the Hague Convention.

"Fortunately," Ryan had said, grinning, "The Hague Convention doesn't hold in the Permian."

He'd gone through the anomaly fully armed and dangerous. Connor stared at it, blinking back tears. Armed and dangerous. Yeah! right!

36.6.25 All Irregularites will be Handled (Challenge 75: crossover)

NB. A longer version of this drabble appears in chapter 15.

Claudia pushed the barrier, ignoring the man and woman beside her.

"I wouldn't. That's a weak point in time," said Steel.

"I'm returning to my friends."

"You no longer belong there."

"If you break through," added Sapphire kindly, "things will follow."

Swirls of darkness radiated from where Claudia pressed against the strange surface.

"And if I don't come with you?"

"We take you anyway," said Steel harshly.

Sapphire pursed her lips and shot him a disapproving look but didn't contradict his words.

Claudia bowed her head and held out her hand. Together they walked into the light of the anomaly.

36.6.26 Nick Cutter and the Pirate Dinosaurs (Challenge 75: crossover)

"OK. You sailed through the 'pretty sparkly thing'."

"Arrr! That be so!" said Pirate Tyranosaurus Rex.

"Saw 'Mr. Macall's Seaside Park of Fun' and stormed it."

"Shiver me timbers," agreed Pirate Triceratops.

"Giganatosaurus was scared by the spider," Nick glanced up at the large balloon floating over the Ghost Train, "at which point class 3B overpowered you."

The pirates cowered away from the children at his back.

"You promise to be good from now on in exchange for safe conduct back home."

"Yo ho ho," agreed Pirate Stegosaurus. "And a bottle of rum?" he added hopefully.

"No rum!" said Cutter.

36.6.27 Challenge 76: "It's so... big"

Ryan liked gardening. He owned a ground floor flat which he'd bought for the garden.

At weekends he made things grow.

Arriving late, the bell unanswered, Connor went round the back and was unsurprised to find Ryan in baggy cords and and an old shirt. His fingers were encased in earth from where he'd been splitting or lifting or planting or whatever it was he did.

"Thought you might come," Ryan said. "Look at this!"

He tossed Connor a turnip. Connor boggled at it.

"Why Ryan!" he said, "It's so... big."

"I'll show you big."

Ryan advanced with a grin.

36.6.28 Challenge 77: Accomplished

Abby studied herself in the mirror. *I have a natural gift with reptiles* she told herself.

She hadn't meant to overhear Lyle and Blade.

I do not need men for self-validation she added.

"So what about Maitland and Lewis?" Blade had asked.

"I don't do women anymore," Lyle replied.
"Yeah, but if you did?"
I'm the world expert on Coelurosauravus she said.
"Lewis has an evil eye," Lyle had mused thoughtfully.
"True"
I have a green belt in Tae Kwon do.
"But she has better tits."
Blade had nodded sagely.
But, Abby had to concede, *Jenny does have better tits*.

36.6.29 Challenge 78: Creepy Crawlies

Follows on from Head, Hand and Heart (chapter 3)

As her horse crested the rise, Claudia could see the anomaly. She spurred it to a gallop, Stephen and Ryan close behind her. Dark smoke billowed up, enveloping them. Claudia clutched Mab's charm at her throat.

"Clouds of Hecate! yield!"

The darkness parted, allowing them a pathway.

Words floated out from beyond the gate.

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,

Claudia reigned up sharply.
"What is it?" asked Ryan.
"I think this is one intervention we should allow to run its course."

36.6.30 Bonfire Night (Challenge 79: Anticipation)

Helen sat beside Nick on the flat roof.

"Congratulations." He clinked her glass.

Helen thought of the future as the bubbly slipped down her throat. She needed to build a research group. Someone had mentioned a Stephen in third year, said he was good. There might be some money available for a PhD.

"You'll get a job soon," she said.

Further appointments were being discussed. She should get Nick into the group.

"My publication record's not good enough."

Helen kissed him fondly. "Don't sell yourself short."

"Helen?"

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

Above her head, bright lights blossomed like flowers.

36.6.31 Not all those who Wander are Lost (Challenge 80: All That Glitters)

Sometimes, something that some person does completely changes the fabric of the universe. A quirk of fate places such power in their hands that it is not simply history that changes as they blunder through time but the natural laws themselves. The old reality is wiped away, leaving no trace, no myths, no echos, except, perhaps, in the dreams of eccentric young men.

It happens surprisingly often.

Worlds that were flat become round.

Groping in the silt of the riverbed where an anomaly had dumped her, Helen's grasping fingers closed about something. It was small and round and surprisingly heavy.

36.6.32 Challenge 80: All That Glitters

McAllister and Wells are OCs created by thefakebook. Taylor Crane is the grown up little girl from episode 2.05

McAllister watched as Crane approached the anomaly. Crane *always* got to the anomaly first even when he ordered her to hang back. It was like moths and candle flames.

"What have we got?" he asked.

Crane stuck her head through. He hated it when she did that. "Drizzle. Swamp. Funny smell."

Wells shot him a look but kept his mouth shut. He knew what was coming next.

"Can we go through and check it out?" asked Crane.

Drizzle. Swamp. Funny smell.

"How many times to I have to tell you."

"All that glitters..." she gazed wistfully at the sparkling anomaly.

36.6.33 Challenge 81: The Gym

Ryan runs on the treadmill as sweat sticks his shirt to his back.

Nicholas Cutter is safe and there is a woman in custody.

His muscles strain as he thinks of the man he has lost. Lost in a deep, dark place with no air to breath.

The exercise is as repetitious as his thoughts lost in a deep, dark place with no air to breath.

He has lost a man.

His muscles strain as he thinks of the woman in custody.

But Nicholas Cutter is safe.

Sweat sticks his shirt to his back as Ryan runs on the treadmill.

36.6.34 Challenge 82 (Temptation): Office Party

Abby sank onto the sofa by Claudia.

"Cutter and Blade are an item?"

Claudia nodded. "Since Chile."

Lester and Lyle were almost, but not quite, holding hands. Ryan's arm was around Stephen's waist. Connor and Ditzy were actually snogging in the corner like teenagers.

"Ditzy better check the water again."

Claudia shook her head. "New theory."

"Yes?"

"Everyone is hand-picked by Lester, right?"

"Right."

"So Ditzy reckons Lester has the most finely tuned gaydar this side of San Franciso."

"Shame it doesn't extend to women," grumbled Abby.

Claudia leaned forward, displaying a surprisingly generous amount of cleavage.

"Want to bet?"

36.6.35 Challenge 83 (Winter Wonderland): One of our Santas is Missing

"There he is," shouted Ryan.

The missing Santa was sat in a snow drift opposite some sort of caveman.

They pelted towards him, the soldiers' guns at the ready. The caveman eyed them warily and then backed off, stuffing bits of fur and stone into a leather bag.

"Come on, mate," said Ryan. "Time to get you home."

Dumbly, the Santa allowed them to drag him towards the anomaly.

"Where's his hat?" asked Connor when they got there.

Ryan looked back over the ice field. The caveman was disappearing into the distance, a splash of red perched jauntily on head.

36.6.36 Challenge 84: Deck the Halls

Fast away the old year passes.

Stephen was sure there hadn't been a door here before.

He opened it. It was another bedroom; bed neatly made up; the room freshly aired.

Ryan appeared at his elbow. "Where did this come from?"

"Management! What's this?" called Stephen.

"We're expecting a new arrival."

"What! Who?!"

"We don't know," Management said in a small quiet voice. "But we thought we should start getting things ready."

Stephen and Ryan looked at the room in silence a moment. Then Stephen shut the door. They didn't discuss it again.

Hail the new ye lads and lasses.

36.6.37 Ghosts at the Feast (Challenge 87: Office Party)

The team were having fun but Nick was watching the ghosts. Stephen was hovering behind Abby his face a mixture of anger and regret. But his mouth twitched slightly in acceptance every time her hand reached out to touch Connor. The soldiers were telling bawdy stories and laughing uproariously. Ryan was there, with the men he cared about. Nick didn't see Claudia very often. Sometimes there was a slight lag as Jenny turned her head. Just once, as Jenny stepped swiftly aside to

dodge a drink's tray, Nick saw Claudia. She stood staring at him, smiled, faded and was gone.

36.6.38 Challenge 86: 'Tis the Season

Season of feasts and warmth and light,
Connor and Abby before the fire,
    Entwining their arms to hold back the night;
Jenny, in Church, harkens to the choir,
Nick in her thoughts and he with his Mam.
    Loaded with turkey, he sinks into sleep.
Grubbing in mud and laughing at fear,
    Lester and Lyle are in cave dark and deep.
In Sanctuary's walls there's candles and ham.
    They drink to their friends with many a dram
    And watch over them in the comming new year.

Dinosaurs too acknowledge the season,
To make up the word count, if no other reason.

36.6.39 Challenge 87: Resolutions

Department C19, Project 673, Minutes.

July 2000

Resolution: Project to continue, despite unexpected side effects

July 2007

Resolution: Reappearance of Cutter problem to be monitored but no action taken.

August 2007

Resolution: Proposal to create an Anomaly Research Centre to be supported. It could provide a convenient official unofficial response.

September 2007

Resolution: Political enemies of James Lester to be identified in case of trouble.

October 2007

Resolution: Oliver Leek to be assigned to the ARC.

January 2008

Resolution: Oliver Leek to recruit Helen Cutter, if possible.

April 2008

Observation: Well! That went well!

May 2009

Resolution: Project to continue.

36.6.40 Challenge 88: Hunger

There are great four dimensional leviathans weaving their way through the vortex. Their feelers spread out through time feeding on the great energy spikes the ships of the time aware powers trail in their wake. But every so often one gets entangled in the gravity well of some planet. Its tentacles encircle the world in an embrace. Trapped far from the temporal highways the creature wraps itself tighter and tighter about the world. The inhabitants, limited to three dimensions, see only a cross-section of the limbs as they pass by, pulsing and gripping and inviting, desperate to assuage the hunger.

36.6.41 Challenge 89: Fools Rush In

Stephen gaped at the man who had just landed. The blonde hair and blue eyes were familiar. He wore blue jeans but his feet and torso were bare, revealing toned muscles. Large, white, feathered wings sprung from his back.

"Who might you be?" asked Cutter, eyeing him with undisguised appreciation.

"Captain Telperion Ryan, Anomaly Unit. Who are you?"

"Nicholas Cutter and Stephen Hart, Scientists."

"From the original anomaly team?"

They nodded, dumbly.

"Where's your backup?" asked Telperion. "You didn't just rush through did you?"

Stephen looked sideways at Cutter. "Don't worry. Your great-grand daddy will be along in a minute."

36.6.42 Challenge 90: Brave New World

They stopped on a high eyrie above a grassy plain and sat side by side, comparing notes. After a bit Claudia pulled out her wallet and showed Miranda the dog-eared photos of her family that she kept inside.

Miranda was fascinated by the glossy paper, the clothes and the furniture. The glimpses of Claudia's mother's tiny front room, with its faded floral curtains and brown floc wallpaper filled her with wonder. Her hands touched the faces.

"Your brother, and cousin Emily and Mrs Watkins from over the road," she repeated reverentially.

Oh brave new world
That has such people in't

36.6.43 Pooh Sticks (Challenge 91: Water, Water, Everywhere)

The grounds were full of follies. Tiny waterways ran between mock Greek temples until they emptied out into a lake.

With nothing coming through the anomaly, Connor and Abby played pooh sticks.

Cutter sat quietly, with a pen-knife and a small piece of wood. When it looked something like a boat, he stuck in a twig, attached a paper sail and wrote Stephen Hart on the prow.

Together, they chased it down the rivulets, watched anxiously as it nearly jammed on last year's leaves and cheered when it raced out into the open lake and sailed away to the west.

36.6.44 Say it to me, Say it for me (Challenge 92: The Good, The Bad an the Ugly)

Having lost everything, I became lost myself. Lost, to die, crawling on hands and knees through the Jurassic desert; a burnt husk; an ugly blot on the pristine landscape.

Struggling back to consciousness, I just made out a woman in rough, practical clothing. She crouched before a fire, by the carcass of an archaeopteryx. I closed my eyes against her. I had not called for Helen, my bad penny.

Broth was forced between my lips, causing eyes to open.

"Claudia," my throat was hoarse with heat and thirst, my mind blank with disbelief, "what are you doing here?"

"Saving you."

36.6.45 Challenge 93: Valentine/Anti-Valentine

Stephen watched as Nick placed a box of chocolates on the back doorstep.

"What are you doing?"

"It's Valentine's day."

Stephen boggled. "OK so, in this timeline, Ryan and I died and you went soft in the head."

"Mebbe," said Nick, "it seems churlish not to give something."

"They'll still be there in the morning. Helen's probably in the Cretaceous. You don't even like her anymore and she's mad as all hell at you."

"True, but I bet she takes them all the same."

Stephen snorted and slammed the door with some force.

In the morning the chocolates were gone.

36.6.46 Feather (Challenge 94: Feathers)

The archaeopteryx feather drifted through the hot, humid air, over dark green ferns with wide fronded leaves. It tumbled up and over in a vortex and then plunged downwards, through the glittering shards of light to land in thick churned up clay. It was raining.

Some time later, trucks drove up.

"Well, wherever it led, it's gone now."

A calloused hand plucked at the end of the feather, pulling it from the mud and into the misty half light. Its colours were dulled to a brownish blue with hints of orange at the tips, just visible through the grime.

"What's that?"

Sharp blue eyes and a Scottish accent: "A feather."

36.6.47 Challenge 95: Something Wicked this way Comes

About half way through the grassy meadow, in unspoken agreement, they stopped. Connor picked wildflowers and Abby laughed as he tried to tuck them in her hair. Nick watched, the smallest of smiles lurking at the corners of his mouth. The

soldiers began an impromptu game of football. The pain of the cold dark winter and the betrayals and the death were washed away in the warm bright sunshine.

Gradually, one by one, they fell asleep.

Only Lyle remained awake, gripping his gun tightly and fighting the soporific, sweet-smelling air with one hard and brittle thought.

His thumbs were pricking.

36.6.48 Challenge 96: Tea

"Tea?" asked Jenny.

Nick made tea by pressing the bag impatiently against the side of the cup. He preferred Nescafe, at least it produced something drinkable, quickly.

On Jenny's desk sat a bone china, willow pattern, tea set. Smoky aromatic fumes filled the room. Ancient conditioning stalled Nick's incipient rant.

Jenny poured, catching large leaves in a wire strainer.

No milk, he observed, suspiciously. He picked up the delicate china and took a cautious sip. It tasted like the smell of woodsmoke intermingled with his grandmother's potpurri. He felt his anger begin to recede.

"So?" said Jenny, "What's the problem?"

36.6.49 Challenge 97: Extinction

"When the sea levels rose competition for land became fierce. I'm sure you are not surprised to hear that competition spilled over into war and, inevitably, that war went nuclear.

"You know what? You can't make an air tight bunker in a week. Protect your family, my arse.

"The international space station kept monitoring and broadcasting. Forty-eight hours after the first bombs dropped, there wasn't a square metre of dry land which wasn't displaying 'dangerously high' levels of radiation. So when your sparkly anomaly thing appeared in the middle of my bunker, Mr. Lester, why wouldn't I walk through it?"

36.6.50 Challenge 98: Fire

"Abby!" Abby turned back, and her mouth gaped.

Out of the anomaly poured a bright, orange liquid. A wave of heat hit her. She scrambled into the Hilux and gunned the engine. The... the lava spread out behind the truck as Connor and Ditzy started to run towards it, liquid rock at their heals.

She drove.

They stopped on a small hill. They could see a large, red pool, darkening to black in the middle. It was still growing.

"What about Cutter and Jenny?" whispered Connor.

"Those two?" said Ditzy. "A little bit of fire won't even slow them down."

36.6.51 Challenge 99: Exanimate

Cutter gazed down at the exanimate skull. He fingered the spikes and ridges thoughtfully.

"That's what we're up against is it?" asked Becker.

The Elginia shied away from the loud bangs and backed into the sparkling light.

Its leg hurt.

"I said don't shoot!" The cry echoed through the anomaly.

The wound festered. Days later, the wretched creature lay down by the river where it was drinking, too tired and hot to move again.

The river rose. Silt washed over the body.

The fossil hunters came and the remains went to a museum.

Cutter gazed down at the exanimate skull.

36.6.52 Challenge 101: Memories

The English countryside of the early 21st century was, all things considered, a good place to die. Gideon sat in the sunshine, untroubled by immediate fears and worries. He could smell flowers and hear birds sing.

When he closed his eyes, however, he saw pale yellow skies. He was assailed by the smell of sweaty human bodies, fearfully cramped too close together. He heard the cries of hunting beasts and insects. For all he fully intended those memories to be of no time nor place, he felt deep pangs of nostalgia and home-sickness that the peaceful garden could not sooth.

36.6.53 Challenge 111: Pride

Although he wouldn't admit it, Lester had grown fond of his rag-tag team of lunatics. The past weeks had been hard. But the ARC was almost reparied. The new team members had integrated well. He was proud of them: proud of Connor for suppressing his grief and working on the artefact; proud of Abby for filling in the gaps left by Stephen; proud of Jenny for holding them all together; proud that no one was giving up despite the obvious danger.

There was a knock on the office door. It was Jenny. Lester saw her face and his heart sank.

36.6.54 Challenge 116: Tender Loving Care

In the depths of the night Jenny would toss and turn. She babbled and cried out but the words were unintelligible. Sarah was glad. In the depths of her soul she feared that Jenny would call out his name.

Sarah would shush quietly and push the damp red hairs from Jenny's brow, watching over her as the nightmare subsided once more into sleep. Then Jenny would lie, quiet and beautiful in her arms.

Once Jenny opened her eyes, smiled a tired but contented smile at Sarah and pulled her close, wordlessly, so that they fell asleep entangled, content and comforted.

36.6.55 Challenge 117: Girls, Girls, Girls

The horde of small pink creatures dashed in and around the dining room.

"Girls! Girls!" cried Mrs Wood. Twelve attentive and expectant faces looked her way.

Sarah, on the other hand, stood leaning against the wall, dressed as a pirate. She pouted.

"And.. err... pirate!" added Mrs Wood. "Time for hunt the slipper"

The small feathery creature dashed in and around the soldiers.

"Guys! Guys!" shouted Connor. Three attentive and expectant faces turned his way.

Sarah, on the other hand, stood leaning against a marble statue, eyebrows raised. She pouted. “And... err... woman!” added Connor. “Time for hunt the compsognathus.”

36.6.56 Challenge 121: Want. Take. Have

Want. Take. Have. It was a simple mantra but, in the twisting corridors of Whitehall, an extremely powerful one, provided you were clear enough about what you wanted, subtle about how you took it, and wary once you had it.

James Lester gazed down upon his domain in the newly built ARC building and a quiet concern entered his thoughts. He’d wanted control of the government response to the anomalies, and he’d fought off several people and departments in order to take that control. But now he had it, he was clearly going to have to do something with it.

36.6.57 Challenge 131 (New Pairings): Bobble Hats and Corsets

Duncan looked uncertainly at Phillip, a shy sideways glance that set Burton’s heart beating fast and eagerly in his chest.

“I really never saw anything in Jenny,” Duncan murmured.

“I know you didn’t,” soothed Burton, stroking Duncan’s bobble hat gently. “She manipulated you and then cast you aside like you were worthless. But you’re not. To me you are everything.”

Burton could barely restrain himself. Duncan looked so perfect. But he held back, allowing Duncan to make the first move.

And, finally, Duncan placed his beautiful hands on the lacings of Burton’s corset and began to pull at the strings.

36.6.58 Challenge 132: The Games We Play

Sir James Lester rubbed his forehead as he read yet another briefing report from a sub-committee from deep within some government ministry or department or quango. The report itself wasn’t particularly tiresome, but the careful reading between the lines sapped his energy.

First Leek, and then Christine; James Lester had been in politics too long. There would be more such threats and he watched for signs. No one really knew what the anomalies were, nor how they might be exploited, but everyone knew

they were important. The ARC was going to prove an important game piece in the long run.

36.6.59 Just the One (Challenge 133: Doctors and Nurses)

Iman checked for life signs because it was protocol, but she could tell the man was dead. She had developed a sense for when there was life present. Noting that he, at least, had no immediate need of her services, she then checked the scene for people who could use her skills.

A suit appeared before her, with an air of displaced authority.

"Any other casualaties sir?" she asked.

"Some minor cuts and bruises," he said. "Just the one the death."

Iman said nothing. Just the one was one too many. She saw her feelings mirrored on the suit's face.

36.6.60 Challenge 134: Temple, Connor Temple

Zaroff was mad, certifiably so. But, as the explosion started, Abby dived through his artificial anomaly anyway.

She slid along a smooth floor. A strong arm grabbed her and hauled her up. She had a brief glimpse of tuxedo. A gun was firing. "Damn security guards. We're going to have to jump," said a familiar voice. "Hang on!"

With a gasp, Abby felt the man launch them out of the skyscraper window. A sudden tug make her look up, into the folds of a parachute and into Connor's face.

"Wha..?" she started.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Temple, Connor Temple."

36.6.61 Challenge 135: Wishful Thinking

"What could do with right now," said Lyle conversationally. "Is a cigarette."

"Not a hope for six million years," said Ditzy. "I'd settle for a decent pint. We can probably brew something round here."

"Not something decent," returned Lyle.

"Abigail Maitland. She'd make up for the Jurassic or whenever we are," said Finn.

"She wouldn't look at you twice, mate," scoffed Blade.

"Bet she would. You can tell she's a real goer."

"Watch it Finn, ladies present," muttered Lyle.

Four dubious pairs of eyes turned to look at Lacey.

She shrugged. “Finn can have Maitland if I can have Temple.”

36.6.62 Challenge 136: Secret Santa

“Ho! Ho! Ho!”

“I’m not fooled Cutter. I have paperwork. Get out of my office.”

“Have a little Christmas spirit. Ho? Ho? Ho?”

“Jenny, remove Professor Cutter from my office and put him back in the Christmas party.”

“Ho, ho, ho.” Cutter clearly waggled his eyebrows at Jenny as he went out. She smiled and rolled her eyes at him.

“What have you done to him?”

Jenny smiled smugly. “The secret santa delivered an excellent Ardbeg to the free bar. Sure I can’t tempt you sir?”

“Bah! Humbug!”

“Very good sir.”

“Just out of curiosity, how old is the Ardbeg?”

36.6.63 Challenge 137: Mistletoe and Wine

(Set in the same world as *Head, Hand and Heart* (Chapter 3))

“The cross was made out of mistletoe. That’s why the plant withered and became parasitic.” Claudia’s arms overflowed with green and white mistletoe. Ivy trailed around her hair and her dress was white.

“That’s not true in so many ways,” commented Nick.

“It’s true in all the ways that matter.”

“Why do we kiss under it?”

“It fruits in winter. Work it out, Nick.”

Nick actually blushed. “And this feast of Queen Mab’s tonight? Where wine will flow like a river?”

Claudia kissed him ever so gently and her eyes danced. “Well Yamin had to come from somewhere didn’t she?”

36.6.64 Challenge 138: Unwrapping the Presents

“Fingerless mittens! Thanks Jenny.” Connor ignored the sound of stifled giggling behind him.

"I'm glad you like them Connor. I wanted to get something you'd use."

"How many pairs of mittens is that?" asked Abby once she was gone.

"Only three, Lester and Danny bought me scarves. Stop laughing, they're all very thoughtful!"

"Here's mine." Abby pushed a small package across the table.

Connor opened it cautiously. "It's a ring? with a heart?"

"It's a promise ring. Look it up on wikipedia."

"I know what a promise ring is," Connor said quietly as he put it on. "Best present ever."

36.6.65 Challenge 139: The End of an Era

Helen was beginning to regret her instinct to explore. The Permian landscape fascinated her and the other gateways to other times fascinated her more. But she was lost and could not get home. Nick would be missing her.

Then she saw the Dimetrodon skeleton, by the dried up shore of a prehistoric sea. The air was short of oxygen, making it hard to breathe. Something inside of her strained and broke. She did not regret her urge to explore. She did not really regret Nick. She was filled with the passion of discovery.

It was the end of an era.

36.6.66 Challenge 140: Trains, Planes and Automobiles

(Set in the same world as *Nazis and Dinosaurs and Airships! Oh My!* (Chapter 7))

Train: Taylor watched the guards loading up their luggage.

"Where are we going?"

"Scotland," said Claudia. "There's an alert in Glencoe."

"Flying would be quicker."

"Not in this weather."

"I should do something about that."

Plane: "It'll be fine, Connor!" Taylor pulled the goggles down over her face. "Honestly, the theory is sound. I've flown before."

Automobile: "Just keep cranking the handle."

"This is worse than that airplane of yours!" complained Connor.

"It's a lot more practical! You can drive it to your honeymoon location."

"Who told you I was getting married?"

"Abby's just randomly wearing that ring, is she?"

36.6.67 Challenge 141: Ice Age

As the glaciers advanced we hit upon the idea of siphoning in heat from other eras. We built on temporal theory dating back to the early 21st century.

We didn't realise the irony in the name 'Anomaly Project'. Someone with access to classified files must have put two-and-two together and then suggested it as joke.

There wasn't much laughter as the dinosaurs thundered across the continents, but at least modern armaments meant they were controllable.

But no one expected the anomalies to reach forward. The *anomalies* shouldn't have reached forward.

No one was laughing at all as the predators arrived.

36.6.68 Challenge 142 (Nick Cutter): Nick Cutter Lies Alone

Nick Cutter lies alone. The slammed doors and raised voices are past. She won't be back tonight.

Nick Cutter lies alone, lacking the strength to finish the Missing Persons form.

Nick Cutter lies alone. The faint memory of a kiss lingers on his lips, the sharp image of a fiancé etched into his mind's eye.

Nick Cutter lies alone. Memories of shared tents soured by recrimination, distrust and finally death churn through his thoughts.

One stayed close. He did not die alone.

The last of the mourners have gone. The head stone stands, simple and cold. Nick Cutter lies alone.

36.6.69 Challenge 143: Winner Takes All

Evolution is incredibly simple for something so incredibly complex. Sooner or later something will out-compete you and that's it. Winner takes all.

Helen knew this. Helen had thought she understood this. It was the armour around her heart. She viewed people dispassionately, just another species muddling along until the evolutionary dice rolled against it.

The sight of a ravaged world with predators feasting in the ruins hit her like a vicious kick. This could not be allowed to happen. She could out-think and out-compete these creatures, single-handedly if need be.

She would win. They would not have any of it.

36.6.70 Challenge 144: I've got a Theory

"I've got a theory," writes Connor.

"Actually I've got lots of theories. I don't like one theory. I like all the other theories. The one's that don't work. They are better theories than the one that does work. Obviously they're not scientifically better but they're unscientifically better, if you see what I mean.

"There is a trial and error pattern. Anomalies cluster ever closer to some event until a desired change is achieved. Then someone or something moves on to a new experiment.

"I've got a theory that the anomalies are deliberate."

Things change.

Connor writes. "I have no theories."

36.6.71 Challenge 145: Romance

"Stairs are blocked!" shouted Sarah.

She leaned over the balcony and stared into the ornate hallway below. The Deinonychus were all on the stairway and the landing below them. "Hallway's clear."

"More behind us!" gasped Jenny.

Sarah risked a glance down the corridor. "Damn!"

"Chandelier!" said Jenny.

Sarah glanced at the heavy rope. "You have to be kidding me."

"I wish I was. Any better ideas?"

"No."

As they swung down to the marble floor Sarah felt Jenny's lips brush against her own. She stared at Jenny in surprise.

Jenny blushed. "Sorry! Caught up in the romance of the moment."

36.6.72 Challenge 146: There is no I in Team

Maturity suited Connor. Geekiness had become a gentle eccentricity. Manic enthusiasm had become an eagle-eyed curiosity and a refusal to be defeated by events. Social ineptness had combined with intelligence into a careful watchfulness for the feelings of other people.

"I am accepting this Nobel prize on behalf of the most amazing team of people a man could hope to work with. Some of them lost their lives trying to understand and contain the anomalies..."

In the audience Helen could only seeth to herself. *I* discovered the anomalies. *I* mapped them. *I* developed the first theories. *I* was there first.

36.6.73 Challenge 147: Victory

Helen was always victorious.

She had set out to show her theories were correct, and they had been proved right.

On the way she had been arrested without charge, injured and villified. She had been misunderstood. Her words had been twisted and her motives derided.

Still...

She had her own goals and intended to pursue them.

She followed a predator to the future.

She had learned how to manipulate the time lines. She had decided on the action to take. She had successfully infiltrated the ARC. She had removed Nick from the equation.

Victory, as Connor might have said, sucked.

36.6.74 Challenge 148: I've got Chills... They're Multiplying

Lester had said it would be "good for morale", which Nick assumed meant "if I have to go to the staff party, so do you."

Even so, and considerably against his better judgement, he let Connor and Abby cajole him onto the floor for WMCA, and again for the Time Warp.

The excellent beer was probably to blame.

He lost track of which cheesy number from his youth was blaring out.

He turned, staggered, caught hold of the nearest person and sang "You're the one that I want," to a surprised looking Jenny.

Suddenly he realised that he meant it.

36.6.75 Challenge 149: Rock

Every summer, throughout her childhood, Abby and her family had spent a week at the seaside with her grandparents. They would build sandcastles, explore rock-pools and eat bright pink rock.

"Your granddad has the countryside running right through him," her Nan used to say. "Bit like this stick of rock."

Indeed her grandfather always had the air of a farmer about him. He had depths, but they weren't really hidden ones.

Connor was like that. What you saw was what you got, without guile or polish. He had 'Connor' written all the way through him, like a stick of rock.

36.6.76 Challenge 150: Bedtime Stories

"Tell me a story."

Connor's no good at telling stories, not really. He breaks off to fill in back-story he's forgotten to mention. He tends to digress into observations about science. He wants to explain and excuse the bits that don't quite make sense.

However, Abby has asked.

He resists the temptation to reveal the excitement of Highlander or the intricacies of Iain M. Banks. He searches in his mind for a simple tale.

Abby falls asleep in his arms, under the bright stars of the Cretaceous, as his voice murmurs the story of two babes, lost in a wood.

36.6.77 Challenge 151: Trapped

I was going to change the world...

...but not until after university, not until I'd saved a bit...

Then...

Mortgage, boyfriend, people waiting for the engagement to be announced; lots of people who would be hurt and let down.

Then...

I was surrounded by people who were difficult. God! were they difficult. People who constantly hurt each other and let each other down, but they were brave and shining and determined.

I don't want to let them down. But they've shown me I have to sieze my own dream, find my own way to change the world and fly free.

36.6.78 Challenge 152: Thunder and Lightening

The wild storm was raging but Mother Cutter did not care. She had the knife. She had the skull. She climbed to the top of Silbury Hill, and hadn't it taken some effort to get that built, fit for purpose, four thousand years earlier.

She knelt atop the hill and plunged the knife into the skull. Lightening struck.

Bolts of paradox curled around her, racing down the hill and out onto the plain. Anomalies danced in the thunder, powering the network, connecting to the labyrinth.

Mother Cutter stood at the heart of the storm and saw that it was good.

36.6.79 Challenge 153 (Gen): Short, Sharp, Click

Jennifer Lewis walks away. Her heels click, click, click on the floor. They sound irritated.

The team are intimidated by the stark suit and the red lips. Even James Lester, accustomed to forceful personalities, is uncertain. How do you tell someone so sharp and brittle about the dinosaurs? He fears the hard exterior will break into a bitter laugh and she'll resign. Cutter's already convinced her, in less than a sentence, that he's either a lunatic or making fun of her.

Lester leaves her to work it out and never apologises that in doing so he nearly got her killed.

36.6.80 Challenge 155: Dinosaurs

Connor was counting his blessings because everything ached, the router was bust and Abby was watching keep fit.

Steady job. Out of deference to his grandpa who thought it important. Grandpa was also awesome with lego and didn't mind buying TV tie-in novelisations as presents.

Co-workers. Abby was the best person to work with ever. And when you also worked with Cutter that was saying something. Abby was probably a blessing in her own right, number three.

Best thing about the job was the great people, especially Abby.

That and the dinosaurs, but he was saving them for blessing five...

36.6.81 Challenge 156: Claudia Brown

Late one night, long after the children had flown the nest. Jenny woke up alone and thirsty.

She was unsurprised to see that the light was on in Nick's study as she padded downstairs. He was inside, pouring over diagrams and equations, endlessly working because he couldn't sleep.

"Still trying to find a pattern in the anomalies?" she asked.

"Aye! I thought I had an idea about the time-line changes but it doesn't work."

"If you did figure it out, would you bring back Claudia?"

She saw him hesitate before he said "no", and in that instant her heart broke.

36.6.82 Challenge 157: Cake

Every morning Claudia ate breakfast at Henry's. She had coffee and a croissant and she looked at the cake; a moist and rich chocolate cake, encased in thick icing.

A slice only cost 50p. Resisting temptation was a part of Claudia's morning routine. Maybe, some day, she'd succumb; on her fortieth birthday, perhaps, or when she finally got Cutter out of her hair - some event worthy of the capitulation.

One morning, as she ate her croissant and sipped her coffee, a voice said, "May I sit here?"

She looked up to see Helen, a slice of cake in each hand.

36.6.83 Challenge 158: Surrender

"Retreating from the field of battle? Not like you," said Lyle.

Maybe not, but Ryan felt like an old soldier in this war. He'd fought his last campaign when Jeff walked out. He was done with relationships.

"What's that about a battle?" With impeccable timing, Hart appeared in the doorway.

"Ryan's hiding behind his defences. I recommend a full frontal assault." Lyle grinned, slapped Hart's chest and then wandered off.

Hart raised his eyebrows. "Fancy a pint?"

As an opening salvo it was simple, but effective. Ryan sighed inwardly, picked up his jacket and braced himself for one last campaign.

36.6.84 Challenge 159: Food, Glorious Food

All was dry and arid, parched and lifeless. The children mewled with hunger. The mother could provide little. They were running out of time.

They watched the elusive shadow watching them. It smelled strange and exotic, but mostly it smelled of meat. It wasn't of this place any more than they were. They controlled their hunger, and watched until it vanished, suddenly, through the same bright light that had first led them to this place.

They broke through, into cool sunlight, light rain and a cornucopia of beasts. The family was saved. Food, glorious food, surrounded them in great abundance.

36.6.85 Challenge 160: Girl on Beach (Picture Prompt)

Connor surveyed the deserted beach, harpoon gun over one shoulder.

"Tranqs, backed up by M4s would be easier," said Abby cautiously.

"You heard the eye-witness; one minute the girl was standing on the beach, then she was gone, nothing but a camera left. We know what's there."

"I don't want to have to rescue you, *again*."

Connor flashed her a devil-may-care smile. "We know this way works. It'll be fine."

He vaulted over the railings at the edge of the promenade.

Abby winced at the yelp of pain. Twenty years dead, and Connor was still trying to emulate Stephen Hart.

36.6.86 Challenge 161: The Permian

This was where it had started and this was where it would end. Timeline after timeline would fold back on itself. Claudia wondered where that would leave her. Was she real or only a ghost?

Dry earth blew around her feet. Ferns grew among the rocks and tall pines waved in the distance. Nothing was artificial save for an abandoned camera, next to dusty bones.

Her cheeks were wet with tears.

The body and camera were not the only things out of time. Mishapen, domed, sightless heads stared at her. Claudia stared back.

She turned and ran for the anomaly.

36.6.87 Challenge 162: Shadows

"You cast a long shadow, you know," Jenny remarked.

Claudia laughed gently. "Oh come now, Jennifer Lewis. You're not going to let yourself be scared of shadows are you?"

Jenny laughed too. "Not scared exactly, a little intimidated, perhaps."

"You say that only Helen is left who remembers me. What do you even care what *she* thinks?"

Jenny shook her head. "You're right. I don't."

"So go, with my blessing." Claudia kissed Jenny and then gave her a little shove, sending her stumbling towards the anomaly.

Jenny looked back once and then stepped through, to emerge blinking into the light.

36.6.88 Challenge 163: Lies

Captain Ryan gave his life in Afghanistan, serving his country, fighting to protect the way of life and ideals that we all hold dear.

Mercifully, his death was swift and painless. He was protecting a civilian group, attacked in a roadside ambush. Captain Ryn received a bullet through the head. It is doubtful he even realised what was happening.

A full investigation has been conducted into the circumstances. It is the army's belief that all those involved, both military and civilian, acted with the utmost professionalism and integrity. No blame can be assigned.

Dulce et decorum est pro Patria mori.

36.6.89 Challenge 164: Bones (3 Drabbles)

The bones stuck out of the dry sand, long picked clean by wind and predators. They formed a ridge on top of the dune; an arched colonade which a traveller walked through, giant ribs curving over their heads and pointing up towards the sky. The skull lay some way distant, tumbled down the sandy slope to lie, facing backwards looking at the great architectural remains of its once vast body. The hollow eyes gazed back, blank and empty, while the sands of time blew and drifted, and ground the vast edifice into tiny grains which were dispersed on the wind.

Helen. Helen found it first and paused to marvel at a sight never seen by human eyes. The first time she passed she gazed upon it with a paleontologist's eye. She measured and theorized and ran her hands over the smooth bone. She sighed when she turned her back and moved on her way.

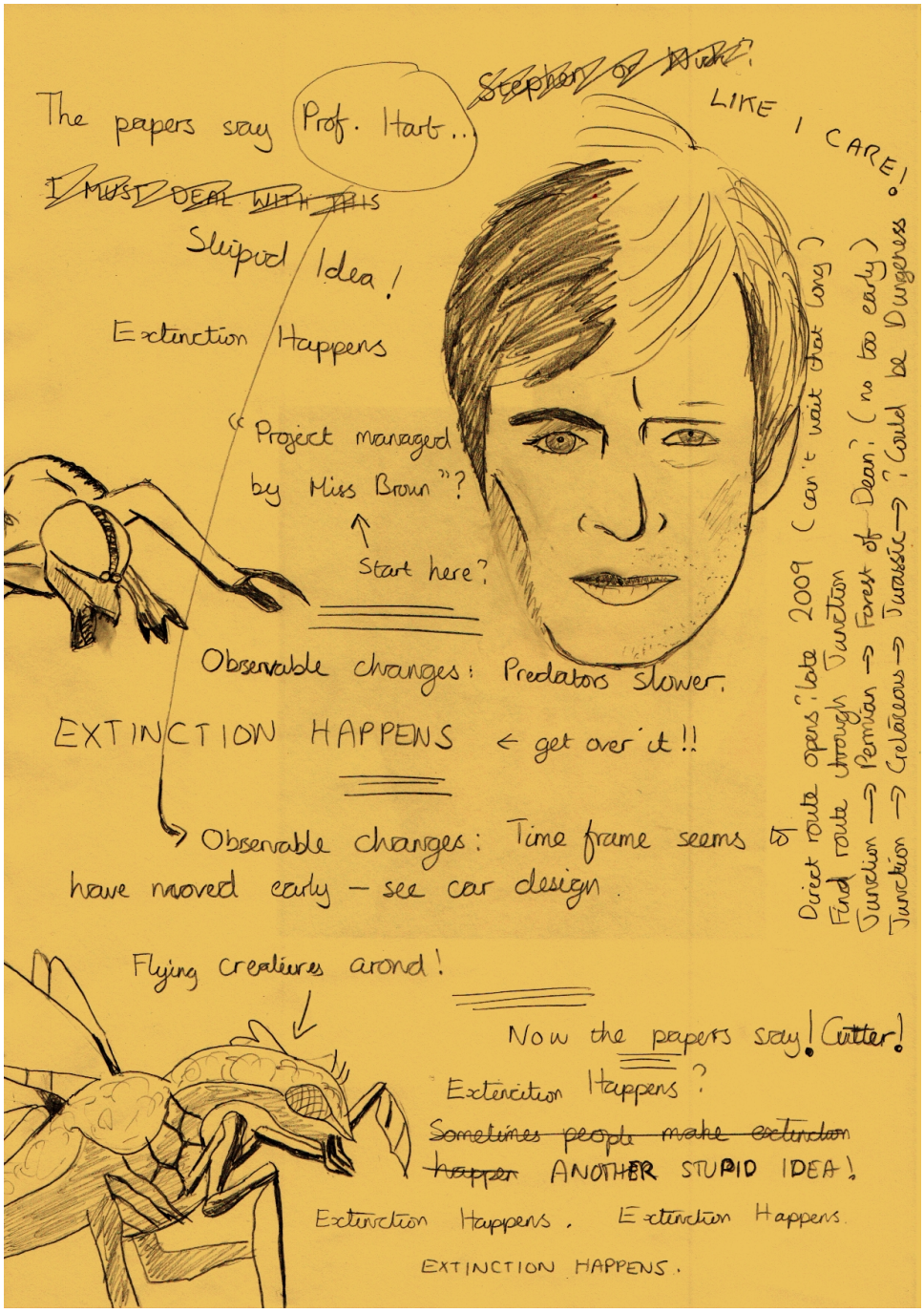
The next time her eyes and thoughts were elsewhere. Living animals were her concern. Survival was her priority. Ambition and desire for intangibles such as freedom and recognition drove her. These were just bones in the sand and had nothing to offer. She did not look back.

Nick. Wandering through time, Nick stumbled upon them. He had a goal and had no time but his eyes darted from side to side as he walked between the ribs.

He returned. Sometimes he brought others. Then the measuring was done, and the skull once more laid bare. Curiosity was in Nick's blood and the skeleton told him all it could. Once done, he moved on to new challenges and asked new questions.

Yet, paleontology was in Nick's bones. Time and again he walked this way and in each passage he looked upon the dead with the eyes of a child.

36.6.90 Challenge 165: If at first you don't Succeed



36.6.91 Challenge 166: Airborne

Telperion Ryan flew over the great plain rejoicing in the feel of the wind. Below him a large herd of Arcosaurs ambled along. He dived down, swooping between their necks and then darting in among the vast plodding legs, enjoying the skill of navigating among the obstacles as the wind urged him on. Then he climbed once more up into the clouds.

"One of these days a predator will stampede them and then you'll only be so much pillow stuffing," remarked Miranda disapprovingly.

Ryan laughed. "I'm better than that!" and even if he wasn't, some things were worth the risk.

36.6.92 Challenge 167: Disappointment

The flat was strangely impersonal. In one cupboard there was a tangle of rock-climbing gear. A bookshelf groaned under the weight of textbooks and a handful of dog-eared thrillers.

The Spice Girls mug was an oddity, but the kitchen cupboards mostly contained IKEA starter kit.

There was nothing in the flat to tell her anything about Stephen that she couldn't read on his one-page CV.

Jenny, boxing up everything for Oxfam, save for the textbooks which she'd send to the university, felt oddly disappointed. She had wanted the flat to reveal the man she had never really known in life.

36.6.93 Challenge 168: Head over Heels

Dara meant compassion and wisdom. The name was bestowed upon her both to reflect who she was and prescribe who she should be. Claudia worked to remain compassionate, kind, wise and insightful. That meant she worked to remain dignified and aloof. She watched Stephen and Ryan dash off to fight dragons or hippogriffs or whatever came through the anomalies and she smiled upon them when they returned.

But when Cutter dragged himself through the mists that separated the worlds, half-eaten apple in hand, she felt like a teenager. She laughed and she smiled and she danced and it was good.

36.6.94 Challenge 169: Fight

Ryan was mildly surprised when Professor Nicholas Cutter suddenly roughened up and took a swing at him. It had been a long day and too much had happened. Ryan needed a beer and some time to think, not a round of fisticuffs and some kind of leadership battle with a civilian. Ryan hoped the blow he landed in return would decisively put an end to matters.

To be honest, Ryan had rather hoped pistol whipping the man would firmly put an end to anything.

It was just his bad luck that it turned out to be the start of something.

36.6.95 Challenge 170: Flowers in the Night (picture prompt)

Oba and Zarina climbed onto the rooftop to watch the show. They owned a tiny cube on top of a Nairobi high-rise. Oba filled the roof with potted plants. The night scents of jasmine and bougainvillea floated in the air.

"They say there will be another water cut soon," said Zarina sadly. Too much of their ration went on the flowers.

"It will all change tonight," whispered Oba. "The project will solve all the shortages."

They lay side by side on the roof top and above them, one after another, the great lights opened in the sky like golden flowers.

36.6.96 Challenge 171: The Road to Hell

Helen's last memory was of a raptor coming out of nowhere. Stupid way to die.

She stood on a narrow road that stretched out in two directions. One way spiralled up a vast mountain. Even from this distance she could hear obsequious groans and the chant of smug and pious prayers.

In the other direction the road was covered in sharp rocks. It plunged down into a dark fissure in the ground, ash blew towards her on the wind.

Helen turned her back on the mountain. She had a feeling she would accomplish more if she headed into the pit.

36.6.97 Challenge 172: Revolution

Spring

Connor brought home half a dozen daffodils 'for the flat'. Rex ate them. Connor didn't ask for anything she wasn't prepared to give. This was good.

Summer

It had been blisteringly hot; dust in her hair and sand in her mouth. Caroline provided a welcome breathing space to get her thoughts in order.

Autumn

Connor didn't follow up on the kiss. He didn't call. Why had she done it? Mates to lovers never worked.

Winter

They sheltered in a cave. Connor put his arm round her. Should she push for more?

Spring

"It's about time I told you something?"

36.6.98 Challenge 173: Obsession

Nick had become fascinated by the patterns. If he stared at the model long enough and in the right way, links and connections would form like a stream of light crossing the space. Thinking in four dimensions, seeing the way things linked together, was the most incredible experience.

"You can't hide in your work for ever, you know." Lester said kindly one evening.

"What do you mean?" Nick shot back agressively.

"You are going to have to face Stephen's death sooner or later."

Nick ignored him until he went away. Lester was wrong. He wasn't in denial. He was obsessed.

36.6.99 Thinking in Four Dimensions

Follow-up to Obsession inspired by Ted Chiang's short story Story of Your Life

Thinking in four dimensions; you started seeing every event as the moments and choices that led up to it. You build models of causality, like the letters of an alphabet. The words of this new language stretched into the future. Nick ceased to be surprised by events. He had the opportunity to weigh the outcomes of every choice. It wasn't that he wanted to die, but he rejected each route that avoided death: Connor dead, body broken; Helen triumphant; Jenny's face burned, her mind gone.

The greatest gift, the language of time, hidden in the artifact, he gave to Connor.

36.6.100 Challenge 174: You want me to put what, where?

The Uintatherium was large and, while not obviously vicious, had the look of a creature who would not worry about who was in her way or under her feet. Connor reminded himself she was a herbivore. Then again that just meant a lack of really sharp teeth but gave no guarantee of a friendly demeanour.

Connor eyed her very warily. "I'm not sure about this."

Abby stood next to the beast with her hands on her hips and smirked.

"Well Connor, you did say 'Are you sure she's pregnant' and I can only think of one way to check for certain."

36.6.101 Challenge 175: Death by Chocolate

Jenny sank into her bath as she enjoyed the feuilltine's contrast of praline and crispy flakes. Her aching muscles relaxed under the combined assault of warm water and the choclatier's skill.

"I take it I'm surplus to requirements," said a slightly woebegone voice.

Becker stood in the doorway, stark naked, everything was standing to attention.

Jenny picked up another chocolate and bit into it slowly. The hazelnut gianduja centre melted together with the sharp and bitter dark chocolate that enrobed it. A small mewling sound escaped her throat and she closed her eyes.

Dejected and defeated, Becker left the room.

36.6.102 Challenge 176: Bad Romance (Warning Rape)

"Miss Maitland, I'd like to see you in my office."

The first time there was confusion and then disbelieving horror, as he locked the door. Moments later she was pressed to the desk, one hand clamped over her mouth and her knickers tangled around her ankles.

She knew what she could and should do. She'd taken the self-defence classes. But every time he spread her legs and took his pleasure, he dismissed her with the same simple threat. "Mention this and you are off the team."

She blamed Stephen and then Connor. If it weren't for them she could leave.

36.6.103 Challenge 177: Hospital

"Thanks for picking me up." Stephen sounded morose.

"It was worth it for the gossip in reception. I gather Allison made quite an exit."

Stephen grimaced at Nick. "Go on, say I told you so."

"I don't recall offering any specific advice on appropriate sexual behaviour while hospitalised."

"I didn't know Allison would be coming back so soon... or that the nurse would mention it."

"Aye well, at least it wasn't Abigail Maitland. I was a little worried."

Stephen found something to stare at outside the car. He made a mental note not to mix women and hospitalisation in future.

36.6.104 Challenge 178: Happily Ever After

Ryan sat on the branch of the great tree and Claudia snuggled up next to him. They looked down on Connor and Abby seated, together, below them.

"At least we're still alive and we have each other," said Connor, shivvering in the cold. "Not like..."

"I know. Stephen, Ryan, Nick, so many losses, even that Claudia. None of them will ever get to be happy now."

Claudia giggled, free and girlish and Ryan laughed with her, pulling her close and rubbing his face in her hair.

Guardian spirits, in the dark nights of the Cretaceous, they watched over their charges.

36.6.105 Challenge 179: The Road Not Taken

They called it the Language of Time. Connor's writing spiralled out, tracing paths he might take through the future.

Sarah's hand squeezed his shoulder. "Bad luck," she whispered.

There were lots of paths. Some led to peace and quiet, waking up each morning with the same head resting in his arms, even if the world outside went to pot.

But Sarah knew the road he would take. The hurried kiss and the promise to return. Beyond that he couldn't see. He wasn't fluent enough in the language. He just hoped that road would eventually wind its way back to Lester.

36.6.106 Challenge 180: Persistence

I weave and a grand design emerges. People meet and part, threads intertwining. People die, their motif abandoned, half complete. Sometimes they change beyond recognition, like birds turning into fish in a tesselated print.

Through the whole tapestry shoots a bright silver thread. It is confident, self-assured, and single-minded in its vision and purpose. It is the thread from which the whole work started and it is the thread with which it will end.

I watch it bring other patterns into the mix, abandoning them when it chooses.

I am Fate, but my weaving dances to the tune Helen plays.

36.6.107 Challenge 181: Goodbye

She *had* been right. Her deductions might have been off. But her deductions *had* been correct insofar as they were the best interpretation of the facts available and those facts had *demanded* action.

So, she had been right. If she told herself that then she could carry on.

The grave was simple and plain. Tasteful. She detected the hand of James Lester.

She was damned if she was going to cry. She was damned if she was going to say sorry.

"Goodbye Nick," she said firmly. Then she walked away because it was the only worthwhile thing she could do.

36.6.108 Challenge 182: Haunted

Ghosts thronged the ARC tonight. Winter's icy grip had yet to freeze imagination into stillness. When James Lester looked out of his high window and watched the lights below, he could feel spirits at his back. The soldiers were a comfort and a protection. They continued to do their duty. Nick and Stephen urged him on, persistent, bickering and restless. Their deaths were testament to mistakes; their ghosts driven by sharp thoughts and abstract ideals. Claudia's presence was faint. She was a whisper in the depths of the night. A warning that the stakes were higher than he could understand.

36.6.109 Challenge 183: Reservations

James Lester had a reserved parking space. When he went out, Lorraine managed the reservations for him. In meetings his seat was always reserved. He had a reserved manner. He surrounded himself with little boxes designed to keep people away and marked with the letters 'reserved'. He told himself he liked it that way. Things might not be simple but at least they were neat, orderly and well contained.

It surprised him therefore how much happier he was, once one Connor Temple had trailed chaos through his neat, orderly, well contained little flat and his neat, orderly, well contained life.

36.6.110 Challenge 184: Special Forces

Lyle was the free spirit who never quite grew-up; always ready with a laugh and joke.

Finn was a good lad; though not the brightest card in the pack.

Kermit was the family man. His life revolved around Kara and the baby.

Ditzy was driven and competent, doing his sensible best for his friends.

Blade was the loner, a bit psychotic maybe, but he was a mate, so what could you do?

An ordinary bunch of blokes out for a night on the town. Ryan looked around his men as they laughed and joked and knew each one was special.

36.6.111 Challenge 185 (Children): For the Children

One morning, Abigail Maitland walked into Lester's office and resigned.

That evening Connor moped and argued around her flat.

"I found something better," she said.

Six months later he managed to catch up with her in the fens. She was knee-deep in mud and seemed to be surrounded by a horde of placard waving swamp people.

"Lunch?" he suggested hopefully.

He took Dame Abigail Maitland to Claridges for her fiftieth birthday.

Halfway through the stuffed mushrooms, a little girl asked for an autograph for 'saving all those birds.'

"Why did you leave?" pressed Connor. "Why did you turn to campagining?"

36.6.112 Challenge 186: Someone to Lean On

Lester told himself, went he sent them away to hide, that he was simply protecting an investment. When Becker turned on Christine, Lester told himself it was simply a shrewd manuever.

Lester watched the team. He saw Connor shoe Sarah away and send her home the day her grandmother died. He saw Danny help a laughing but limping Abby up the steps after a dangerous call. He noticed the way Sarah gave Danny a little thumbs up before he saw Lester to report.

It didn't really matter what Lester told himself, he knew why the team worked together so well.

36.6.113 Challenge 187: Annivesary

On the first anniversary of Helen's disappearance Nick went into work as usual, ignoring the surprised glance and tentative question of his inherited PhD student.

On the fifth anniversary, Stephen turned up on his doorstop with a bottle of Caol Isla and a determined look on his face. "Nicholas Cutter, you are going to damn well mourn, even if I have to let you drink me under the table to do it."

Nick didn't even realise the eighth anniversary had passed until the Connor Temple thrust a newspaper headline under his nose and the walls came crashing down around him.

36.6.114 Challenge 188: Frozen

Steel looked dispassionately at the time break. Contained now, frozen into the stillness that only absolute zero could bring.

"Pity," said Lead, his deep voice booming. "She's a pretty little thing."

Steel hadn't thought of the break as a she and didn't propose starting now. It had one arm upraised, its mouth open, a look of surprise and indignation on its face.

"I never had much patience with humans," Steel said.

He threw one, single, hard punch and watched the frozen figure shatter into pieces. The break was destroyed. His job done.

"So much for Claudia Brown." Sapphire sounded mournful.

36.6.115 Challenge 189: I thought you were Dead

It all started, Helen now knew, at an MoD research facility run by a mysterious Miss Smith. With the technology at her disposal, it was trivial to break in. She moved swiftly and silently, until she stood in Miss Smith's darkened office.

She placed a compact pistol at the back of the woman's head but paused, recognising the face that looked back at her from a mirror hung on the opposite wall.

"Christine Johnson! I thought you were dead!" she couldn't help saying.

"Oh please Helen, such a cliche! Besides I could say the same of you, twice in fact."

36.6.116 Challenge 190: Time Fall (Picture Prompt)

Frozen.

She is an errant cul-de-sac in time. Those that would keep the highways clear froze her and shattered her and, as far as they were concerned, that was the end of the matter.

But there is more to Claudia Brown than a footnote among the might-have-beens of history.

Each fragment of herself becomes a gateway. As she falls, she twists through the curves of time and arrives. Arrives at last and gives her blessing.

"Go with joy."

Silently she falls as white flakes around Nicholas Cutter and Jennifer Lewis who hold hands and gaze, laughing, into the night sky.

36.6.117 Challenge 191: Honey, I'm Home

"Honey, I'm home!"

Three simple words spoken in a tone of sarcasm intended more to annoy than to please. After six months of silence and uncertainty, they lifted Lester's heart.

A bag dropped, thumping heavily against a wall. Boots stamped and then clattered as their owner tossed them onto the laminated flooring.

Lester was in the hallway immediately.

"Eager!" grinned Lyle. He looked tired.

"Just protecting the paintwork." Lester pulled him close.

"Bloody paintwork," muttered Lyle, his head dropping to Lester's shoulder. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"The feeling's mutual." Lester smiled and held Lyle tight.

36.6.118 Challenge 192: Flesh and Blood

The CMU archeology department had boasted an expert on facial reconstruction. Nick had written the discipline off as showmanship with a touch of the charlatan about it. Even so he had, once or twice, watched in fascination as the man layered clay muscle and skin on top of a skull until a dead face emerged to stare sorrowfully into his eyes.

It was with similar fascination, laced with horror that he watched the process in reverse, as the future predators peeled away Stephen's skin, and then muscles, layer by layer until the floor was strewn with flesh, blood and bone.

36.6.119 Challenge 193: Stargazing

"Can we find Orion?"

"Wha?"

"It's a constellation. It was in my magazine."

"Oh Aye! Weel! Did the fancy magazine say how to find yon?"

"No, but you can find it Dad!"

"I find your faith in ma abilities touching. I ken that there's the North star."

"I'm going to be an astronomer when I grow up. The magazine says how to do it."

"I thought you were going to be a dinosaur hunter?"

"That was *ages* ago. I was little and didn't know dinosaurs are extinct."

"Ach well, Nicholas. I dinna doubt you'll be whatever you want to be."

36.6.120 Challenge 194: Naked

The fingers that drifted across the skin on his chest were worn. Toughened from clinging to rock, scrapping, and holding guns in harsh sun and blowing sand. Lester could feel each touch, followed by soft lips and the ghosting of breath.

Jon looked up. A lop-sided grin betrayed an imminent sarcastic remark.

Lester was amazed. The afternoon sun fell across Jon's features. Gold flamed in his brown hair. Contrasts of light and shadow revealed the muscles that held him poised above Lester.

"I love you," Lester whispered and Jon's quip died unuttered.

James Lester lay revealed; naked body and soul.

36.6.121 Challenge 195: James Lester

He had been here too long. He was letting the facade slip. That frightened him. The subtle, beguiling, intoxicating sense that maybe people liked him, that maybe, just maybe, people appreciated him for what he had done was terribly, terribly dangerous.

If upfront, straightforward, people like Abby could tell he cared just a little then the dangerous sharks could tell that he cared a great deal. He had traded gentle glances and kind words for the security of good, hard-working people.

He must leave, but not yet. A crisis loomed. He told himself, again and again, he would leave afterwards.

36.6.122 Challenge 196: Phobia

"Hurrah! You show the Hoi Polloi!" Roger brayed with laughter.

Jenny felt humiliated, stricken and trembling.

"Are you OK?" The man she had decked was from the band. "He said just to tap you on the shoulder."

Jenny stammered and apologised and explained. Michael, he was called Michael, found her somewhere to sit where nothing could creep up on her. When she decided she had to leave. He asked no questions, but found a taxi.

Jenny took one of the band's flyers with her. She had a suspicion, even in her confused state, that she might have found a keeper.

36.6.123 Challenge 198: Cakes and Ale

The Inn at the World's Edge clung desperately to a sheer cliff face and the ocean pounded rocks far below. Helen wasn't sure where or when it was, but she welcomed the sight every time she tumbled out of an anomaly and found it before her.

"Who's the new boy?" she asked Gaius, the barman.

"Name of Patrick Quinn. You interested?"

Helen liked what she saw. There was potential there. Then he looked up at her with a predator's gaze.

She shivvered and turned back to Gaius. "No, he'll be dead weight."

He shrugged. "Just cake and ale tonight then?"

36.6.124 Challenge 199: Anomaly

Such a gentle word that tripped off the tongue without harsh gutterals, or sharp consonants.

Helen rolled it around in her mouth. She'd met travellers from a dozen eras and they all used different terms: portal; gateway; faery lights; a dozen names that spoke of adventure and mystery and possibility. But Nick's chosen name was 'anomaly': something out of place.

Out of place like an unwifely wife who didn't do the 'plus one' thing, who didn't bother trying to entertain your friends, and who didn't put her career second. And people wondered why she'd felt like marriage was suffocating her.

36.6.125 Challenge 201 (Sleep): Macbeth hath Murdered Sleep

HELEN

The doom of man beats ever in my brain
Shattered cars, fell beasts, the swarms that fill the skies.
I thought I knew, I thought I was, I thought.
No matter. All is undone. Dead, he is
And at my hand. I'll sleep no more. I'll be
No more. Yet all the people will sleep sound
Oh! Mother Earth, this stain from thee I cleanse.
No more will smoke thy skies with darkness fill.
No more will man thy natural wealth remove.
No child will weep. No child will laugh. No Stephen.
No Nick...

Exit, pursued by a raptor

36.6.126 Loyalty

Matt had developed a morning ritual. He'd stare at himself in the mirror and think of his father. Then he'd deliberately think of the people he worked with: Jess, Connor, Abby, Becker, even Lester. Mentally he ticked each one off and reminded himself that his loyalty was not to them.

He didn't even think about Emily.

It was far harder to be loyal to an abstract, to the dim hope of a better future, than it was to be loyal to real, breathing, individual human beings. Matt closed his eyes and told himself it was far harder, but far better.

36.6.127 Rescue

The sound of gunfire was echoing down the corridor. Abby struggled with the heavy helmet of her disguise. It was made for one of Burton's guards and they were wall big burly men and it kept slipping down over her eyes. She checked the list of cells, realised where she was, and shot out the lock.

The door swung open. Connor lifted his head from a make-shift bunk and blinked blearily at her.

"Wha?" he began.

She couldn't help it and pulled off her helmet so he could see who it was. "I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you."

36.6.128 Confession

"For serious," asked Lyle. "Why do you stick with the ARC? It can't be doing your previously stellar career any good."

"Would you believe me if I said I felt a sense of loyalty?"

Lyle took a thoughtful swig of his pint. "No."

"I stick around for shit and giggles?"

"I might consider that."

"The anomalies are the single biggest, most influential event since the atomic bomb. My stellar career may be suffering a short-term set back. History will see things differently."

"Now that has the ring of truth."

"Besides, even Temple has a certain endearing quality."

Lyle just laughed.

36.6.129 Once More Unto the Breach

His final, rousing speech had failed. The soldiers had abandoned the breach.

The entire disastrous campaign had lurched to a muddy and disease-ridden halt. They had been here a month. Again and again the attackers were repelled from the accursed town's walls and the strange light that hung in the gap. The tired soldiers struggled back to the King full of tales of dragons and monsters.

And then the light failed. When the Governor appeared to parley, Harry thought to himself that if he couldn't inspire his troops with words, maybe he could use them to terrify his enemies instead.

36.6.130 Matt Anderson

Emily inhabited the 21st century like a new and uncomfortable outfit. Matt observed the way her nose wrinkled at the ever-present smell of disinfectant and the way her hand lingered uncertainly on strange highly manufactured surfaces.

The century didn't fit either of them and it fascinated him the ways they were the same and the ways they were different.

Emily walked with the same confidence that the natives had; confidence that the world was, fundamentally a safe place.

Sometimes he loved her for the ways they were the same and sometimes he hated her for the ways they were different.

36.6.131 Cold Blood

Someone had to be to blame for her ridiculous predicament and that someone was going to suffer.

Her tail twitched angrily. It was probably Nick. He'd turned her into a reptile out of petty spite, as if that could quench the fiery passion in her blood.

"Good boy!"

The lad would be next 'Good *boy*' indeed.

Then her eyes narrowed as a familiar figure appeared. What was Abigail Maitland doing here?

"I see you like dinosaurs."

"Yeah! They're awesome."

Helen snorted in irritation, it came out as a chitter, which drew their attention.

"His name's Rex."

Oh for fuck's sake!

36.6.132 Getting Married

"Don't they realise this is just a convenience?" Christine hissed angrily at him, as her parents fluttered excitedly around the wedding guests.

"Did you tell them otherwise?"

She humphed, and posed for photographs, and even forgot herself enough to throw the bouquet before rushing off to a meeting.

"I got your secretary to clear some space for a honeymoon," he mentioned casually, as she scrambled into her car.

She rolled her eyes but came on the honeymoon anyway.

When the short sympathetic note arrived from the ministry, he packed the photographs away carefully and wondered if anyone else would mourn.

36.7 Written for Prompts

36.7.1 Power Corrupts (Lester/Leek – "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely" – for curia_regis)

"Leek! What a surprise. I was rather under the impression you were dead."

"History changes." Leek shrugged.

"What do you want?"

"I bring you this."

Leek opened his hands to display a small crystal. Shards of light flickered in and out of it.

"What is is?" Lester was fascinated in spite of himself.

"It controls the anomalies. It let's you see how a tweak here or a prod there can change anything or everything. I searched all through time so I could bring it to you."

"Give it to me." Lester's voice was thick with lust.

"Say please, Sir James."

36.7.2 And in the Darkness Bind Them (Connor – fredbassett)

Darkness.

"So are you going to help me now?"

"No."

Darkness.

"Come on, Connor. I'm hardly Mephistopheles. Where's your sense of scientific curiousity?"

"Where's Cutter?"

Darkness. Trying to win me over with classical allusions. Melkor would have been a better metaphor - destroying the music through pride. Mundanes!

"Look Connor. I don't know how to control the changes and they're getting worse. I need your help."

"Go to hell, Helen!" (or Angband).

Darkness.

"Connor. London's gone."

Light. Orodruin erupts in the distance, somewhere in the region of Hyde Park if my geography serves.

"Well, Helen. Let's get started shall we."

36.7.3 As Time Goes By (Nick/Jenny – for yorick28)

Suddenly Nick stepped forward and kissed her. "Don't Go."

Jenny sighed. "Inside of us, we both know you belong with Claudia. If you stop me putting things right, you'll regret it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life."

"The physicists might be wrong. You don't have to do this."

"We both have a job to do. Where I'm going, you can't follow. What I've got to do, you can't be any part of."

Nick's fingers brushed across her lips. "Here's looking at you kid."

Then Jenny turned and walked into the anomaly.

36.7.4 A Walk in the Woods (Abby being fabulous – for alyse)

"Stay very still."

"What!"

"and quiet."

The smallest, blondest slip of a girl stepped out of the undergrowth holding a dart gun. She reached out one hand.

"It tracks movement and loud noises," she said quietly.

The soft touch reassured me. Slowly, she raised the pistol. The creature roared as the dart hit. I tensed to run but the pressure on my arm increased. Her composure held me.

"What now?" I hissed.

"We wait," she whispered.

Five minutes later the thing was asleep on the path. My saviour graced me with the brightest, most beautiful smile.

"Well done," she said.

36.7.5 Bored (Lester/Lyle, – for fredbasset)

"I'm bored."

Lyle was naked and nothing if not decorative. The whitening scar, where a raptor had slashed him open, traced its way across his skin. Lester had the

temptation to run a finger down it, if only to remind himself that Lyle survived. Lyle would be there to hold him when he cried out in the depths of the night.

His eyes flickered to the television. He had really wanted to watch that documentary. However, there was always the record button and, as another lover had once said to him. When you're bored of sex, you're bored of life.

36.7.6 I Don't Wanna know about Evil, Abby/Claudia, – for lukadreaming

Sometimes, in the first confusion of waking, Abby had the faintest recollection of an arm draped across her waist. She had the memory of the sensation of breasts pressed against her back. She sometimes thought she could see a drift of auburn hair across her shoulders and onto the pillow which glimmered golden brown in the morning sunlight.

So it was that, when sick to the heart of Leek's treachery and the death and the destruction, it seemed completely natural to her to seek solace in Jenny's arms. She wept uncontrollably while a soft voice murmured

"Hush, my love, hush."

I'm Waiting for the Cities to Crumble

Abby trudged up the hillside, Claudia at her heels.

"Are you sure we're headed in the right direction?" asked Claudia.

Abby looked at the compass in her hands. "Helen said due east."

"I wish I trusted Helen more."

"So do I."

They crested the brow of the hill. Abby felt Claudia's hand clasp her own. Vegetation grew over the ruined city below them, adding a green haze to the buildings. Abby could see the outline of a dome and spires.

"I studied at Oxford," whispered Claudia.

I'm waiting for the cities to crumble. sang a half-remembered lyric in Abby's head.

36.7.7 Julius Caesar Drunk of his Arse in a Pub – for rodlox

"Someone's having a good time," Lacey commented.

There was a lone pub on the derelict estate. A loud male voice could be heard singing.

"Bibit ille, bibit illa,
Bibit serves cum ancilla,"

"That's Latin," said Tremayne, surprised.

"How I miss the benefits of a classical education."

The two women exchanged glances and then hurriedly entered the pub.

"You didn't think to contact someone?" demanded Tremayne gesturing at the large be-toga-ed man seated at the bar, laurel-wreath slightly askew.

The landlord shrugged. "These are solid gold," he brandished an aureus, "and he seems harmless enough. Catch me turning down good custom."

Chapter 37

Interlude in Cafe-Space

A Doctor Who/Sapphire and Steel Flashfic

It was a cafe of some kind. Romana categorised it as 20th century earth-type and wondered if the universes conspired with the Doctor's interest in the planet. It was shrouded in dust, with a faint musty smell. Long-deserted, Romana thought.

Two figures sat at one of the tables, motionless and still. At first Romana thought they were life-size dolls. The woman's right hand reached across the table and was entwined in the man's left. She bent close to examine them and realised the forms were biological. Although neither moved, nor breathed, the bodies were suffering no decay. They were held in some kind of stasis. Romana closed her eyes and sniffed, trying to feel the stasis field in the atmosphere but she could not. Whatever held them this way it wasn't a technology she was familiar with. Possibly they held themselves in stasis. It was theoretically possible.

She was disturbed by the sound of motors behind her. It seemed that K9 had followed her through the arch and into this universe.

"This is not N-space, mistress," intoned K9.

Romana was surprised. The room certainly looked like Earth, an N-space planet. However she had to admit that her arch was still only a prototype. There had been no guarantee it would lock onto the right universe from it's position in the Tharil's great hall.

"It's not E-space though. If it's not E-space or N-space where is it?" she asked.

"Insufficient data, mistress."

She needed to gather data and fast. The energy requirements on the arch meant it wouldn't hold for long and she would need more information for her next attempt. She stood up and looked around her, scanning the cafe for clues. Then she saw the stars out of the window. She crossed the room and gazed out into the void

beyond.

"I'm in an Earth cafe," she mused. "A small, cheap Earth cafe." She rapped a Formica table top to make her point. "In the middle of the vortex of some unknown universe. A large universe by the look of things."

"Negative mistress. Space is compacted. This universe is small."

"Small?"

"Like the Gateway, mistress."

Romana formed her mouth into a silent 'Oh'. A pocket universe with two silent inhabitants. Space beyond the room folded and compacted upon itself to give an illusion of distance that wasn't there. She turned to examine the figures once more, bending down to stare into the woman's eyes. Her reasoning told her this universe was a prison.

"I think they've put themselves into this state."

"That is possible, mistress. Though unlikely."

"Well once you've eliminated the impossible..." she grinned to herself. "I wonder how I can wake them up."

"Is that wise, mistress?"

"Almost certainly not." She grinned again. She was feeling Doctorish today and that made her light-hearted. "I like to give people the benefit of the doubt and I dislike prisons."

"Question. How will you wake them?"

"In Earth fairy stories it's traditional to wake someone with a kiss."

"Mistress?"

Romana glanced between the two figures, the intertwined fingers and the carefully neutral expressions on their faces. Then she pressed one finger of each hand to their lips, and crossed her hands over, transferring the kisses. She felt the ghosts of breath.

"Touching us would have been sufficient, you know." The man said drily.

"Hush Steel," said the woman with a smile. Romana watched as she lifted her own fingers to her lips as if to relive the faint memory of the kiss.

Romana straightened up and gestured to the arch. "I have a universe at my disposal. Medium-sized and not the one this cafe came from but better than here, I should think."

Steel frowned at the arch. "That rip in time could collapse at any instant."

"Negative," interrupted K9, "controlled arch collapse will occur in three minutes, fifty four seconds."

Romana suspected her smile was a little smug. "It appears we don't have much time. Are you two coming or not?"

Chapter 38

Flowers of Probability

A Primeval Short Story

One of the things Lester liked about the summer was being woken up by the sun coming in through the window, rather than by the insistent sound of the alarm. He'd developed a habit of sleeping with the curtains open for precisely this reason. His ex-wife had objected strongly but now he slept on his own, he was free to indulge. The light woke him up gently and he was at liberty to enjoy the calm of his bedroom, the pale sheets and the dappled sunlight before the alarm sounded and he had to face the day.

His still moment of reflection was rudely broken by the insistent beeping sound of a blackberry, a startled groan, the scrabbling sound of 'stuff' being groped through, the clatter as said stuff fell to the floor, more scrabbling sounds, presumably on the floor this time, then a thump and a curse as someone fell out of bed.

Lester closed his eyes and counted quietly to ten. Then he got up and pulled on a dressing gown and slippers. Thus armoured, he headed out to investigate the chaos in the lounge.

Connor was sitting on the floor, bed covers tangled about his legs and his hair standing out at several angles. He was peering at the readout on the front of the Blackberry. Lester couldn't think why, only one kind of message came in on the device.

"Where's the anomaly this time?" he asked.

"Hampshire." Connor struggled to his feet. "Right! Clothes!" He stared around himself wildly.

Lester observed the small heap of chaos which was Connor's corner of the living room. There was a trail of shredded cloth leading from there, toward the

kitchen.

"Sid? Nancy? Utility Room?" he asked. For some reason the diictodon's seemed to like it in there.

Connor's eyes widened as he, too, saw the trail. "Yeah, looks like it. Sorry!"

"I should be grateful that, on this occasion, it's your shirt and not mine. You had better go and retrieve it though."

"Yeah! Right!" Connor headed out of the room.

Really the boy was a walking disaster area. Lester surveyed the living room and wondered, not for the first time, why he'd offered the lad a place on his sofa, but he knew the answer. It would have taken a heart far stonier than his own to leave Connor sleeping at the ARC. Especially given Connor's, apparently unconscious, lost puppy air.

Lester also wondered, also not for the first time, about the state of Miss Maitland's heart if she could so easily leave Connor homeless, but he dismissed the thought. Abby's reasons were not his business and it was certainly unprofessional to be angry at her on Connor's behalf.

Besides, he thought as he headed to the kitchen to make himself some Oolong, the start of his morning ritual, Connor was simply an employee, and he had acted simply out of concern for staff morale and regularising the health and safety issues. Wider emotional issues didn't come into it.

"Dear boy, who do you think you're fooling?" he muttered quietly to himself.

Connor met him in the hallway, trailing a mangled shirt and two small dinosaurs. "I'm really sorry Lester. I think they've also had some of the spare sheets. I promise I'll find a new flat soon. Straight away even. I'm going to the letting agents this afternoon, honest!"

It would seem he was fooling Connor just fine.

The anomaly had opened dead in the centre of a stone circle, known locally as Maiden's Ring, a ragged oval of misshapen rocks.

"Not really in the same class as Stonehenge," Connor muttered, peering through the window of the 4x4. There was a light mist in the air, almost but not quite turning into drizzle. The world outside the car looked cold and potentially wet.

"Well, there's a reason Stonehenge is a World Heritage site," countered Sarah. "This part of the country is littered with these kinds of ancient monuments. You can't expect them all to be hugely impressive."

Quinn laughed. “Stop admiring the scenery; let’s get on to the anomaly. Bag it and Tag it, then we can all go home for tea.”

They scrambled out of the 4x4. The army in the Land Rover behind them tumbled out as well, focusing their guns on the anomaly while Connor and Sarah set up the sealing equipment.

“Any tracks?” Connor heard Quinn ask Abby.

“I’m looking.”

Connor watched out of the corner of his eye as Abby walked slowly around the anomaly. She wasn’t exactly graceful. Graceful wasn’t really Abby. But she had that look of an animal, entirely focused on what it was doing, no unnecessary movements. He loved it when Abby was like this, as if she was in her natural element, a wild animal observed from a distance.

He wondered when he’d started thinking of Abby as a wild animal, something you could never quite tame and shouldn’t ever try to hold onto for too long.

“Tracks!” called Abby. “Large ones!” She pointed off to the right and checked her gun.

Connor watched Quinn and Becker glance at each other. “I’ll come with you,” said Quinn.

“I’ll come too,” said Becker. “Lieutenant Richards, you’re in charge here.”

“Can I come?” Connor couldn’t help calling across to the small party.

“Need you to seal the anomaly,” said Becker. “Don’t worry we’ll keep her safe.”

“I can look after myself thank you!” Abby’s voice faded as the three of them vanished into the mist.

“She’s not worth it you know,” said Sarah gently.

“Well...” Connor paused to organise his thoughts because what he said now was definitely going to be important and he was trying to concentrate on the sealing device at the same time.

“Well,” he said again. “Firstly, she’s a mate and a good friend and I don’t need more excuse than that to want to look out for her. Secondly, who says that had anything to do with Abby rather than just being fed up with being the incompetent geek that always gets left behind.”

“Which of those do you want me to contradict first?” asked Sarah gently.

Connor shrugged and hit a button on the device, sealing off the anomaly.

“Don’t bother, it doesn’t matter.” And it didn’t really, not any more.

“Let’s have a look then,” said Sarah asd she marched towards the anomaly.

“Probably not much to see,” said Connor trailing after her.

“You never know and it beats hanging around with you moping.”

"I wasn't moping." Connor shrugged his shoulders and walked after her and he hadn't been, not really. Wanting to protect Abby, or be seen as a competent was just a kind of habit, because she *could* look after herself better than he could and nothing he did or didn't do would make any difference to how she felt about him and, he realised in sudden surprise, he was glad of that. The kiss had been awkward and odd, as if in the moment he had got what he'd really, really wanted all along, he had suddenly realised it was not what he had wanted after all. He knew he'd been a little odd with Abby ever since, and he wondered if that was why she was being a little odd with him, and why she hadn't asked him back to the flat.

The anomaly hung over a rough stone lying flat in the centre of the circle. Deep grooves were sunk into the stone. Sarah squinted thoughtfully at it.

"Some kind of central altar, I suppose..." she said.

Connor shivered. "You mean like for sacrifices and stuff."

"Who knows? Julius Caesar would have you believe all sorts, but he was on the other side."

Connor glanced down at the stone again and then froze. "It's writing."

"What?"

"It's writing. Look, it's the same as the lettering on the inner rim of the artefact. Look!"

Sarah looked down at the deep gouges in the rock at their feet. "It can't be."

"It is! You know it is!" Connor scrabbled in his pockets in order to fish out his mobile phone.

"That's impossible!"

"Why? I mean why is it impossible? We know time travel works, we just don't know how. Whoever made the artefact, they left these markings here for us to find."

Connor snapped a quick picture on his phone.

"Connor! Connor! Unseal the anomaly!" It was Abby's voice.

"What?" He looked up.

Abby was running towards him, Becker and Quinn at her heels.

"Unseal the anomaly, Connor!" she shouted.

Connor looked beyond the people to see a large creature bounding across the fields. It looked a bit like a giant cat. Well, it looked superficially cat-like but somehow Connor wasn't quite convinced. He realised Sarah was tugging at his sleeve and then she headed back for the sealing device. Connor followed her.

There was a sound of shooting and Abby's angry voice. "No! Don't shoot at it."

"Careful of the civilians!" Becker's tone was calmer.

Connor reached the device and hit the switch, allowing the anomaly to surge outwards once more. Abby dodged around it. The creature leapt for her and vanished through the anomaly. As it passed, Connor glimpsed a pouch under its belly. Of course! It must have been one of the early marsupials, probably a Thlacosmilus, they had been a bit cat-like.

"Oh boy! Pliocene marsupial!" he enthused.

Quietly Sarah reached across and hit the control to seal the anomaly again.

From his vantage point on the balcony of the ARC's atrium Lester could see Connor and Sarah hunched up over the artefact. He envied them both their fixity of purpose and their ability to concentrate on one thing. Connor was cross-checking something on the device against what looked like his mobile phone, talking fast and confidently. Lester wondered if he was even aware of the change that came over him when he was absorbed with something and forgot about being anxious and socially awkward. One day, Connor would come out of his shell and be a force to be reckoned with. Lester hoped he would be there to see it.

Lester glanced at the clock. It was getting late. He should probably round Connor up and take him home.

Connor was having another peek at the comparative images when a cup of coffee suddenly, magically appeared at his elbow. He looked up to see Lester standing next to him, actually inside the hazard zone tapes he'd spread around Connor's area of his flat.

"I assume that is work?" Lester asked.

Connor tried and failed to detect sarcasm in his tone.

"Umm... yes! Thanks!" He reached for the coffee.

"Why don't you use the desk? You looked cramped there."

"Well..." Connor trailed off and waved a hand in the general direction of Lester's desk and the prominent 'Do not Touch' sign.

"Ah yes!" Lester smiled thinly and walked over, briskly removing the post-it. "I don't want you to get backache in the cause of duty."

"Thanks, I think." Connor smiled nervously and picked up his laptop, carrying it over. Then he went back to fetch the coffee mug and several linguistics textbooks which he started to place on Lester's desk.

Lester coughed pointedly.

"What?"

Connor looked at the desk. It was already looking crowded and messy.

Lester sighed. He carefully removed a photo, a diary and a clock from the right side of the desk and placed them on the left. Then he moved Connor's books from the left side and placed them on the right. Then he stuck the post-it 'Do not Touch' back on the left of the desk.

"Right, got you," said Connor.

But Lester seemed to have paused, one of the text books in his hand.

"Linguistics?" he asked.

"Errr... yeah! We found this script on a rock at the anomaly site and it matches the script on the artefact."

"I didn't know there was any script on the artefact."

"Not on the outside, but there's some markings on the inner rim. Here, look!"

Connor pulled up the sequence of images on the computer.

Lester stared at the strange squiggles, each a roughly circular shape, reminiscent of flowers. "Do you know what they are?"

"No idea, but several are identical to the markings on the stone."

Connor pulled up another image. There seemed to be five squiggles in a group of three and a group of two.

"So presumably the squiggles on the artefact are a hallmark or a serial number or something," hazarded Lester.

Connor was surprised. He'd never thought of Lester as particularly interested in the scientific side of things, beyond stuff that assisted the project clearly and directly. He'd not even made much of the markings in his report on the anomaly earlier that day. It could too easily be a wild goose chase.

Lester leaned forward to peer more closely at the images and his brow furrowed, but Connor realised it was genuine interest. Abby hadn't ever been that interested in the technical side of the anomaly work. Connor had tried explaining his theories to her once or twice, but her eyes had always glassed over. Lester always maintained an air of boredom and Connor had never really bothered to look beyond that. But, now Connor thought about it, Lester always asked relevant questions afterwards. He obviously paid attention and thought about what Connor said. That was unusual. Nick had paid attention but he'd never really followed the physics stuff, and now Connor was thinking about Lester and physics, hadn't he

heard someone say Lester had a physics background? He ought to check that up. Lester didn't have a web page, but it must be possible to find his CV somehow.

Connor was suddenly and uncomfortably aware of how close Lester was standing and the way his arm, resting on the back of the chair, was lightly in touch with Connor's back. This could get embarrassing. Connor was definitely not going to get the hots for two flat-mates in a row, especially when one of them was Lester.

"Connor!"

He realised Lester was talking to him.

"Sorry, I got sidetracked!"

"I noticed. I was asking if they were a serial number."

"Well, Sarah thinks they were added later. Scratched onto the device after it was made. Something to do with wear patterns and craftsmanship."

"So not a serial number or hallmark then? What if it's just numbers, from one to ten? There are ten of them."

"If they were digits it might be zero to nine, but why would anyone just write a sequence of digits on the artefact?"

"Humour me."

"Well, if they are digits then the stone at the anomaly site says 51 something 1 something, or possibly 48 something 8 something. Oh! It was 51 north and 1 west, those were the grid coordinates of the site. So that squiggle could be N and that one could be W, but..." Connor tailed away, none of it made sense.

"What's wrong?" asked Lester.

"Why would anyone write a grid reference on a stone or just the digits on the artefact? I mean what purpose would it serve?"

"Well I hate to buy into your Scooby Doo-style conspiracies but maybe someone is deliberately leaving clues for you."

That was a pop culture reference. How did Lester know about Scooby Doo? "Are you sure you're not ill?" Connor couldn't help grinning at Lester a little. "You're starting to sound like me."

"We've obviously been living together too long. Give me another week and I shall be leaving my underwear out to dry in the bathroom."

"Oh sorry! I forgot about them!"

"I realised," Lester smiled gently. "Well, this was all very informative and more than a little disturbing. I suppose I had better leave instructions for people to look out for more of this script at anomaly sites."

"Yeah... probably."

"Connor! Come and look at this!"

Connor lifted his head at the sound of Abby's voice. Water was soaking into his tee-shirt as he lay on the ground. He glanced upwards, anxiously looking for the Quetzalcoatlus, and then across at Abby who was hiding behind one of the gravestones.

"Must I?" he mouthed.

Abby scowled in irritation and gestured impatiently to him to cross over to her.

Connor glanced up and around again, but he couldn't see the Quetzalcoatlus anywhere. Presumably it was off chasing Becker who had disappeared over the nearby hill making a lot of noise in order to 'distract it'. Connor risked climbing to his feet and running towards Abby.

"Connor! Down!" shouted Quinn's irritated voice.

Connor threw himself flat once more as he reached Abby and he felt her arm on top of him as a gust of wind flew over them.

"Where did it come from?" he whispered, watching the creature speeding away into the distance to the accompanying sound of the soldiers' gunfire.

"It must hover at a high altitude," said Abby. "I expect your movement attracted it. Don't worry you're almost certainly too large to be a prey animal. I think it's just trying to scare you off."

"I think it's succeeding."

Abby patted him on the head. "Anyway, it's gone now."

"Right, OK! So what did you call me over for?" Connor couldn't help snapping a little. Abby had him confused enough already without trying to get him eaten by a Quetzalcoatlus and then patronising him. At least you always knew where you stood with Lester, even if that was a vast inconvenience to his orderly life-style.

Silently, Abby pointed to the back of the gravestone and Connor's eyes widened.

"So," said Abby smugly. "Was I right to call you?"

"Oh!" Connor stared raptly at the strange script covering the stone.

"It's a Rosetta stone," said Connor.

He was sort of surprised to find himself curled up on a sofa in Lester's flat, drinking cocoa late at night. Actually, he was extremely surprised. He kept

expecting Lester to bark at him about feet on the cushions or something. Self-consciously, he quickly unwound his feet and put them on the floor. He saw Lester smile but the man didn't comment.

"You may be surprised to learn that I've heard of the Rosetta stone. I thought that was a translation between two languages."

"It was. OK Rosetta stone is probably a bit grandiose," Connor conceded.

Lester's eyebrows twitched. "Are you suggesting you might be getting carried away with a theory?"

Connor felt himself flush red. "Well... err... I mean."

Lester patted his arm. "Do go on, don't mind me teasing a little. I'm honestly interested."

Connor gulped and tried not to think too hard about the pat. "The gravestone is basically the key to the cypher. I mean I knew it was a cypher, so I started doing letter counts and stuff and then I realised it was just reproducing the writing on the other side of the gravestone."

"That's why you grabbed a contingent of soldiers and dashed back to photograph the graveyard."

"Oh, you heard about that." Connor felt himself blushing again.

"You possibly could have waited until the Queztalcoathus had been captured and returned to its own time, but no harm done."

Connor frowned at Lester. "Are you all right, I mean you aren't normally this...?" Connor searched for a word and waved his hands to demonstrate thought.

"If you say 'nice', Connor I will make you clean the oven. I still don't know how you managed to coat the interior in burnt pizza."

Connor frantically groped around in his vocabulary. "You aren't normally this relaxed?" he offered.

"I can't be a hatchet man the whole time. Since you're here, I'm just having to trust you won't let the secret out."

"Oh! Oh!" Connor thought about that.

"Now I shall go to bed and get some beauty sleep. Good work on that cypher. I dread to think why someone is trying to contact us like this, but at least we will know what they're saying when they do."

Connor watched Lester leave the room. He cast around in his mind for anything else he might be able to do with the cypher and then got side-tracked into wondering why he wanted to earn Lester's further approval all of a sudden.

"Stop over-thinking and go to bed, Connor!" came a voice from Lester's room.

Connor glanced up and caught Lester's eye in the hallway mirror. Abby had never been able to tell, not really, when he was thinking himself into a corner.

"Any more messages?" asked Becker. They were all sitting at the foot of a sealed anomaly in the middle of rolling countryside eating sandwiches. They'd arrived at the apparently peaceful anomaly at midday. Sarah and Abby had suddenly decreed it was picnic weather and Private Finn had been despatched to a nearby shop to purchase supplies.

Connor shook his head. "No, maybe that was it. Perhaps they weren't meant for us."

"Must have been meant for us, surely. Who else is there?"

Connor shrugged. OK, so lots of anomalies only opened the once, including the ones where the messages had been, but that just meant they'd only opened the once in the past couple of years. Maybe they were on ten year cycles or fifteen year cycles.

Sarah had taken to making doodles out of the messages, vast spiralling shapes that started in the centre of the page and drifted out, like blossom on the wind. Connor had sat next to her through several briefings and watched as she did them. They looked a little like Nick's model. Connor and Sarah were trying to recreate it, but it was slow work. When Connor went through Nick's notes he found the same spiralling doodles in the margins, but they didn't say anything. If Nick was using the cypher, he wasn't sending messages when he'd made the patterns. It was more as if he was working through possibilities for the models, petals of an idea blown across the margins of the page.

"Aaargh!"

They all looked up to see Quinn backing away hurriedly from the cardboard box that Finn had bought the sandwiches in.

Sarah laughed. "Did Finn buy something healthy, like weight-watchers tomato salad?"

"No, there's a lizard in there. Gave me a shock!"

Abby leaned over the box. "Looks like we have an escapee. Here, girl!" She put in her hands and gently picked out a small lizard, about a hand span in length. It ran from hand to hand, Abby gently holding it.

"Let's open the anomaly up again and send her home," she said.

Connor flicked a switch on the anomaly sealer.

"How do you know it's a she?" asked Connor.

"Educated guess."

Abby stepped through the anomaly. Becker hurriedly picked up his gun and walked after her, a sandwich half-eaten in his mouth.

Moments later the two of them came out again. Becker was carrying a large piece of slate which he dumped in front of Connor. The strange script scrawled across it, written in chalk.

Connor tried to close the door to the flat quietly, he really did, but his rucksack caught on the kitchen door as he did so. He heard it swing, and lunged out to grab it. That was when the heavy front door clanged sonorously into place.

"I suppose I should commend you for working late." Lester appeared from the direction of his bedroom.

Connor rather wished that he had whatever Lester's knack was for looking good in the middle of the night. Lester was wearing a padded silk dressing gown and slippers that were a deep red colour. But his hair was all in place and he still looked trim, dapper and handsome. Connor was uncomfortably aware that he looked like a startled hamster for a good half hour after he woke up. He glanced self-consciously in the hallway mirror. He didn't even rise to startled hamster this late at night. He just looked bleary and unshaven.

"I was trying to be quiet," he explained and gestured a little helplessly at the two doors that had conspired against him.

Lester sighed in an exaggerated fashion but Connor thought he detected the ghost of a smile. "Time for cocoa I think, and you can tell me what the cypher says."

Connor trailed after him into the kitchen. "It says there's going to be a monster anomaly, in about two days, near Bedford. A confluence of several anomalies, in several eras and of particular attraction to predators."

"Have you told Becker?"

"Yes."

"That's as much as you can do for now. We can start putting measures into place in the morning." Lester pushed a mug of cocoa towards him.

"What if it's a hoax?"

"Then I will look foolish for believing you. Do you think it's a hoax?"

Connor shrugged. "I don't know. I don't really understand who is communicating with us, or why they are telling us stuff, or even why they are doing it in a cypher."

Lester sat down opposite Connor across the kitchen counter and tapped his chin. "All good questions. I don't think cyphers and codes are really Helen's style

and she's the only person we know of who's out there through the anomalies."

"No," Connor agreed. "It doesn't seem like her, she'd turn up in person and drop hints, wouldn't she?"

"If past form is anything to go by, yes. I think we should take this warning at face value, if this is a ploy to make us trust someone, then the first piece of information will be good. It's the next message we have to worry about."

Connor felt himself nodding. Lester was probably better at the people side of the problem than he was.

"You look done in," observed Lester. "If the show isn't for two days why don't you take tomorrow off?"

"Need to make sure the sealing device will cope with something that big," Connor explained.

Lester nodded. "I see. Well, get a good night's sleep. I don't want you making mistakes."

He stood up to leave.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Connor blurted out suddenly, as Lester reached the door. "I mean I know it's a pain having me around and I mess stuff up..."

"Maybe I like you¿" Lester flashed him a tired smile. "I admire hard work and you are very good at the technical side of things. If you need a little chaos for that to happen, well, let's say I'm getting used to it."

"Oh!" Connor tried out a small smile back in Lester's direction.

Lester nodded and left. "Don't forget to wash up the mugs before you go to bed though," his voice drifted back down the corridor.

Connor looked down. He'd been doodling on Lester's note pad while they talked. He realised now it was like Sarah and Nick's doodles. Spirals of lettering, like multiple possibilities reaching out from one point in time, Connor thought. Then he frowned and wondered why he would think something like that. He crumpled up the paper and threw it in the bin. He didn't have many possibilities really. He was reduced to squatting in Lester's flat even though Lester didn't seem to mind the fact. But the images danced in his mind as he went to bed making him think what ifs... What if Abby asked him back? What if he applied for a PhD with one of the big American universities? What if he got eaten by a large predator in two days time? He had a vision of a large smilodon bounding towards him across an open field, it's jaws stretched large.

Lester watched as soldiers swarmed all over the small farm in Bedfordshire that had been indicated in the cryptic message. It was called Galleycross farm. Sarah, not very helpfully in Lester's opinion, had informed them that the name was once Gallows' Cross farm, called after the gallows that had hung at the nearby crossroads.

They had evacuated the farmer, after much complaint and a threat that they would impound his herd for foot and mouth. Lester could still feel Becker's angry eyes on the back of his head for that. Becker had family who farmed, but Lester had wanted the man out for the six hours of Connor's window.

It slightly surprised Lester that he was putting so much faith in Connor. But then, unlike Nick, Connor hadn't pressurised him to do anything particular. He'd given him the evidence and left Lester to make the political decisions and, given the evidence, Lester didn't want to risk anything big happening.

Connor had connected long cables up to the farm power supplies. These snaked out across the cobbled yard and into the nearby meadow where the anomaly was due to appear.

"Are you going to need a lot of power?" Lester asked him.

"Not sure to be honest," Connor said. "I've done some modelling and if it really is a big anomaly then yes, the bigger it is the more power we'll need to seal it but, right now, I've no idea how big it will be. The note didn't say. I reckon about twice the usual size, though."

"What makes you say that?" asked Lester.

Connor blinked. "Not sure it just seems like, you know..." He shrugged and then gestured with his arms to indicate an expanse in the centre of the field. "It just seems like it would be about right if it were that big. I can see it in my mind's eye."

Lester looked at the field and couldn't help a shrug.

Connor hadn't expected it to be so large. The huge glowing anomaly seemed to fill half the field. Several guns tumbled into it, the soldiers unprepared for the magnetic pull of so vast a shape. Twice the size had definitely been an underestimate. Spatial reasoning had never been Connor's strong point.

"Car! Connor!"

Connor looked round uncertainly just as Lester barrelled into him, pushing him to the ground. A Land Rover rolled past.

"What?" asked Connor.

"Someone must have left the hand brake off!" shouted Becker. Then he opened fire.

"Ah! Seems like the excitement has started." Lester climbed off Connor, brushing down his suit.

Connor struggled to his feet. His attention was only half on the scene around him, though, the other half was focused on some very mixed emotions about what had just happened. Not to mention the embarrassment of some immediate physiological effects.

"Can we seal it?" Lester waved a hand in front of his eyes. "Connor! Seal it!"

Connor blinked and then grabbed the large handle he'd fixed to the anomaly sealer. He hauled it down hurriedly. The anomaly shrank slightly, more to the size Connor had expected. In fact so much more to the size Connor had expected, that it now almost perfectly matched the picture in his head. A picture of pulsating light and men clustered around it firing as large sinuous creatures bounded through, their eyes glittering and their jaws spread wide.

"Smilodons," murmured Connor in awe.

"Can we seal it?" demanded Lester. "Has something gone wrong?"

"Not exactly, we just need to bring the secondary power unit online. I factored this in."

"Now would be a good time for that secondary unit, I think."

Connor began to sprint to the next power station, aware that Lester was running at his heels.

He fumbled at the controls, scrabbling for the switches.

"Take your time," said Lester. It sounded sarcastic.

Two choices leapt clearly into Connor's mind. He could snap at Lester who would back off and walk away, looking embarrassed, then Connor would be on his own when the smilodon from his dreams bore down on him, or he could let Lester stay.

"Take a deep breath," advised Lester suddenly. "Keep calm, the soldiers have the situation under control."

Connor realised he'd been standing stock still in indecision, his mouth open. More and more animals were pouring out of the anomaly, from several eras it would appear.

"Are you sure it's under control?" he stammered.

Lester's eyebrows shot up for a moment. "Absolutely, special forces will handle it. Take your time."

"Right, calm," Connor muttered to himself and focused on the controls and the monitors. It was tempting just to switch the thing on, but he knew there was a risk of overload which is why he'd set up the monitors in the first place. Gradually, he began to increase the power.

His concentration was shattered by the sound of shots close by. He glanced up to see that Lester had a pistol in one hand. A large smilodon was bearing down on him, it's jaws open wide. This is it, he thought, I'm going to die. Then Lester's gun cracked again and the smilodon crumpled into a heap a couple of yards away.

"Lester?"

"All under control."

Connor looked back to the dials and raised the power a notch. There was a soft whooshing sound. He looked up to see that up the anomaly was sealed. It hung in the sky like a large orange ball.

"Good lad!" said Lester.

Connor glanced around at the chaos on the field. "Sorry it took so long!"

"You did your job. Don't knock yourself."

Connor was sitting next to Lester on the sofa. He'd rather cautiously agreed to watch 'Dial M for Murder' and was surprised by how much he was enjoying it. Out of the corner of his eye he was assessing Lester's DVD collection of classic movies. He really needed to go on Wikipedia and work out where the gaps were. He was sure Lester wasn't being systematic about the collection at all. In fact it looked like it was sorted alphabetically rather than into a proper categorisation.

Lester groaned when there was a knock on the door. "At least it won't be work, they'd page us," he muttered as he left the sofa.

Connor paused the DVD and listened as Lester opened the door. He heard him call 'hello' into the corridor beyond, sounding a little puzzled. Then Lester's footsteps returned.

"This was on the mat." Lester dropped a sheet of paper into Connor's lap. It was covered in the scrawl of the cypher.

"Another clue?" asked Connor.

"I don't know. The envelope was addressed to both of us." Lester turned the

envelope over in his hands. “High quality paper. Someone cares about their stationary. What does the letter say?”

Connor picked it up and began to read.

Lester watched in fascination as Connor read the letter. After about a minute, he suddenly blushed bright red from the exposed neck where his shirt top was unbuttoned, right up to the tips of the ears that Lester could peeping through his hair.

“What does it say?” Lester asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Errr... it’s personal.” Connor stuttered.

Lester looked down at the envelope. “It’s addressed to both of us.”

“Err... yes...”

“So?”

“Well, it says.” Connor took a deep breath and blushed again, refusing to meet Lester’s eye.

“Do go on.”

“It says that you, I mean me. I mean, it says that we, you know.” Connor looked desperately at Lester.

Lester was beginning to have an inkling of what the letter said, but Connor was looking too irresistible not to tease a little further. “You are not being entirely clear, Connor.”

Connor gulped and looked back at the coded letter once more. “Well, it ends...”

“Yes,” prompted Lester.

“It ends by saying ‘stop faffing around and kiss each other.’” It came out in a rush and Connor’s eyes fixed on the letter in his hands.

“That sounds like eminently sensible advice to me.” Lester was a little surprised, it had to be said, to discover Connor reciprocated his feelings, but it wouldn’t do to show it at this point.

“Umm... yes...” Connor looked up anxiously.

Lester leaned forwards.

Lester smiled to himself as he watched the lights go out in the apartment opposite.

"Was the cypher really necessary?" asked Sarah.

He turned to look at her where she stood sweating in her furs. They had come from the Ordovician ice age and needed to return there soon.

"You know it was. Anything else and the wrong people would have got the message. Besides, we needed to be prompted into looking at the symbols and understanding their purpose. Constructing a cypher from them just kick-started that process."

"I remember when I found that description of them in the British library. I was so excited. The flowers of probability, the author called them, letting us map paths to desired outcomes." Sarah sounded wistful, remembering care-free days when consequences weren't so stark.

"How terribly poetical. Unsurprising, I suppose. The premonitions they induce are very vivid."

"But I really meant was it necessary to use a cypher for that final letter?"

"That may have been an indulgence. Connor looked very cute as he read it."

Lester pulled his own coat about him and fished out the anomaly locator. They needed to get going. They had things to do and very little time for indulgences like this.

Chapter 39

Not a Good Day to Die

"Are we going to check out Roywood?" I asked.

"Is there any point? It's not in our jurisdiction and it's supposed to be crawling with zombies, isn't it? Or am I thinking of somewhere else?"

I grimaced at Gabriel Mallows' back. We were scouting, or more accurately wandering around aimlessly. For once things were quiet in Dunell Hills which just made Squad Leader Mallows restless. Half an hour ago he'd burst into the squad room at Swinnerton PD and announced, "I'm going scouting. Who's coming with me?" When no one answered he'd pointed at me. "You don't look like you're doing anything, Cat. You're scouting with me."

I hadn't been doing anything, but frankly I valued my not doing anything time.

I didn't have a clue what was in Roywood. At least not right now, although it had certainly had more than its fair share of zombies back in the early days. "You're the squad leader Gabs, you tell me if there are zombies there."

"Bloody indecisive wimmenz," he muttered. "Where are we now?"

"Tupton Lane, it's still in Peddleston Village. Cross the road and we're in Roywood." I pointed at a road sign and then decided to wait patiently for his decision.

I'd switched in to Bravo squad a few months back, thinking I should maybe get some experience in the front line, as it were. Support was all very well, but in this town there are days when you have to pick up a shotgun and defend yourself. Gabriel Mallows had been promoted to squad leader not long after I'd joined up. He was half my age, with the organisational skills of a hyperactive hamster. If the department hadn't been desperate... but then the department was desperate. This was a zombie apocalypse and we had no time to worry about whether 16-year-olds could handle responsibility. I coped with Gabby by skilled deployment

of passive-aggression. Waiting patiently for answers was, I had discovered, a particularly successful tactic.

"Fuck it!" he muttered. "Well we're here now. Might as well check out some of the buildings. We've nothing better to do."

"Protect Swinnerton PD? Man the 'cades?"

"Rest of the squad have that covered. We're scouting. Come on!" He headed across the road.

We turned into Owers Way. St. Dismas Hospital was on our left and Hemburrow Library and Carslake Museum were on our right. They were both related to the hospital somehow; ancient, ornate and imposing buildings constructed to glorify their donors.

"Let's give the library and museum a quick sweep, then we'll check the hospital for medical supplies," said Gabby.

I shrugged. Whatever.

We scrambled over the remains of a barricade. Heavy wooden doors had been dragged across the entrance and now lay splintered and rotting on the floor. Bookshelves lay in heaps nearby. Someone must have got them ready to plug the gaps. Piles of books lay in mounds against the far wall. The place smelled of damp paper, but not badly. The windows were set up high and hadn't been smashed. The hall was large and the windows were small, not much rain had got in. The small high windows plunged the whole place into shadow, though.

Gabby looked around. "Doesn't seem to have been much of a fight here. I wonder where the defenders went?"

I shrugged again. What was I? Fount of all knowledge?

Gabby scowled and skittered off into the depths of the hall, swinging his gun around imaginary corners. It was a silver-plated Smith & Wesson Model 500. Gabby described it as 'big and manly'. It was certainly big. I had had no idea revolvers came in super-size. It did convey a certain Dirty Harry vibe on Gabby and its stopping power was impressive. It was a good quality handgun for Malton where we typically relied on what BD termed 'pea-shooters', dropped on us in supply crates. Gabby had called the gun Slasher. All the younger recruits seemed to worship BD and since his favourite gun had a name, so did theirs.

I picked up one of the books. It was a medical text, not surprising given this was a medical library. I frowned at the small writing and technical illustrations but I had no idea whether it was of any use to me or to us and no way of finding out. I tossed it to one side. It was probably useless. In this town, if you can't fix the problem quickly, you wait for it to run its course and let our cheapened version of death do the fixing for you.

"Do you think there was an economics section?" Gabby's voice echoed back. "There's some books I've not been able to track down."

It was easy to forget that Gabby read. He argued. He argued endlessly, mostly about the equitable distribution of resources and sometimes liberating the sources of production. Not that he could identify any sources of production in Malton. Some days he argued that, in the absence of an economy, communism and libertarianism were identical. That one always went down really well. Once or twice I'd joined in since I sometimes got weary of the DHPD's right-wing rhetoric, but I never got much further than calling various officers fascist wankers, which doesn't really rate highly as a debating tactic.

Gabby, on the other hand, knows his stuff. He read voraciously, mostly biography, politics and economics, when he could get his hands on the books. I've no idea where he picked up the habit. He can only have been 11 when the dead started walking the streets. He never talked about his family and no one ever asked. He'd staggered into Cotty Street Police Station when he was 14, half-starved and dragging a guitar that somehow looked bigger than he was. It was certainly more solid. We fed him and then taught him to shoot. Sometimes I'm not so sure we did him a favour.

There were several doorways leading off the large room, small offices maybe, or reading rooms or something. I checked my shotgun was loaded. It was. This was a routine drummed into us in the academy again and again; always keep your guns loaded and always double-check. I started looking through the side rooms one by one; office, cleaning cupboard, another office, a small hallway with a second door at the far end. There was a large biohazard sign stuck on it and then a long series of instructions for entry and exit procedures. I frowned.

"Gabby! Gabby!"

"What is it?"

"There's something odd here."

"Define odd." His voice echoed, distorted by the large empty chamber at my back.

"Some kind of quarantine thing."

I felt him arrive at my shoulder. "Wow! Well, don't suppose it does anything now. Zombies will have been all over it." He kicked the door. It fell from its hinges to the floor with a crash.

"Gabby!"

"What?"

"All those biohazard signs might have been there for a reason."

"Zombies ransacked this place long ago. Someone just propped that door up. Whatever was in there has got out already."

"You don't know that."

Gabby shrugged nonchalantly and walked into the room, sweeping his pistol about. Unlike the rest of library, this had smooth walls made from metal and a large hatch in the middle of the floor. Gabby stood in front of the hatch and stared at it thoughtfully.

"Best leave it shut." I said hopefully.

Gabby shook his head. "Might be defensible down there. This room doesn't look too badly mangled. We should check it out."

I looked at the bare room and the metal walls. "There's nothing here to mangle."

Gabby just grinned and then pulled the hatch open. A metal tube led downwards. There were fixings in the sides where a ladder had once been. It looked like someone had torn it away.

"They must have taken the ladder away to prevent the zombies getting in," suggested Gabby.

"Wouldn't stop them for long. They'd just throw themselves down the hole and then stand up when they reached the bottom."

Gabby looked thoughtful. "It worries me when you come up with shit like that. You're right, though. Mind you, whoever was down there might not have thought of that. Fuck. Would zombies notice this hatch, if it was closed?"

I looked at the hatch thoughtfully. When shut it lay flush with the floor, a small handle set into it. "Maybe, maybe not."

Gabby rolled his eyes. "Still worth checking down there. I've got climbing gear in my pack."

I was still doubtful as Gabby began his descent. "There could be anything down there."

"Only one way to find out." Gabby fished a pair of sunglasses out of a breast pocket and put them on. "How do I look?"

"You can't go down a big dark hole wearing sunglasses!"

"Who's in charge here, bitch?"

I froze and glared at him. "Oi!"

"It's a term of affection!" He grinned, waved, and began the descent. I stamped my foot.

"Halloo?" called a voice. "You coming down?"

I lay on my front to call down the hole. "Don't you want me to keep guard up here?"

"Nah! Shut the door. Who's going to come past?"

"Zombies? Death Cultists? Random maniacs? Take your pick. Anyway, you knocked the door off its hinges."

"So I did. Fuck. Well, prop it back up. It'll be fine."

I growled in frustration, then heaved the door back into place.

It was dim down the bottom of the hole, with a faint musty smell in the air alongside the normal smell of rotting bodies that pervades Malton. Low power lighting cast a dull yellow glow over everything. That meant there was a generator down here somewhere which was probably worth salvaging.

I sniffed. "Zombies around. Must be."

"It's bloody dark. I can't see a thing."

I looked at Gabby. "Take the sunglasses off, maybe?"

"Point." He took them off, grinned in an entirely unembarrassed fashion and then bounced on the balls of his feet. "Which way?"

I shrugged and then pointed right. Seemed like as good a direction as any. Our feet clattered on metal. We were in a long tunnel. I struggled to orient myself. We were probably heading out under the road towards the hospital. That figured, I supposed, what with the biohazard signs and everything.

"Something ahead," said Gabby quietly.

"What kind of a something?"

"How should I know?"

I peered around him. There was a sort of lump in the middle of the floor. A dark mound in the yellowish light.

"Someone dropped something?" I hazarded.

"Pure genius."

"I didn't even want to be here."

"So you keep saying. Fuck it! I'm checking it out."

He walked forward. I saw him stiffen and then prod at the shape with his foot. It rolled over. The movement helped resolve the form. An arm flopped. It was the hunched shape of a human body. I hurried up, gun at the ready.

"Shit!" muttered Gabby. "Is there somewhere we can dump it?"

I looked around. "All the windows are at ground level. I suppose there might be a room we can lock it into."

I knelt down for a closer look. It smelled terrible, but then zombies did. Although it was decomposing I could see the deep gashes in its torso. "Looks like a zombie kill to me. That means there are more of them down here."

"That body's been dead for a while, though," pointed out Gabby. "Must have been zombified when it was put down. Why would zombies be tearing each other up?"

I shrugged again. "Maybe this one was looking for a revive or something." Zombies weren't terribly bright, but they did all work out eventually whether they wanted to be living or dead. Those that wanted to live stood around at revive points, muttering 'Mrh?' at passing humans, if they were alert enough. It was a strange sound, a kind of strangled groan, but everyone in the city knew it, and what it meant. Those who wished to remain dead often fought with the 'mrh-cows'. They can be quite evangelical, in an odd sort of way, zombies.

Gabby pulled out a torch and switched it on, sweeping along the floor. "Lots of dust. No footprints."

"So?"

"So there wasn't a fight recently. I think that's just a dead body."

I snorted. "No such thing around here."

We stood over the body bickering about whether to explore further or return to the surface and whether there was anything useful we could do about the body. In the end Gabby shot it through the head for good measure and announced we'd be back before it re-grew enough brains to cause trouble.

Then he put his sunglasses back on and headed deeper into the tunnels. After about a minute he tripped, cursed and took the sunglasses off.

"There's only me here anyway." I pointed out. "And I'm already unimpressed."

"You never know. There might be a young and innocent wimmenz down here somewhere. I can rescue her."

"And she'll then fall at your feet?"

"Actually I'm more likely to fall at hers and beg in an entirely unmanly fashion, but I live in hope." Gabby could be surprisingly self-effacing and self-aware at times, in amongst the brash confidence. I guess it's called being 16.

The narrow tunnel opened out into a large cavernous space. There was a railing in front of us and we leaned over it to look down onto an empty floor.

"Cool place for a party," remarked Gabby.

I laughed. "Maybe we should suggest it to Brass. When did we last celebrate anything?"

"Dunno, when did we last retake Caiger?"

"Must be someone's birthday soon. When's your 17th?"

There was a sharp silence. "Tomorrow."

I blinked in surprise. "You never said."

He shrugged. "Nothing much worth celebrating, not really."

"Gabby, your 17th! That has to be worth marking."

"Maybe, dunno, fuck it! I'd just rather not. This place is so fucked up I just can't face it."

"What was that?" I asked. I could hear something behind us, a dull metallic clatter.

"Sounds like someone running," muttered Gabby.

We turned. The tunnel we had walked out of stretched away into the distance but it was possible to see the form of a man, silhouetted against the emergency lighting.

"Oi, mate!" called Gabby. "What's happening."

There was no answer. Some instinct made me start backing away but I bumped straight up against the railing. Seconds later I realised the run was slightly lopsided, like the man had a limp. Gabby fumbled about and produced his torch again. A powerful beam of light flooded the tunnel.

"Fucking hell!" he said.

I raised my shotgun and fired. The man's skin was a palish green colour and blood was caked around his mouth and hands. I couldn't account for the speed but I was pretty sure this was a zombie.

It staggered backwards and then came on. "How big is that thing?" muttered Gabby.

It was big, I realised. Gabby's tall, well over six foot, but this creature was going to tower over him by several inches and it wasn't skinny like he was. I fired

again. It was almost on top of us.

Gabby raised Slasher, all the time keeping the torch steadily fixed on the creature. He fired one shot, placing the bullet directly between the man's eyes. It fell over backwards. He glanced at me sideways and grinned. "Always go for the brains."

Then something dropped down from the ceiling. Gabby's gun clattered on the walkway, skidded and then dropped over the edge, clanging on the floor below. It was a second zombie, this one lean, wiry and elongated. It's limbs seemed uncannily long and jointed like a large spider had dropped down from the ceiling to pin Gabby to the floor. I raised my shotgun, hoping to get a clear shot at the thing's head but a stray arm lashed out, knocking the shotgun over the edge to join Slasher.

I fished in my pocket. I'd cooked up a syringe full of revivification serum earlier in the day and then Gabby had decided we didn't need it. So it had been slowly going to waste. The creature was busy biting and pounding on Gabby, so it was easy enough to slam the thing into the back of its neck.

On the whole, combat revivification is frowned upon. Those who have chosen the zombie lifestyle have a habit of standing right up, knocking you out, stealing your guns, shooting you and then committing suicide. It's very messy. Live humans do more damage than dead ones, who'd have thought? so we prefer to keep them dead. However, reviving him would buy us a few minutes, let Gabby find one of his spare guns and then we could just kill the zombie again and tip him over the edge of the gantry. With luck it would take the thing a while to get back up to our level.

I slid home the plunger. The zombie jerked upwards, its back ram-rod straight, and then turned a baleful glare upon me. To my surprise, it then stood up and sprang, spidery limbs outstretched. I found myself toppling backwards against the gantry rail and I scrabbled frantically at the zombie's front, realising I was grabbing the tattered remains of a lab coat. The gantry creaked and bent and I was leaning out over the drop. The zombie pressed forwards and my feet began to slide. I twisted frantically, grabbing at the railing behind me, hearing the sound of tearing metal. Then I was hanging over empty space. My hands were gripping thin metal struts that had twisted away from the gantry. The thin strip of metal hung down over the floor far below like a piece of orange peel and I dangled from the end.

"Cat!" It was Gabby shouting. There was a sudden flare of light and the zombie fell past me, burning like a comet.

"What?" I asked.

"Flare gun! I knew those things had to be useful for something." Gabby lay down on his front, hands reaching down. "Can you get hold of me?"

I hauled myself upwards and then lunged with one hand. He grabbed hold and pulled. A foot found purchase on a metal strut somewhere and I risked transferring my second hand to his arm. Moments later I was back up on the walkway.

"Thanks," I said, sitting up.

Gabby stood, his face looking surprisingly adult for a fleeting moment. "No problem." Then he fidgeted and looked both ways. "What now? Go back and tip the other bodies over the edge as well?"

"Anti-virals first. That thing bit you. I don't want you dying on me."

Luckily Gabby wasn't badly mauled. He'd sustained some scratches and a bite on his upper arm which appeared to have done more harm to his leather jacket than it had to him. I swabbed it clean and applied a dressing anyway, while Gabby whined that it was stinging and he was fine.

"You've got blood on your shirt too," I muttered, examining the tear around the bite.

"It was blood-stained already from that break-in last week, a little more won't hurt."

"Really Gabby! Don't you wash it?"

"Occasionally, often enough. Who made you my mother anyway?"

I tossed my head but didn't say anything, because really it was none of my business and hot water was pretty hard to come by.

We tipped the big zombie Gabby had shot through the head, after its fellow and looked down at the burning remains below us, neither seemed to be moving. Even after spider zombie had burned out, it just lay there on the floor.

"I reckon it's dead," said Gabby.

"No such thing in this town."

"So you keep saying but those zombies aren't moving, nor is the fucker we found earlier."

"Maybe one of those is the fucker we found earlier."

Gabby shook his head. "He was black, so unless his skin magically changed colour when he stood up..." He shrugged.

"Point taken. I tried to revive that gangly one as well and it didn't work. Mind you, the serum could have gone off."

"Well, whatever the fuck's going on, we need to find a way down. Slasher's down there."

"So is the big fuck-off zombie and the creepy ceiling spider zombie. Slasher's not worth it. It only holds five shots in the cylinder anyway and the ammo isn't

easy to find. Why not get a hand-gun with a magazine and ten shots?"

"You just don't understand guns. Speaking of which..."

Gabby had a large shotgun strapped across his back. He unbuckled it and handed it over. I'm generally given shotguns. Precision aiming isn't really my thing.

"What about you?"

"Spare pistol." He pulled back his leather jacket to reveal a holster under one arm, counterbalancing the one at his hip where Slasher normally lived.

"Why did you shoot it with the flare then?"

"Flare was cooler."

"What?"

"Fuck! Flare was to hand. I didn't have time to think."

I shook my head.

The gantry continued round the edge of the large room. Doorways opened off it at regular intervals. The first batch led into spaces that had clearly once been laboratories. The doors were all smashed and we wandered, largely uncomprehendingly, amid broken glass and twisted bits of equipment.

"What do you suppose they were doing here?" asked Gabby.

"Zombie stuff."

"How do you figure that?"

I pointed at the nearest whiteboard. Notes were scrawled across it in marker pen. 'Group meeting: Monday 10am', 'Remember to bug NT again about notes', 'Could infection become airborne?' All the lab whiteboards had had similar scrawl. Enough to be sure these guys were studying the Necrotech virus.

"Do you think they developed the disease?"

"Doubt it." I pointed at the note about bugging 'NT'. "Looks like they were separate, trying to get the information from Necrotech."

"Yeah but if they were separate *and* working on the virus... I mean how? No one knew about the virus until after the quarantine."

"Maybe they came afterwards. I bet no end of people have been smuggled in here for one reason or another since the wall went up."

"But the biohazard signs in the library?"

"These labs have probably been here a long time, connecting the hospital and the library, and maybe the museum. Maybe we'd have ended up at the museum if we'd turned left instead of right down the tunnel. Someone must have known about these labs and thought they could make them secure."

"More fool them."

We found the living quarters; five bedrooms and a small kitchen. Then we stumbled across the remains of what had probably been some kind of isolation room. The door had been smashed out from the inside. A large, reinforced, metal door, smashed out from the inside.

"That's not good," muttered Gabby, looking at it. "Zombies shouldn't be that strong."

"Shouldn't have been as fast as that one we met earlier either."

"What the fuck were these jokers doing?"

I looked at the twisted and buckled door again. "Are you serious about finding a way down to collect Slasher?"

I heard him sigh. "Not really. It would be kind of stupid, knowing that thing is down there somewhere. Not to mention the creepy spider one."

I nodded and patted him on the arm. "There'll be other guns."

"It was just a gun. It was cool but, you know..." he shrugged and scratched his arm. "What do you say we quickly check the rest of the rooms on this level, see if there's anything useful and then we bug out? Leave the big dangerous creepy spider zombies safely boxed up down here."

"We *will be* in trouble if we both get zombified down here. No one knows where we are and zombies can't climb up ropes." I pointed out.

"Right and once we get back up top, we can let the right people know about the mega-zombs and they can bring the buildings down on top of them. That should stop 'em getting out."

"Sounds like a plan," I said relieved. "Mind you I think there must be a big generator down here that we should look for. Something's kept the lights going, and for quite some time, I'd guess."

"Won't be portable then, will it? Nah, let's just give the stuff here the once over quickly and then scarper."

I smiled at him. "They could be stuck down below. Maybe it's all safe now."

He grinned back. "Five bedrooms and this isolation room; That's six people. There must be three more somethings down here somewhere. I don't much fancy meeting them. No, we'll do this your way." He made a mock serious expression. "I'm wearing my sensible hat today."

"You're not wearing a hat."

"Well I don't have a sensible hat. But, if I did, I'd be wearing it. Use your imagination, woman!"

I thumped him gently. "Sexist!"

"Always! Come on wimmenz! Let's check this place out!"

Then we found the morgue. It looked like the basics of an infirmary but a large chest freezer had been dragged into the room and someone had taped the word "morgue" onto it. Inside were two bodies. A small blonde woman in pyjamas was laid out, looking like she was asleep. There wasn't any obvious sign of injury but since she was frozen solid it was difficult to tell. There might have been a bandage on her arm, under the pyjamas. The other was obviously a zombie, although someone had put a bullet through its brain.

"Freezing doesn't stop zombies, does it?" asked Gabby as I squinted at the bodies.

"Slows them up a little, but no. Never heard of freezing stopping them."

"Then why aren't these two up and about causing chaos?"

"Or that body in the tunnel for that matter, or even the zed you fried. This woman might not have been infected, but the other four sure are." I closed down the lid of the freezer. "I wonder if they've got medical notes anywhere?"

"It'll all be on the computers won't it? Behind passwords and shit."

"Bet there was a paper trail too. This room was some kind of hospital. I'm guessing that woman died of something or other and they had nowhere to store the body."

"Why not just ship her out?"

"They had no easy way out of the quarantine? They had to jury rig up this 'morgue'?".

"OK, makeshift morgue, find the paper trail." Gabby glanced around the ransacked room and then wandered over to a filing cabinet. It was lying on the floor, the drawers trapped beneath it. Gabby heaved it over. Papers spilled out and ran across the floor.

The story we pieced together was pretty simple. The medical notes were full of phrases like 'massive organ failure' and 'infection carried by saliva' but the basics seemed to be that the woman, Dr Kent, had been bitten. They'd administered a 'cure' and she had died.

"Stupid fuckers," muttered Gabby.

"They were working on a cure. They were trying to help."

"Like fuck they were. What do you think the stronger, faster zombies are all about? If they were working on a cure it wasn't the only fucking thing they were doing."

At that moment we both heard the noise. A faint groan and the sound of running feet.

"It's another one," whispered Gabby.

"They don't seem any brighter than the regular zeds, just faster, and stronger or creepy-crawlier."

"Just." His tone was dead-pan.

"It'll also stay down once shot. I'll go and stand in the corridor. It'll head for me and then you can shoot it from behind."

"You trust me?"

I hadn't thought of it that way. The question made me pause and look at him closely. Yes, he was 16 and hyperactive and irritating in all sorts of ways but I actually had no doubt that he would stay calm in a crisis and he was a good shot. He wouldn't run or abandon me or panic. It wasn't everyone who could face down a mega-zombie and remember to shoot it between the eyes. Most people wouldn't think to turn a flare on one either and certainly few people would actually hit it. There was a reason Brass had put him in charge, after all. I'd just never really thought about it. "Yes, I trust you."

"'K. Let's do this thing."

Once I was standing out on the encircling walkway, it did occur to me that I had maybe been a little blithe in my confidence. The plan was sound, but that didn't make acting as bait any easier... and why was I the one acting as bait anyway?

I clutched Gabby's spare shotgun tight against my chest and banged a metal ladle from the kitchen against the railing, listening all the while for the sounds of running feet. Gabby had concealed himself behind the closed door of one of the offices.

It wasn't long before the thing appeared some way off to my right, a moving shape in the dim lighting of the facility. I banged the ladle against the railing a couple more times, just to make sure I had its attention and then dropped the lump

of metal on the floor so I had both hands free for the gun. Gabby's hidey hole was between me and the zombie, which was good.

I held my ground until it was past Gabby's concealed room. I could see it now, a woman's form with grotesquely elongated arms and legs and a mouth that seemed unnaturally wide and gaping. I opened fire, emptying shot after shot into her and pumping the chamber maniacally. I walked backwards a step at a time as I did so, more through habit than anything else. The fighting retreat was ingrained into us all.

She pounded on. I'd been aiming for her chest because shotguns are useless as precision weapons but great for sheer stopping power. My intention was to slow her down, expecting Gabby to take the head shot, but Gabby hadn't appeared. I backed up further, fumbling new shells into the gun. I dropped the first onto the floor but the second slipped home. I didn't bother scrabbling for more but raised the gun and fired in the general direction of the thing's head, watching the shot pepper its way across her features, ripping flesh from bone to reveal the skull beneath. She was less than a stride away. I held the gun out in front of me like a bar as the flailing limbs reached forward. I fell backwards, staring into that wide gaping mouth, my shotgun rammed hard against her throat, keeping the teeth away from me.

I didn't think getting eaten would kill me, but it's never a pleasant experience. "Gabby!" I shouted, desperately.

I heard shots. The thing turned its head but I was pinned down by the weight on my chest and couldn't do much with the distraction. I closed my eyes and hoped Gabby's aim was good. More shots followed and then I felt the body slump. I pushed it to one side, no help from Gabby, and then struggled to my feet a sarcastic comment on my lips. Gabby stood in the centre of the corridor, a pistol held in one hand. He gazed at me a moment, mouth working silently and then swayed and crashed to the floor.

It didn't take long to work out what was wrong with him. His skin was hot to the touch and his arm, where the zombie had bitten him, was a livid red. With difficulty and a lot of cursing I managed to drag him to the infirmary and get him onto one of the beds. I found paracetamol among the pills littering the floor and gave them to him on the grounds that it might help bring the fever down. It had some effect. I'd have done efficient medical things with fluid drips if I'd had the

skills and been able to find any supplies. As it stood, I was reduced to dabbing at his forehead with a damp flannel.

After about ten minutes his eyes flickered open.

"Did I get the zombie?"

"Yeah, you got the zombie." I reached down to squeeze his hand.

"That's good. I feel like shit, though."

"Infection."

"That's not good, is it."

"I don't think so, no. It means our normal anti-virals don't work."

"We're going to have to use their cure, then."

"Well for starters we don't know if there is any and for seconds it killed the only person they tried it on."

"I had actually remembered that much, but what alternative is there? I'm not getting all zombieish and killing you too." He looked completely serious.

I wondered briefly if he really understood what he was saying but then realised he did. He wasn't stupid by a long shot and he clearly knew he was proposing his own death in order to save me. "There are revives," I hazarded.

"Not for this type of zombie-ism."

He was right there. Nothing we had seen suggested that this infection carried the same immunity to permanent death. "We could wait and see. I can always try to revive you, and shoot you if it doesn't work." I stumbled a bit over the end of that sentence. I didn't like the idea of shooting someone dead, properly dead that is, even if they were a zombie, least of all if they were someone I knew.

He shook his head. "I'm not prepared to take the risk. You could get infected too. Go find the cure."

"I'm not sure..."

"Well I'm in charge of this squad and I am. Go find a cure, wimmenz." He raised his head and then sank back with a groan. "I'll rest here a bit."

I sighed and started checking the litter of jars and vials on the floor. We had the medical name for the cure in Dr Kent's notes. It was just a matter of matching the labels.

Gabby grimaced when I returned with the a small vial and a syringe. "Maybe that woman had some dodgy condition. The cure just reacted badly as a one-off."

"Maybe. You still sure about this? I could go get Snow or Sy or someone. They might have some idea that we don't."

"If you thought you had time for that, you'd have gone already. Look on the bright side, either I survive, or you get rid of a lousy squad leader."

"You've done all right." I suddenly felt defensive on his behalf.

"I irritate you. You think I don't know what I'm doing."

"Only sometimes. You do OK in a tight spot." There was finding him a bit irritating and there was wanting him gone. I didn't like to think of him actually hurt.

"You didn't want to come down here. I should have listened."

"I get too cautious. If someone else had stumbled on this place the infection might have got out. It was a good call, checking down here."

"Now I know it's bad, with you complimenting me."

"Gabby... I..."

"Wimmenz! Just... fuck... get on with it please."

I sighed and sucked a dose into the syringe. The notes hadn't been that clear about amounts but the bottle was small, looked like a single dose to me. Like I knew anything about it. I didn't like the colour. It was just off clear with a sickly yellowish tinge.

"These probably weren't meant to be left around that long," I said doubtfully.

"They probably wouldn't have done me any good when they were fresh. Get on with it, Cat."

I tapped up a vein. Dr Snow had shown me how to do this. It was useful for some of the medical supplies they dropped on us. Then I injected the so-called cure.

"What now?" asked Gabby.

"I don't know. I guess you die or get better."

"Burn." He closed his eyes.

The symptoms more or less followed those laid out in the medical notes. Gabby's fever went down as the cure wiped out the virus. We chatted a bit about nothing much; music and politics and our friends back at the PD. He was a nice enough lad, really. I held his hand and he let me, but we never talked about what was actually happening. I didn't know what to say. I don't suppose he did either. Gradually his breathing became laboured.

"Do you think I'll make it to 17?" he whispered.

I glanced at my watch. "You've got half an hour."

"I'll make it to 17 then. I'd hate to die at 16. It's a shitty age." He coughed and there was blood on his fingers as he took his hand from his mouth.

"You'll make it to 17. You're going to pull through and we can have a big party. Anton quit smoking last week but he's been hoarding the ciggies. We can trade them for pigeon at Caiger, and Christmas lights and some big fuck-off boom box you can play Guns 'n Roses on. It'll be great, you'll see."

"You almost make it sound worth celebrating."

"It is. Oh Gabby, it is. We might give you a hard time but we all like you really."

He coughed again. "Thanks Cat! I'll look forward to it."

Another fit of coughing took him, his body shaking. He was taking big gasping breaths. Dr. Kent's medical notes said her lungs had failed first. I found a bag valve mask and started ventilating. He lay silent under the mask for a bit, his eyes flickering open occasionally. He continued to cough and I had to stop the ventilation and hold him up as his body was wracked and shaken and he brought up blood and goodness knows what onto the sheets. He clung to me after one such effort.

"Sorry about the mess."

"No problem. You'll be fine," I whispered. "You just have to get through this and then you'll be fine."

"Yeah! Keep telling me that. Oh God, Cat! I feel fucking awful."

I hugged him. Then he sank back onto the bed and I reached for the ventilator once more.

The scientists in this underground lab had kept their colleague alive for almost four weeks as her organs had failed one by one. It sounded unpleasant. I tried to tell myself that Gabby was lucky that I had neither the skills nor the equipment to do the same. I wasn't convinced.

"Hang on in there," I whispered.

He smiled wanly and then closed his eyes.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, surfacing a little occasionally to complain in a ragged whisper about music I hadn't heard, or rant about the evils of The Man or money or Necrotech or all three at once. Occasionally he mumbled about a family I didn't know and had never inquired after.

Then his eyes opened and fixed me with a penetrating gaze. "Mum!"

I grasped his hand instinctively, but he blinked and disappointment flashed across his face.

"Sorry Cat," he whispered.

"Gabby! It's OK." I realised tears were starting to run down my cheeks.

"Don't cry, Cat. It was a pretty shitty life anyway. Not got... much... to look forward to."

"No, Gabby. There's always hope. We'll get out of Malton one day. Don't give up!"

"I don't think I'm going to make it. Sorry to let you down. I'm glad you were here." His head fell back and his eyes closed. The fingers grasping my hand slowly fell away.

"No, Gabs! You're doing fine, just a little longer." I pressed fingers to his wrist, searching for a pulse. There was nothing to be found. "Please, just a little longer," I begged, but he didn't respond.

I tried a desperate improvised CPR, probably doing more harm than good. Slowly, his body became cold and stiff beneath my palms.

"Gabby, please, don't die." But there was nothing. He had already gone.

I lifted my hands away from his chest and looked at the still body. Only my sobs disturbed the silence.

It was 1.05am on the 17th May. Gabriel Mallows was just 17.

I smoothed the untidy brown hair away from his face and wondered whether to leave him where he was, put him in the freezer, or somehow try to drag the body back to the DHPD. It was such a stupid, stupid waste of life. But then all of Malton was a stupid, stupid waste.

Then his eyes flicked open and fixed me with a cold, dead stare. My hand stilled on the cool skin of his forehead. A low groan issued through his lips.

"Mrh?"

So I cooked up a needle and stuck it in him. Twenty minutes later he was revived, right as rain and I was incandescent with fury.

It wasn't hard to work out what had happened. The 'cure' had cured only the mutated form of the zombie virus. The underlying original infection, which responded to the revivification serum, had continued chugging around his system. So when the cure finally killed him, the original infection simply kicked in and raised him as a zombie.

"This is all your fault," I shouted over the balcony rail as he abseiled down a rope to the floor below in order to collect Slasher. "Coming down here was a stupid idea. Anything could have happened! We could both have died, or become super-zombies. What if one of us had gone back up the hole and carried the infection with us?"

"I just had a near-death experience. I could use a little fucking sympathy here," he retorted. There was a clatter and a curse. I deduced he had reached the floor.

"You don't deserve any sympathy. You are disorganised, reckless, puerile, adolescent and sexist." I shouted down.

"And you're obstructive, hyper-critical and scared of responsibility. Ah ha! Found it! If you don't like the way I run the squad then you should have stepped up."

"Bastard! Stupid, fucking, bastard!"

"I'm tying your shotgun onto the rope. Haul it up."

I did so with bad grace, still seething quietly.

"Did you check the zombies?" I asked as he emerged back over the railing.

"Yes, I checked the zombies. Dead as fucking door nails. I told you."

"You just made a lucky guess. I can't believe how close we came to dying, really dying."

"Oh shut up, Cat! I get it. I'm a joke. My life is a farce. Fuck, I died today and even that was a farcical stupid fucking mess. I'm stuck in this shitty town, with a bunch of people who tolerate me at best. I have no life, no future, I don't even have a sodding girlfriend because, let me tell you, picking up women in a zombie fucking apocalypse isn't easy. To top it all, it's my sodding birthday so just, for once in your life, quit complaining about how much you hate working for me."

He looked terribly vulnerable all of a sudden, like he had on the bed while he lay dying. I suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh God! Cat. Don't cry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout at you." He took a step towards me and then stopped waving his hands vaguely, almost, but not quite, daring to touch.

"I thought you were going to die!" I sobbed.

"Shit! Cat! It's all right. I didn't die. I thought I was going to die too." He hugged me rather awkwardly as if I might explode any moment which, given how unreasonably I was behaving, was probably a fair assessment.

"I'm sorry," I sniffed a bit. "I didn't mean all those horrible things I said. You're not a joke."

"Well they were mostly right." I felt him shrug. "I am puerile, adolescent, disorganised and.. what else did you say? I've forgotten."

"Sexist."

"Yeah, that too, silly wimmenz. Have you stopped crying yet? You're getting my shirt wet. I wouldn't want to take it off. You probably couldn't control yourself."

I laughed and thumped his chest. "In your dreams, sunshine. I'm old enough to be your mother."

"But you're not and anyway, maybe I like the sexy mum thing."

"Waaay too much information Gabby."

He grinned. "We good?" he asked.

"Yes, we're good."

"Cool! Because I don't know about you but I want to get out of this shit hole and get you to organise me a birthday party."

Chapter 40

Primeval Denial Virtual Series 4, Episodes 9 and 10

Set in a world where no one died

40.1 Episode 9

Three Weeks Ago, London.

Helen was doing a little bit of investigation on her own, since Stephen and Lester so clearly weren't prepared to help. She had been tailing Christine Johnson for days. She remembered her clearly from their brief encounter in the Cretaceous. Helen wasn't prone to either forgetting or forgiving and being knocked out and abandoned for any passing predator to feed on made her distinctly peeved. Christine might have changed hair colour but Helen wasn't fooled.

What did puzzle Helen was what the woman was up to. She had tailed her from Westminster to a prestigious London flat, also to a number of secret research facilities and out into the wilds of the Midlands to a dilapidated concrete monstrosity that had, apparently, once been the Morton Hall Research Institute but was now an empty shell, smelling of damp, with a Cold War bunker in the grounds fronted by a sophisticated security system.

Helen had decided that tailing was no longer sufficient which was why she was now standing outside Christine's flat armed with a set of lockpicks. Of all the places Christine went, it was the least securely guarded, so had seemed like a safe place to start.

The door clicked open and Helen slipped inside. She used a small torch and

she walked carefully, looking for a study or a computer, not wanting to touch or disturb anything else. She had just reached the centre of a large living space, probably with a panoramic view of London, when all the lights came on around her. She whirled to see Christine in the doorway, flanked by several armed men.

"Well, I must say it took you long enough to take the bait," said Christine.

Helen twitched an eyebrow. "Took you long enough to apprehend me," she riposted.

Christine smiled dangerously. "Less paperwork if you're doing something clearly and obviously illegal, like breaking and entering. It saves me the effort of going through any channels James Lester might be monitoring."

"What do you want?" asked Helen.

Christine tossed her a mobile phone. "Let's say I want you available for a chat any time I need one. And once you're on the books it's treason to give away secrets. I won't need to be so circumspect about picking you up if you cross me."

Christine's smile was deadly and said clearly that if you weren't with her, you were against her. Helen smiled falsely back. If she had to undermine Christine Johnson from the inside, then that's what she would do.

* * *

9.35am, Anomaly Research Centre.

Connor had thought he was alone in the ARC. Well, not alone obviously. The soldiers and the secretarial staff and Lester were all there, everyone who was expected to turn up at 9am. But the science team had all been out drinking the night before to celebrate Cutter getting a paper accepted by Nature and he'd really thought he was the only one who had got to work on time.

He'd been playing around with the idea of running a few experiments on the anomalies, encouraged by a physicist Lester had drafted in as a consultant. He'd been building a probe which could bombard an anomaly with light at various wave-lengths and measure the response. He'd been very close to finishing it the night before when Cutter had summoned them all for a 'swift half'. It was the weekly group meeting this afternoon and he had wanted it finished by then, so here he was, hungover and alone but busy.

However, the moment the alarms went off on the anomaly detector, causing Connor to wince and rub his temples, he magically found himself surrounded by the team.

"Where is it?" asked Abby.

Connor scurried over to the machine. "Working on it!"

Abby chewed at her fingers. Connor could see the others walking across the wide floor towards him.

"Well?" Cutter leaned over his shoulder.

The signal faded.

"What happened?" asked Abby.

"Anomaly closed," said Connor tersely. "I'm still looking where it was. I got all the triangulation points we need."

He felt their eyes on his back as the image zoomed into the map.

"Oh! That's perfect!" said Connor happily. "Just what I was looking for."

* * *

9.35am, Research Station, Electric Mountain, North Wales.

"Carefully does it! Don't get too close to the irregularity." Dr Joanne Carson watched as a final series of checks were carried out on the silver wire by muttering technicians.

She looked across to Professor Ian McKenzie, the chief engineer. "That look OK to you?"

He nodded, running a hand through his curly black hair. "Everything else is ready, I reckon we're good to go."

"Do you think this is going to work?" asked Sophie, their research assistant. She was looking as trim and neat as she always did and, as usual, her frizzy red hair was fighting to undermine the image, escaping free from the pins and clips she held it back with.

"It should do," said Joanne. "We've been getting good results drawing power from it so far, but we're going to need more output if we're seriously going to try to use this to replace one of the main turbines."

"Only one way to find out. Let's get this show on the road," said Ian, his Scottish accent broadening in his excitement.

Sophie typed into her console. "I'll start sending low power through the busbars and gradually build it up."

Ian and Joanne walked behind her and stood watching the monitors as she increased power.

"What's that?" asked Ian, pointing to an irregular wave form.

"I'm not sure. It looks like some kind of feedback?" Joanne bent closer to look, brushing a stray blonde hair from her eyes. She really needed to get it cut, but there wasn't a decent hairdresser for miles, probably not until she was out

of Wales and into England, and she was too busy to travel far. This project had sucked in all her available time.

"Feedback from the irregularity?" wondered Ian.

"It's getting more pronounced as I increase the output. Do you want me to shut the experiment down?" asked Sophie.

"Not just yet," said Joanne.

"And how are we all today?" asked a brisk voice.

Ian groaned quietly. "Good morning, Christine. We're just trying the experiment I briefed you on."

"Good. What's the news?"

"Not much so far," admitted Joanne. "It's been going nicely all week, but we've just had some anomalous readings. Like we're getting some kind of feedback."

There was a sudden flash of light and all four of them shielded their eyes.

"What was that?" asked Ian.

"Flashover!" said Sophie in alarm.

"No, no. Nothing like that," reassured Joanne. She was worried about flashover, but that had been nothing like one.

"Switch off the generators," ordered Ian. "Let's work out what just happened before we increase the power we're taking off it."

"I'd like a copy of those readings of yours as well, please. I'll show them to an independent expert." Christine Johnson smiled falsely at them.

Joanne frowned. She had a feeling Christine knew a lot more about their magnetic irregularity than she was letting on. Joanne resented working in the dark, even on something as exciting and interesting as this, or rather especially on something as exciting and interesting as this.

* * *

9.40am, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Ian MacKenzie, Head of Research Physics at the Morton Hall Research Institute, couldn't help a smile of pleasure at the woman who had just handed him a cup of coffee. Light brown hair fell across her features as she sat down next to him.

He raised his eyebrows as he took the coffee. "And to what do I owe this honour, Claudia Brown?"

She put a report down on the desk in front of her. "Can you explain all this to me in layman's terms? I've got some kind of a briefing with Christine Johnson this afternoon and I don't want to appear too much of a dunce."

"My pleasure." Ian took the report and flicked through it quickly. "This is about our local anomaly. I assume you were told about it."

"I got a brief run down. Opens on a regular cycle every six months or so. Opens three or four times in quick succession and then closes down."

"That's right. We got our first opening just now, there'll be another in a couple of hours."

"What's all the stuff about sealing it in? I've not come across that before."

"Oh, that's an off shoot of some of the research back in Wales. I won't bore you with the technical details but we can close off an anomaly and prevent anything getting in or out."

Claudia rolled her eyes. Ian thought the expression of good-humoured irritation suited her. "That makes the ARC a bit redundant doesn't it? Why didn't you share the information with us there?"

Ian shrugged. "Don't ask me, I'm only a physicist. You can ask Christine when you see her this afternoon."

"I can guess what she'll say. I suppose I should leave her and James to their territorial dispute."

"Probably a good idea. Good luck with that meeting Claudia."

Claudia Brown smiled at him. "Thanks, I'm going to need it."

* * *

11.40am, Private Meeting Room, Chester Services, M56.

"A Bubble Timeline!" Christine Johnson sounded indignant.

Helen sighed exaggeratedly and then smirked. Always keep them guessing. "Sometimes a bubble timeline forms in parallel with this one, the major timeline. It's like a parallel universe, if you like, in which history took a slight different turn."

"How many of these bubble timelines are there?"

"Well lots form, but they never last long. A few hours at most. That's why they're called bubbles."

"Is that what happened when Jenny Lewis replaced Claudia Brown?"

"No, that was different. That was an overwrite of the dominant timeline. But it's a similar idea. This bubble timeline of yours could be one with Claudia Brown in it, not Jenny Lewis, for instance. People might be the same but with different jobs, or working in different places, or just having chosen to wear different clothes this morning. Anything really."

"What causes them?"

Helen shrugged. "No one is sure. They often happen if two anomalies are open at the same time. The bubble timeline centres around one of the anomalies, meanwhile the other one behaves strangely. That might be the flash of light you described. If your people were messing around with magnetic fields it's possible there was some kind of resonance effect. The anomaly you were playing with interacted with the other and 'boom' bubble timeline."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Not as far as anyone knows. They last for their few hours and then disintegrate. Nothing to worry about." Helen judged her moment had come. "Can I go now?"

Christine's mouth pursed in irritation but in the end she nodded curtly.

* * *

9.55am, Anomaly Research Centre.

Jenny watched as Connor bounced gently on his toes in excitement.

"So, you see, the anomaly opens every six months or so. A few times in succession at regular intervals and then it quietens down again. I'm absolutely certain it'll open again this afternoon."

"This is at that abandoned research facility. Out in the Midlands somewhere?" Jenny checked. She recalled the place from the last abortive series of call-outs, squat ugly concrete buildings in a large park.

"That's the one!"

"It's not abandoned, it's MoD," said Lester wearily.

"It looks abandoned," said Connor.

Lester shrugged. "Looks can be deceiving, or so the MoD tell me. I'll get on to them. Last time I asked they said we were fine to go there as long as we didn't damage anything or interfere with their storage bunker in the grounds."

"Do you think the dinosaurs got the memo?" asked Cutter.

"Take a Special Forces team to deliver it," said Lester, deadpan. "If we have some soldiers camping round the place ready for it to open, they can stop anything destructive getting through. Besides, I imagine it's too much to hope that nothing got through this morning. In fact take both teams, maybe Becker's lot will pull their socks up a bit if they're working next to Ryan's men. That research institute is close enough that we can despatch them elsewhere if necessary."

"But don't you see," said Connor excitedly. "We can take my new probe. It'll fit easily into the back of one of the vans."

Lester scowled. "Didn't you say it required access to the National Grid?"

"I sorted that. It'll run off a generator now and we've got one. Please?"

Lester sighed. "I suppose you do have to field test it sometime. Don't break it though, the parts alone cost a small fortune and don't damage the research institute either."

* * *

1pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

"How are you finding the job? I do hope you like it." Christine smiled professionally.

"It's certainly a lot quieter than working for the ARC," agreed Claudia. "I needed a break but, in many ways, I'm glad still to be connected with the anomaly project."

Even now, Claudia got flashbacks to Cutter's broken body being carried out of the burning remains of the ARC in Connor's arms. It was a difficult memory. Lester had drafted in some Home Office counsellor who had talked a lot about delayed reactions and the grieving process. She'd never mentioned it to Lester, but it was partly on the counsellor's advice that she had resigned from the anomaly project. The beginnings of a flirtation with Quinn had felt too much like a betrayal.

Christine was nodding. "I do feel that the scientific work we do here is the real work. All the running around the countryside chasing dinosaurs has its place, of course, and I don't mean to downplay the contribution of those involved, but it really is a case of treating the symptoms rather than the cause."

Claudia bit her lip, recalling the many times she or Lester had tried to get funding for more scientific work. She had little doubt now why they had had so much difficulty. Working for Christine's unit also felt like a betrayal. But the discreet invitation to a meeting had arrived two weeks after she walked out of the ARC for the last time. Just long enough for her to have started regretting her decision and before she'd settled into a quiet life once more. It had intrigued her, and once Christine offered her the job as manager of Morton Hall Research Institute she had jumped at the chance. It might have been the MoD rather than the Home Office, but it was working to the same ends and she had some hopes she might manage to liaise between the two groups.

Christine glanced out of the window. "I'm glad you've settled in, though. I've been looking for a good manager for this facility for months. It's a bit of an outpost, but important all the same."

"They're a good team," agreed Claudia. "I've found them easy to work with."

They were a good team. Ian was a little like a toned-down version of Cutter. He was less combative but Claudia was grateful for that. She didn't want someone keeping her on her toes just at the moment.

Christine nodded. "Jolly good. I have to get back to Wales this evening, so I'm afraid I need to go. But I'm glad you've settled in."

Claudia knew she was dismissed and left the room with a few platitudes. She wondered, not for the first time, what it was Christine was doing in Wales. It was all boxes within boxes and she was uncomfortably aware she didn't know the full story behind Christine Johnson's little operation.

* * *

1.05pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

The science team were crammed into a 4x4 and a large van carrying Connor's new probe. Behind them the two security teams were in trucks. Ryan reflected, as he drove, that they must look like a small army detachment on manoeuvres.

Morton Hall Research Institute was a depressing building. Greyish white concrete cubes, stacked higgledy piggledy in an area of patchy grass. It had rained heavily overnight and puddles were visible in the gravel drive. It had a look of a place long abandoned.

Ryan parked the truck and watched as the scientists all tumbled eagerly out of their vehicles chatting animatedly. Ryan went to fetch a gun. As he came round the truck Stephen was already examining a patch of grass just by the gravel.

"Got something?" Ryan walked up to him.

"Looks like the anomaly was just here and something came out," said Stephen.

Now he looked, Ryan could see large tracks, appearing as if from nowhere and leading clearly across the muddy ground and out into the woodland that seemed to ring the site.

"Nice clear prints," agreed Ryan. "Looks like several creatures though. We'd better take both teams to be on the safe side."

"Don't go near the bunker," warned Jenny. "The MoD are very protective about it."

"It's in the other direction from those tracks," said Ryan. "I'll be careful, but if the whatever-it-is doubles back that way, I'm staying on its trail."

"According to Lester they have armed guards. They say they can handle anything that gets close."

"Pigs might fly!"

"Ryan!" There was a note of warning in Jenny's voice.

"I won't go over there deliberately, but I do have a job to do."

"It's academic anyway," interrupted Becker. "The whatever-it-is has gone the other way. Hopefully we won't have to deal with the MoD goons at all."

Jenny scowled at them both. "Just be sensible, OK? Call me if you're going to start stepping on someone's toes."

"I'd like to check out the buildings," said Cutter, suddenly. "Just to be sure nothing's inside. Last time we were here it was all unlocked."

Ryan frowned and caught Becker's eye. He realised they were both thinking Cutter was bound to get into trouble. However, Ryan had a nasty feeling he was going to need all his men.

"Becker, you go with them," ordered Ryan. "Secure the building. Take detectors with you. We want to know the moment the anomaly opens a second time."

Becker nodded. "Jones! You're in charge of our squad, take orders from Captain Ryan. I'll give you all a call if the anomaly opens. This lot should be safe enough if I can keep them indoors."

"Agreed." Ryan eyed Jones warily. He was a thick set man with a shaved head and disconcertingly large brown eyes. He was reliable and efficient, as Becker's team went, certainly as good a choice as Becker could make under the circumstances.

There was a crash from the back of the supply truck.

"Connor!" shouted Ryan.

"I'm OK. I just tripped."

Connor staggered out carrying his probe and began to set it up in the car park.

"Doesn't that need to be next to the anomaly?" asked Abby.

"No it just needs to be pointing in roughly the right direction. Then I take this remote to fine tune the beam," explained Connor. "I'll stay here and hook it all up so it's ready to go."

Ryan scowled. Herding cats would definitely be easier. He looked around. The grass area at the front was wide open. As long as Connor kept an eye open he would see anything heading over to attack him. As long as he kept an eye open. Ryan succumbed to the inevitable. He would have to leave a guard. Suddenly he realised Quinn was watching him, an amused grin on his face.

"Can you stay here with him?" Ryan asked. "First sign of trouble, you both move into the building."

Quinn nodded. "Leave it to me, mate."

"Here take this!" said Becker unexpectedly. He was holding out his Mossberg. "It's got more stopping power than that pop-gun you normally use."

"Nothing wrong with a Glock," muttered Quinn. "Thanks anyway though. What about you?"

"I'll take an M4. That should be powerful enough to handle anything that could actually get in the building. Look after it though."

Quinn grinned. "Don't worry mate. I know what she means to you."

Becker flipped him a finger but grinned at the same time.

Jenny looked anxiously over at the woods. "How close are we to the road? Could there be members of the public about? It's been a while since that anomaly opened."

"We'll keep an eye out for them," said Ryan. "I'll give you a call if we find any but I'd prefer it if you were back here."

"I've got an ex in the local police," said Quinn suddenly. "I'll give her a ring, ask if there have been any dinosaur sightings."

"Danny!" The warning tone in Jenny's voice was clear.

"Hey! Don't worry! She's trustworthy and I'm discreet. You're going to have to liaise with them anyway if there's a problem."

"Very well." Jenny still looked doubtful.

"OK we have a plan," said Ryan. "Jones and I will take the two teams with Stephen to track down these creatures. Connor and Quinn stay here, to secure the main entrance and set up the gizmo. Becker and Cutter are going to check the building. Abby go with them, they may need your expertise."

"We'll come too," said Jenny, glancing at Sarah for confirmation. "If there's anyone in there, I want to talk to them."

Ryan nodded. "Good plan." Something big had come out of the anomaly. Too big to get through the doors of the research institute. Hopefully they would all be safe inside.

* * *

1.15pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

"Are we looking for anything in particular?" Jenny asked curiously. She and Cutter were a little behind Becker, Sarah and Abby as they entered the building.

Cutter shook his head. "Not really. We'll give the place a quick sweep, but I doubt anything came in here."

"Not itching to help Stephen with the tracking?" Jenny was curious. She crossed to one of the windows in the corridor and looked out, vaguely wondering if she would see the team in the grounds.

"Oh aye! But I think he needs his turn in the lead. He and Ryan can be trusted not to do anything foolish."

* * *

1.15pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

"He and Ryan can be trusted not to do anything foolish."

Claudia jerked her head up in surprise. She was on her way back to her office but she had had the clearest impression of Cutter's voice floating on the air.

Carefully she took a deep breath. Clearly she wasn't as over the shock and grief as she had thought. She crossed to the window, hoping to compose herself as she looked out over the grounds.

* * *

1.16pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Suddenly, Jenny shivered as she stood by the window. The grounds looked dreary and empty. She could just see the soldiers disappearing into the woodland.

"What is it?"

She was surprised Cutter had noticed her reaction. She smiled and shook her head. "Nothing. A ghost walked over my grave, that's all."

"It's an amazing site really. Such a shame they did the archaeology in a hurry when they built this place." Sarah's voice floated back down the corridor towards them. "It's been continuously occupied since prehistoric times."

"So what was here before the research buildings?" asked Becker.

"16th century manor house. It got bombed out in an air raid during World War Two."

"Hang about," said Abby. "Don't want to leave Cutter and Jenny behind."

Jenny offered Cutter a smile. "We'd better catch up."

"Check the offices?" asked Sarah as they approached.

Becker glanced briefly at Cutter and then nodded. They stood in a long corridor. Doors ran down either side.

"Jenny and I'll check on the left. You check on the right," suggested Cutter.

He opened the door nearest him. Jenny followed him into the room.

"Nothing here," she remarked.

It must have been a large office once, but now it stood bare and empty. Peeling blue carpet tiles covered the floor.

* * *

1.17pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

Claudia walked into her office, making a mental note to get the faded blue carpet tiles changed. One day she'd even remember to ask about it. She shivered as she crossed the threshold, a sudden chill washing through her. She turned to glance back into the corridor, wondering if there was an open window.

She caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye and put her head out to look. She gasped in surprise.

* * *

1.17pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Jenny looked around. She had the strangest sensation that she was seeing things out of the corner of her eye. She started as Cutter touched her arm.

"You OK?" he asked, sounding concerned.

She nodded, distracted, but summoned up a smile for him. "Think so. Should we get moving?"

"Anomaly!" shouted Becker's voice suddenly.

"What!" Cutter dashed out of the room, Jenny hot on his heels. They stopped in the corridor. The anomaly was directly in front of them, just inside the big double entrance doors.

"I'll tell Connor!" said Abby.

Cutter nodded. Jenny watched as she edged past the anomaly and then ran out into the grounds.

Becker raised his gun and pointed it at the glittering shape, opening up a frequency on his radio. "Captain Ryan! Come in please. We have an anomaly in the building."

* * *

1.17pm, Grounds, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Ryan watched as Stephen crouched over the tracks. He could tell Stephen was worried by the set of his shoulders.

"Any idea what it is?" asked Ryan.

Stephen glanced up. "They look like allosaurus prints to me. I've seen reproduction trackways, they're pretty distinctive."

"Allosaurus is bad I take it," said Lyle gloomily.

"Allosaurus is bad," agreed Ryan.

"Large carnivore," confirmed Stephen. "Several of them, in fact. I'm not sure how many yet, but more than one."

"Look on the bright side," said Ditzy. "Some paleontologists believe they were too heavy and cumbersome to be effective hunters."

"When have we ever had that much sodding luck?" muttered Lyle.

"You been reading up then Ditzy?" laughed Finn.

Suddenly the radio burst into life. "This is Becker. We have an anomaly in the building. I repeat, we have an anomaly in the building."

Ryan exchanged a glance with Lyle. He could see they were both calculating risks and manpower. If there were several allosaurus', Ryan was going to need all the men he could get, but now there was an anomaly in the research institute.

"Becker can handle it," muttered Lyle quietly.

"Maybe," agreed Ryan, "but he's not the only trained man there."

"Quinn, have you been listening?" Ryan asked into the radio.

"Sounds like fun," Quinn answered.

"There are some allosaurus on the loose. We don't know how many yet but I'd be happier if you and Connor got inside the building. We'll keep tracking them. Becker, radio the moment it looks like anything dangerous might come through that thing. Make sure Cutter and Abby are armed, Connor too if you have to."

* * *

1.19pm, Car Park, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

"Connor!"

Connor looked up to see Abby running out of the building towards him.

"What is it?"

"Anomaly!" she gasped out, stopping in front of him, panting slightly.

"What? In the building?"

She nodded breathlessly.

"Just heard it on the radio mate," said Quinn, suddenly. "What's worse there's allosaurus on the loose. Everyone needs to stay in the house. Abby are you armed? What about Cutter? Do we know if this anomaly goes to wherever the allosaurus' came from?"

"Unlikely," said Connor. "They've not been to consistent time zones in the past." He grabbed the probe remote. "Right! Time to test this out. Danny, can you stay here to switch the beast on?"

"What? This?" Quinn gestured at the main unit which Connor had connected up outside the house. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Abby helping herself to a gun from the back of the supply van.

"That's right. When this red light here goes on, flick that switch. When it turns off, switch it again. Simple, really," said Connor.

"Yeah..." said Quinn doubtfully.

"It's that or Abby, mate. You want her to stay out here with allosaurus on the prowl? Ow!" Connor finished, as Abby hit him.

"I'm armed, and I've got a second tranquiliser gun here for Cutter." She looked at Quinn.

"Go on, you two, then. But I'm not staying here long." Quinn shouted after their retreating backs. "First sign of an allosaurus at the tree line, I'm heading into the house too. And I'm coming in as soon as it's on. We want as many people as possible guarding that anomaly."

* * *

1.25pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

"Corridor! Outside my office!" said Claudia breathlessly, bursting into Ian's lab.

Ian's research assistant, Sophie, was in there with him. She was a short redhead, apparently fighting an endless losing battle with her frizzy hair. The two heads were bent over some kind of print out. Sophie's red curls contrasted against Ian's black locks.

"What?" asked Ian, looking up.

"The anomaly's opened, outside my office, right in the entrance of the building!"

At that moment the alarms went off. Ian grimaced.

"That's quite a lag," commented Claudia.

"Always has been. The algorithms are lousy slow," said Sophie.

"Not to worry, it's opened there before. We've got a machine set up in the right place," Ian said.

He switched on several cameras, showing the anomaly pulsing in the corridor. Then he pulled up some kind of control panel on the computer and clicked several buttons. There was a small unit at the side of the main entrance which Claudia had hardly ever noticed, or if she had, she'd assumed it was a fuse box, or a boxed-in radiator. It lit up and a beam of light shot towards the anomaly.

* * *

1.25pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Connor skidded to a halt in the entrance, Abby at his heels. Cutter and Jenny stood on one side of the anomaly and Sarah and Becker on the other. Becker had his gun pointed at the light.

Connor switched on the handheld and lifted it up. Quinn was obviously doing his job because a beam of light shot out from the probe. Connor lifted the handheld so it caught the beam and then he twisted it to deflect the light into the anomaly.

Connor felt for a moment that he was somehow looking into and through the anomaly, but on the other side was not some prehistoric landscape but a reflection of the corridor in which he now stood. A beam of light was streaming from some device by the wall, into the anomaly, touching the light from his own probe.

The anomaly seemed to expand. Shards of light flew out along the corridor. Connor vaguely saw Cutter grabbing hold of Jenny and pulling her towards him. When Connor looked either side of him he just saw sheets of light expanding away into the distance.

The anomaly twisted and vanished.

Connor was left standing in the middle of a field. In the distance he could see a faint orange glow, as if there was some translucent wall between where he stood and the horizon. In front of him stood half a dozen men, dressed in animal skins.

Claudia raised her hands instinctively as a flash of light seemed to fill the room. She heard Ian cry out. She felt her hair stir in some kind of breeze. When she opened her eyes Ian and Sophie, sat at a desk in front of her, were outlined against a glowing orange backdrop.

"What the...?" said Ian incredulously.

Claudia looked around. They appeared to be in the middle of a circle with an orange barrier separating them from the lab beyond. She stepped forwards cautiously and touched the glowing wall. Light shone through it. The wall was slightly soft and yielding to her touch, but when she pushed she couldn't force her hand through it. They were trapped.

Ian was frantically typing into his computer.

"What happened?" asked Claudia.

"I've no idea."

"It looks like the exterior of an anomaly once we've sealed it," hazarded Sophie cautiously.

"Can you switch off the device?"

"I've tried but it's on the other side of that thing and the cameras are down." Ian shook his head. "I've no idea if it's actually switched off or not."

* * *

1.26pm, Car Park, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Quinn stared at the strange bubble that appeared to have encased the whole building. Hurriedly, he cut the power to the probe. The loud hum of the machine quietened to nothing.

The shell remained.

Experimentally, Quinn lobbed a stone at the bubble. It bounced and clattered to the driveway at his feet.

He sighed and picked up the radio. Ryan was not going to be happy. "Captain Ryan! I have a problem."

"What the bloody hell has happened? We saw some kind of flash."

Quinn shrugged, pointlessly since there was no one there to see. "Beats me, mate. Connor wanted me to switch on his machine before heading into the institute. I did as I was told. This kind of orange barrier has appeared. It's all round the flippin' building as far as I can see."

"Bloody scientists! Becker, are you there?"

Quinn paused, giving Becker time to reply. There was nothing but static.

"Too much to hope for, I suppose," came Ryan's weary voice.

"What do you want to do? Bring a team back here?"

"No, we're still tracking these dinosaurs," said Ryan. "Call up the ARC, say we need a physicist. Wait to meet them up on the driveway."

"Think I'll hold you back, do you?"

"No, but I need Stephen. He's our best tracker. And everyone else here is army. They're the best men for a coordinated hunt like this. That leaves you to hold it all together. You going to do it?"

"Yeah! All right," agreed Quinn with a grin. "I've got a gun. But if I get eaten by an allosaurus or disintegrated by some weird phenomenon unknown to physics, I'm blaming you."

He heard Ryan chuckle. "I'll bear that in mind. Keep in radio contact."

* * *

1941, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"You can let go of me now," murmured Jenny quietly.

"Sorry!" Cutter realised he was holding her tight in his arms. "Reflex reaction, I wasn't sure what was happening."

Jenny smiled at him, knowingly he thought, but maybe he was imagining things. Then she glanced around.

"What happened? Where are we?"

They stood in a long wood-panelled corridor. There were cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. Heavy drapes covered the windows, plunging the corridor into gloom. The only source of light was a translucent diamond that hung eerily in front of them.

"I have no idea," Cutter confessed.

"This looks a bit like part of an anomaly, only bigger," said Jenny, walking around the light curiously.

Cutter nodded. "Aye, difficult to be sure, though."

"I wonder what happens if you step through it?"

"Aren't you the one always urging us to be more careful around these things?"

Jenny grinned and looked up and down the empty corridor. "Do you have any better ideas?"

Cautiously Cutter pushed his hand through the light. It vanished into the haze. He wiggled his fingers and imagined he felt them move. A breeze wafted across them.

Jenny walked around the diamond again. "Can't see your hand on this side," she reported.

Cutter withdrew his hand and stared doubtfully at his fingers. Cutter shrugged. "Here goes nothing."

He stepped through the light and found himself on a stone-built road, which ran in a straight line before him. Not so far away he could see ranks of men approaching, orangey sunlight glinting off helmets and breastplates. They were unmistakably Roman.

Cutter turned to retreat through his doorway of light. There was nothing there. The road stretched out, bare and empty, in the other direction. Cutter stepped forward hopefully, but nothing happened. It looked like the doorway had been one way.

* * *

1642, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"Why are you holding my hand?"

Becker looked down to find Sarah's hand was clasped firmly in his. "I was pulling you out of danger?" he hazarded.

"You happen to know it's safer to be standing behind a fully armed soldier in unexpected anomaly events, do you?"

"In my experience it's usually safer behind a fully armed soldier."

He heard Sarah sniff. "There's some innuendo in there if I cared to dig for it."

Becker grinned to himself. "You wouldn't have to dig that far. Where are we?"

He was standing in some kind of room. Heavy wooden furniture was pushed up against wood panelled walls and a fire burned in a large grate at one end.

"A Great Hall, I think. The decoration is 17th century."

"I would have expected a great hall to be larger. My gran's kitchen is bigger than this."

"I assume your gran lives in an extensive farmhouse of some kind. This is a pretty typical size for a manor house. Not as showy as the big stately homes, but then it'll hold the heat better."

"We're in a manor house then."

Sarah nodded. "If I had to guess, I'd say it was the building that was on the site before the research institute was built."

"Who are you?"

Becker and Sarah turned round to see a tall gaunt man walking in through the door behind them. He had long brown hair that fell around his shoulders and a large wide-brimmed hat on his head with a feather in it. A sword was strapped to one hip over dull red clothing. Even Becker could tell he was a cavalier. Men walked behind him in a mixture of clothing, but all looking distinctly soldierly and business-like.

Sarah smiled a sick worried smile and glanced in his direction. "My husband and I were travelling to err... Colston Bassett and were waylaid by... levellers who dressed us in this outlandish attire before we were able to escape."

Becker nodded seriously. "Yeah! Levellers. Very outlandish!"

Sarah scowled at him.

"Colston Bassett, you say?" said the man. "You were visiting the Chaworths?"

"That's right," agreed Sarah.

"Indeed, my lady wife speaks truly," said Becker. It sounded like a good turn of phrase to him but Sarah's frown suggested maybe he had overdone it.

"I am Major Carstairs," said the man. "I am charged with maintaining the estates around here in the name of the King. I am sorry you had trouble with

levellers. I was not previously aware there were any in the area." He regarded them curiously.

Becker shrugged. "That's what they said they were. They took our clothes, dressed us up like this and then left us tied up by the highway. It's possible they wanted our clothes to infiltrate somewhere." He glanced sideways at Sarah, who frowned at him a third time. He was tempted to shrug. It was her implausible story.

"Very likely," said Carstairs.

Becker's hackles quietly rose. He might not have been a historian but the man's reactions were not ringing true.

"Well... Mr..." Carstairs paused.

"Captain Becker," Becker said automatically.

"Of Lord Chaworth's regiment," added Sarah hurriedly.

"Yeah," agreed Becker. "And my wife, Sarah." He gestured with his hand which she caught hold of and then curtseyed.

"Well, Captain Becker. I'd appreciate it if you could look over some maps with me and give some indication where these levellers were. If your lady wife would care to be conducted upstairs? I'm sure my wife's maid can find some more suitable clothing for her."

"Well..." Becker temporised. He didn't like the idea of being separated from Sarah.

"That would be delightful," said Sarah.

* * *

1939, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Abby walked down a wood-panelled corridor. The lie of the land outside the window looked familiar. The trees were younger, and there were formal borders and little pathways in the area around the house, where previously there had been a simple lawn. No pylons marched over the hills in the distance. However, she had no doubt she was in the same place, just in a different time.

She turned a corner. A beam of light hung in the middle of the corridor. In fact it wasn't a beam so much as a vague diamond shape. Dust motes danced in it. Warily, Abby edged around it.

"Abigail!" said a voice.

She whirled around and found herself looking into a bedroom. An old man lay on a large double-bed, a thick heavy counterpane in patterned red tapestry across his body. Clear blue eyes gazed at her.

"Did you ever reach the library?" he asked.

She stepped backwards in surprise, through the hanging diamond of light.

Someone was crying. The strange light, which should have been directly in front of her, had vanished. Instead she faced a closed door, where seconds previously she'd been looking in on the old man. She turned around. There was a window behind her and once again she looked out onto manicured grounds. She turned back and cautiously stepped forward. Nothing changed. She grasped the handle on the door and turned it slowly. The door swung open to reveal what appeared to be the same room she had just seen. The same large bed stood in the centre, covered with a long white dust sheet. The sound of sobbing appeared to come from under the bed.

Carefully, Abby stepped forward, crouched down and lifted up the sheet. She stared into the eyes of a small boy. His face and hands were grubby with dust and streaks ran down his face from the tears.

"Hello?" said Abby.

"Who are you?" asked the boy.

"Abigail," she said and then caught herself, surprised. She didn't normally call herself Abigail, but the old man's words were still echoing around her head. "What's the matter, mate?" she asked the boy.

He sniffed. "I can't do Latin."

Abby grinned. "I never even tried, and I turned out all right. I wouldn't worry about it."

"Mr. Turner says if I can't decline mensa correctly by this afternoon it'll be three straps instead of one."

Abby winced and pursed her lips. "How difficult can it be? Do you have it written down somewhere?"

"I left my books in the library."

Abby shivered slightly as the old man's words echoed in her mind. "Let's get to the library then," she said brightly.

* * *

2473 BC, Leicestershire.

Tarn looked at the young man who had suddenly appeared before them. His clothing was strange and outlandish. Tarn found it hard to conceive what kind of animal much of it had come from, although the man wore some kind of worked tunic over the top that was clearly like well-rubbed leather, shaped to a degree Tarn would not have thought possible.

He didn't look back at his men, though he would have liked to see their faces, so he could judge their reactions to the stranger. They had been on their way to visit the strange ball of light that sometimes hung over the fields. Smaller pieces of light could be seen darting in and out of it. The day had dawned with a strange orange cast to the sky and a large block of light had appeared in the village centre, looking just like one of those tiny pieces made big. It had been agreed that the menfolk should venture into the fields and see if the ball had returned.

Instead they had found this man, with his smooth skin and strange clothes.

The man opened his mouth and speech tumbled out. He held up his hands in a gesture that looked placatory.

"Take him back to the village," ordered Tarn. "Let us see if he can do something about the strange light."

* * *

1941, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Jenny decided to see what was outside. She reached out to one of the drapes across the window and was surprised to find it was taped down. She pulled up one corner and peered through the window.

Outside, night had fallen. It was clear and bright however and, as Jenny's eyes adapted to the dark, she could make out indistinct shapes of vehicles in the drive. There were a lot of trucks with canvas tops which made her think of the army.

Suddenly a long siren wailed out. Jenny recognised the sound from a hundred childhood movies. There was an air raid. She heard the sound of footsteps running below and orders being barked. Of course, troops got billeted in houses like this, didn't they? During the Second World War? Then she recalled Sarah enthusing about the house, 'bombed out during an air raid in World War Two'.

Jenny looked upwards and made out the shape of a plane, blocking out the stars. Something fell. She turned in panic and began to run back down the corridor towards the shard of light Cutter had gone through. As she leaped through, the sound of an explosion echoed behind her.

* * *

1642, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"There, that's more like it," said the maid as she made some final adjustments to Sarah's bodice.

"Oh yes," agreed Sarah, mustering a smile. "I feel quite civilised again."

"It must have been a terrible thing for you, getting captured like that," added the maid. "Gave us quite a turn seeing you in the hall. For a moment I half thought the ghosts had left the library."

"The library?" echoed Sarah, puzzled.

"Oh yes, ma'am. There's all sort of tales about ghosts in the library."

"Have you ever seen one?" Sarah couldn't help asking.

A look crossed the maid's face that told Sarah that she would dearly have loved to be able to say yes, but in the end she settled for, "I can't say that I have, but I've heard whispering in there. Strange incantations about anomalies and the like."

"Oh." Sarah fought to conceal her interest.

"Will that be all?" asked the woman.

"Yes, thank you very much."

Sarah waited a few moments for the maid to vanish and then she poked her head out of the room. It might have been safest to keep a low profile, but it sounded like the library was definitely the place to be.

As she turned a corner she was startled to see a diamond of light hanging in the corridor. Curious, she stepped through.

* * *

71AD, Fosse Way, Leicestershire.

Cutter blinked in surprise as Jenny suddenly appeared next to him, at a run.

"You OK?" he asked, catching her arm.

She nodded. "Air raid! Thought I'd be safer here."

"Ah, well, I hate to say it, but we're trapped." Cutter gestured towards the empty space. "And the army are on their way."

He saw Jenny's eyes widen at the Roman Legion before them. "Oh my!" she said. "We've never gone back in time to this sort of period before, have we?"

"Nor World War Two, if that's what you meant by an air raid. Something strange has happened. We need to find Connor and get him to explain exactly what he was doing. Meanwhile I suggest we get off the road and let the nice soldiers pass."

Jenny nodded and the two of them stepped off the stone roadway and into the short grass. "Do you think we should head into the woods?" asked Jenny. "Our clothes are going to cause comment."

Cutter shook his head. "Hopefully they'll just think we're some kind of barbarian locals. If we start trying to hide from them we'll cause suspicion."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Military mind-set. I don't believe it's evolved in 2,000 years."

"That's a little unfair. I bet you wouldn't say that if Ryan was here."

Cutter grinned. "Possibly not."

The legion was marching past them, rank upon rank of foot soldiers with golden standards held high. In the middle were mounted men, officers of some kind, Cutter assumed. He saw one of these men glance at him and Jenny and then speak to someone. Seconds later one of the horsemen peeled away and cantered towards them.

"Uh oh!" muttered Cutter.

"Quis es?" said the man.

Cutter looked in panic towards Jenny who frowned back at him.

The man repeated his words more slowly. Jenny visibly took a deep breath and then, to Cutter's surprise, she answered back.

What sounded like a slow and painful exchange of information continued for a bit and then the Roman turned his horse and galloped back to the column.

"I didn't know you spoke Latin," said Cutter.

"I did Greats. Danny isn't the only person around here with a classical education, you know."

"Danny has a classical education?"

Jenny smirked at him. Then she gestured after the retreating army. "He asked if we were Corieltauvi. That's the local tribe I think. I said no. Anyway it appears there's some sort of insurrection. He was warning us to get clear of the area, they were expecting a fight."

Cutter groaned. "That's just what need. Getting stuck in the middle of a battlefield."

"He also asked about the sky. I gather we haven't arrived at sunrise or sunset."

Cutter glanced upwards. "It is an odd colour. I can't say I'm too happy about it."

"I wonder if the anomaly detector might pick up any more of those light diamond things?" mused Jenny.

"Not a bad idea." Cutter was impressed. He turned his back on the army to face her and switched on the detector. He peered at the readings. "There's a faint signal, in those trees somewhere."

"An anomaly?" Jenny stepped to his side and peered at the detector's screen.

"To be honest? No. The signal is very faint and, well, not quite typical of anomalies. Connor packed a whole load of sensors into these devices that weren't strictly needed."

"Did he? Why?"

"Said he thought they might be and he might as well include them while he had the budget."

"I can see I'm going to need to personally oversee Connor's accounts in future."

"Anyway, the thing is ahead of us somewhere." Cutter gestured towards the woods at the side of the road.

"Off we go then!" said Jenny, with forced jollity.

"At least you're wearing sensible shoes for a change."

Jenny grinned at Cutter's retreating back. "I can run pretty fast in heels you know. But I do run faster without."

"And what made you think there would be running today?"

"Connor was much too excited about his new probe. Let's call it women's intuition."

* * *

1881, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"Miles? Miles?" came a voice.

Instinctively Abby darted behind one of the long curtains in the hallway, making shushing noises at the small boy in front of her.

"Miles! There you are!" A woman in a bustle appeared at the end of the corridor and bore down on the boy. "Mr. Hurst has been looking for you everywhere. You have been playing truant again!"

The boy hung his head but said nothing.

"What am I going to do with you? It'll be the ruler tonight."

Abby bit her lip as the boy was led away. Much as she would have liked to intervene, she was too unsure of what was going on. Once the corridor was empty, she stepped carefully out from behind the drape.

With a shrug she continued the way she was going. Another shard of light hung across one of the side corridors. Abby headed towards it. She needed to find the others, preferably Connor, and she was fairly sure they weren't here. Beyond the shard she could see some sort of railing at the end of the corridor, presumably the top of a staircase or similar. As she stepped through the light, music and laughter assailed her. Before her stood a young man in an elegant tuxedo.

He looked at her in surprise and then a broad grin broke across his face. "Abigail! So I didn't dream you!"

"Errr.. Miles?" hazarded Abby.

"Good show! Come down and join in the dancing."

"I'm hardly dressed for a ball!" Abby said, alarmed.

Miles looked her up and down, taking in her ripped jeans, tight top and lumberjack shirt. "Wear my dinner jacket," he said. "I'll just say you're dressing as a man for a lark."

Abby frowned. Normally she wouldn't have cared what people thought of her appearance but she was painfully aware she was in a different time, one about which she knew very little. History had never really been an interest of hers at school. It was the Victorian era, she thought, recalling the bustled woman she had seen moments earlier. Well, if she remembered rightly, they didn't burn women as witches by then. The worst that could happen would be getting thrown out of the house and probably struck off the Christmas card list.

She shrugged and allowed Miles to lead her down the wide staircase into a small hall below. Abby felt herself blushing at the curious eyes fixed on her. A small chamber group were playing some kind of dance, a waltz, Abby guessed, as Miles placed a hand on her waist and began to lead her through the crowd.

"You don't seem all that surprised by my sudden appearance," said Abby.

"Oh, the house is haunted. Ever since I saw you when I was a boy I've assumed you're just a particularly eccentric ghost."

Abby raised her eyebrows. "I can't say I feel much like a ghost."

Miles pulled her closer. "No, I have to admit that you don't, but you're as outlandish as the other ghosts."

"What other ghosts?"

"In the library, mostly. Several of them, there's a sighting every couple of years or so. Generally hysterical chambermaids talking about people in outlandish clothing and Scottish accents."

Abby smiled what she hoped was her most winning smile. "Any chance of you showing me the library once this dance is over?"

* * *

1642, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"It is certainly a curious device." Major Carstairs turned Becker's M4 over in his hands. Becker was praying fervently that he wouldn't find the safety catch. "Some sort of weapon do you think?"

"I have no idea why they would have given it to me, sir, if it was a weapon."

"Ah well, Captain Becker, God moves in mysterious ways."

"Indeed sir."

"I hazard this is some kind of musket. Its form is not dissimilar and see, there is even a trigger mechanism."

Becker couldn't help wincing as the man pulled the trigger. Nothing happened and the man frowned. "Although the mechanism would appear to be jammed in some way."

"I agree. It does look something like a musket," said Becker desperately. "But it makes no sense for the levellers to arm me."

"Ah, Captain! There are no levellers hereabouts, we are too close to Nottingham. The story your good wife spun was quite inspired, but I know the legends of this house. I do not believe for a moment that you were captured by levellers. The accounts in the library however, lead me to suspect that you are, at least, not in the pay of Parliament."

"I really couldn't say, sir." Becker opted for the standard military approach to questions which didn't come from a direct superior.

"Really not?" Major Carstairs glanced back at the entrance.

"No, sir." Becker was disturbed to notice troops beyond the door where Carstairs had glanced. Troops that were not at ease, but were poised ready for action. Instinctively he started checking the room for exits.

He noticed more movement in the hallway, which suggested the arrival of reinforcements. As casually as he could he reached out for the M4.

"One thing I noticed about this, sir," he said, wresting it from the man's hands and turning it over, "is that this bit appears to detach." He ejected the magazine and handed it to Carstairs who was forced to take it rather than grabbing back the gun.

At that moment a second man entered the room and nodded briefly at Carstairs. Becker took a couple of steps back, so Carstairs would now need to cross the floor to reach him, and pulled a second magazine from his belt.

Carstairs threw him a steely glance and Becker knew the game was up.

"Soldiers!" shouted Carstairs.

Becker rammed the clip into the gun and let off a short burst of fire over the heads of the soldiers now pouring into the room. He bolted for the stairs as the men cried out and ducked. Pounding up them, two at a time, Becker headed into the interior of the house as fast as he could.

* * *

71AD, Corieltauvi Lands, Leicestershire.

Cutter and Jenny were deep in the trees. Cutter found himself impressed by how well she was keeping up.

"I never took you for an outward bound type of person."

Jenny smiled at him. "There's lots of things you don't know about me, Nicholas Cutter. I like hill-walking. My father always took us on what he chose to call 'yomps' when we were children."

"I'm amazed it didn't put you off for life!"

Jenny laughed. "I wasn't so keen at the time. But the habit got ingrained somehow." There was a pause and then she said. "Did Claudia like hill-walking?"

Cutter was startled. No one ever talked or asked about Claudia, although, when he thought about it, it was obvious Jenny would be interested. "Dunno," he mumbled. "There was lots about her I didn't know either."

"I see," said Jenny non-commitally.

Cutter grunted, unsure how to continue the conversation.

"What is causing that orange glow?" Jenny asked. She had apparently decided to change the topic of conversation.

"I'm not sure," Cutter confessed. "Some kind of atmospheric effect?"

"I don't think so. I can see it through the trees as well as in the sky. Hang on a moment." Jenny headed off at a tangent.

Cutter glanced at the anomaly detector and then shrugged. He was curious too. He followed her. Jenny was standing in front of a glowing translucent wall of some kind.

"I don't believe it," said Cutter.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Connor had some theories a while back about the effect of magnetic fields on anomalies. Some of the preliminary results suggested a kind of membrane effect, but on a much smaller scale than this."

"I think it curves round us," Jenny peered into the distance.

At that moment Cutter thought he heard some kind of shout through the trees. "What was that?" he asked.

Jenny glanced back. "I hope it's not that battle."

"Time to pick up our pace a little," muttered Cutter.

They began to jog through the trees.

* * *

2473 BC, Leicestershire.

"So you see," said Connor desperately. "The anomaly..." he pointed to the sketch of an anomaly that one of the cavemen had drawn in the dirt. "Went all big!" He threw his arms wide. "And this," he pointed at the glittering triangle of light behind him, "is part of it." He beamed hopefully at his captors. He wished they hadn't stationed someone in front of the shard of light. He didn't know it was a part of the anomaly, nor was he certain he'd get anywhere if he tried to go through it. But he'd have been willing to take the chance in order to get away from the cavemen.

"You wouldn't consider letting me have a look at it, would you?" he said conversationally to them. He didn't think they'd understand him but he was nervous and that always made him ramble. He gestured towards the shard again. There was always the possibility that the cavemen would get his general drift. "I mean, I think it might be a gateway to somewhere, a door, you know?" He frowned at the wooden huts around him and the animal hide drapes that hung across the doors. "OK, so maybe you wouldn't. An entrance?" He drew a hut in the earth and an arrow pointing at the doorway. "It's not that I've anything against you, or other cavemen." He frowned. "Wooden hutmen. It's just that dinosaurs are more my thing, except when they're trying to eat me, obviously. Dinosaurs? You know?" Connor stood up roared and gnashed his teeth a bit. Several spears pointed in his direction. "No! No! That wasn't a threat! Dinosaurs? Through the anomaly? Roar, gnash, aaarrggh! Run away?"

The caveman... hutman... whatever, probably an iron age villager or something, Connor squinted at the tips of the spears and wondered what sort of metal it was... anyway, the not-caveman leader person, who had drawn the anomaly in the earth started talking again at length, gesturing to Connor and the square of light. Connor smiled politely and tried to look as if he was paying attention. The man concluded with a rising tone and some vigorous fist shaking. The other men roared in response and spears were readied.

Connor gulped.

* * *

3.05pm, Car Park, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

There was a small platform next to Connor's machine and Quinn was sitting on it whistling Stairway to Heaven. He'd called back to the ARC and amused himself battling the will of Lorraine Wickes to get the call routed through to Lester. He had then explained the problem and been amused again as Lester pointed out that Lorraine was more than capable of sorting out the relevant logistics and added a rider that Quinn should be more polite to the staff. Lester had then hung up.

Quinn was getting bored. He took some photos of the anomaly effect on his mobile and sent them to Lorraine in the hopes it might expedite matters. After fifteen minutes of a pointed communications silence from that end, he also texted an apology. Minutes later he got a text back. ¡code¿Physicist being briefed. With you after that. LW.¡/code¿ Quinn sighed. Looked like they would be on their own for a while.

Quinn was still bored though.

It was almost with a sense of relief, therefore, that he heard a harsh cry from the tree line. Cautiously he climbed to his feet. A large two-legged dinosaur, probably just larger than a man, suddenly crashed out of the undergrowth and made a dash across the scruffy lawn towards him. Quinn's first thought was 'raptor' but he presumed it was an allosaurus. He lifted up Becker's Mossberg shotgun and then glanced nervously at Connor's machine. The damn thing was almost bound to turn out to be the solution to the problem, so he'd better make sure it didn't get trashed.

He jumped down and began to run away from the probe unit, keeping out in the open where he would be a nice clear moving target to attract the creature's attention. Once he saw that it was veering away from the car park he headed into the trees, uncomfortably aware that in leading it away from the machine, he was also running away from the woods where he'd last seen Ryan and any back-up he might hope for.

"Ryan! Ryan! There's an allosaurus on the driveway. Repeat, allosaurus on the driveway," he shouted desperately into his radio as he ran.

* * *

3.05pm, Grounds, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

"What is it?" asked Ryan.

Stephen had paused over the tracks and was biting his lip. "I think there's three of them."

Ryan frowned. "Could be worse, I suppose."

Stephen smiled apologetically. "I suppose."

"Ryan! Ryan! There's an allosaurus on the driveway. Repeat, allosaurus on the driveway." The radio burst into life.

"Damn!" muttered Ryan. "Lyle! Take Finn and Blade and back up Quinn. He may need help."

Before Lyle could reply there was a sudden commotion in the undergrowth and a large reptilian creature burst out and headed towards them. Jones gave out a

single cry as a large claw slashed into him and then the beast was upon the rest of the squad.

* * *

2.50pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

Claudia wondered when a Scottish accent had started to sound so familiar and reassuring. Ian and Sophie were bent over several monitors and read-outs discussing the situation they found themselves in.

"Any chance of a layman's summary?" she asked.

Ian raked a hand through his dark hair. "Well," he said. "We're getting what I can only describe as some kind of counter-signal from within the anomaly."

"From another time?"

"No, that's it. Not from *through* the anomaly, from *within* the anomaly."

Claudia glanced at the strange glowing bubble that appeared to encase their room. "Or without," she hazarded.

Ian went pale. "Well, I'm not keen to consider that possibility."

"It's just an echo," said Sophie, suddenly. "None of the theory suggests the existence of alternative timelines or histories, or any of that speculation. The signal we're getting is just some kind of echo from our time getting bounced around."

"I doubt it," said Ian.

"Look," said Sophie. "Why don't I activate the sealing device we have in here? That way we can see if the echo fluctuates in time with the wave-form"

"Might be worth a try, I suppose. It's only the prototype though, not as fine-tuned as the later models." Ian kicked a large machine next to the desk.

Claudia watched as Sophie stood up and swung the machine round. Claudia realised it looked a little like a large science fiction gun, mounted on some kind of swivel. Sophie adjusted it to point towards the strange barrier and then returned to the workstation and sat down. She began typing away and appeared to be checking some readings. Claudia edged over to Ian. "Do you really think it's to do with the sealing device?"

Ian shrugged. "We've used it a hundred times and nothing like this has ever happened. But if there was interference from some kind of parallel timeline that was joined to ours by the anomalies, well, I can see how something like this could happen. Each timeline is competing to generate a specific reaction within the anomaly. The resulting effect is that the anomaly itself enlarges and then tries to separate into sections relating to each timeline."

Claudia rubbed her temples. She had a feeling that a headache was coming on. She was getting odd effects at the periphery of her vision as if small ripples were appearing on the inside of the bubble. But whenever she looked directly at them she saw nothing.

"It does look like we're trapped inside a sealed anomaly," said Claudia, thinking of the pictures she'd seen in one of the briefing packs.

"Aye, it does."

"OK, I've switched it on," said Sophie. "Low power, I'll bring it up gradually. That way we should be able to easily see the effect on the echo."

The big machine started to hum with power. A beam of orange light sprang out from it and hit the orange wall, appearing to merge with the barrier.

"What was that?" asked Claudia. She felt as if she'd seen a small flash of light dart across the room.

"What?" asked Ian.

Claudia frowned. There was a strange dappled effect on the desk next to Sophie as if the anomaly were somehow reflected upon it.

"Was that light there before?" she asked and glanced around, trying to see where it came from.

"Raising the power!" said Sophie.

Ian leaned over his research assistant's shoulder. "I'm not seeing any change in the signal."

"There's more light, though," said Claudia. A small shower of sparks seemed to lie across Sophie's desk.

"So there is." Ian took a step back and gazed around curiously.

"Powering up another notch!" said Sophie, barely glancing at them, her eyes fixed on her computer screen.

As Claudia watched the dappled light seemed to break apart into small units about the size of a shoe box. There was a strange scratching noise at the edge of her hearing. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said.

Suddenly one of the shoe boxy pieces of light seemed to dart onto Sophie's hand. She screamed and lifted it up. Claudia gasped as the hand withered in front of their eyes.

"What!" said Ian, in surprise.

Suddenly all the fragments of light seemed to surge together and swarm over Sophie. The strange scratching noise increased in volume until the whole room seemed to resonate under its patternless staccato blanket.

Briefly Claudia saw the face of an old woman, staring out at her from where Sophie was sitting, then a screaming skull and then a small sprinkling of dust

fell to the floor. The units of light spread out. Claudia took a step back. They appeared formless and featureless apart from the ever changing movement of the light within them, but she nevertheless had the distinct impression that they were ranged up, facing her and assessing their prey.

40.2 Episode 10

71AD, Corieltauvi Lands, Leicestershire.

Cutter and Jenny were running. Jenny hoped they were still following the signal. Cutter kept glancing at the detector, but they kept getting headed off by the sight or sounds of battle. As far as Jenny could tell, in the confusion, there was a running skirmish taking place through the trees. Small groups of whatever tribe the locals were, seemed to be engaged in endless tiny battles with units of Romans.

There had been a number of bodies. Enough that Jenny had got over her initial revulsion at the blood and the disquieting smell of fresh meat that hung about them. Now she just averted her eyes and carried on following Cutter.

"Subsistite!" a voice shouted. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Jenny recognised it as halt. She glanced back. There was a Roman in a red tunic and gold helmet visible through the trees, pointing at them.

"Doorway!" shouted Cutter at almost the same moment.

Jenny looked ahead once more. Not far away, she could indeed see a glimmer of light. She ploughed on after Cutter. The undergrowth got thicker and she realised that previously they had been following some kind of path.

There was the sound of heavy footsteps behind her and the clanging of metal against metal. Gasping for breath Jenny threw herself through the light after Cutter.

His arms caught her on the other side. They seemed to be back in the same building they had previously found themselves in. Jenny recognised the panelling, although the windows were no longer blacked out and a bright summer sun, tinged with the ubiquitous orange, shone through small glass panes.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Same place, I think," said Cutter. "Sarah said there used to be a manor house on the site of the research institute. I'm guessing this is it."

"And the Romans?"

"Same, just much earlier. I think the anomaly expanded and we're standing in its fringes. Each time we pass through one of these fragments we end up in a

time period between the present day and wherever the anomaly led to. I wonder if there is any pattern to the distribution?"

"Well," said Jenny, trying to think about the problem. "If there is, I suppose we might be able to map it."

"We need a floor plan," said Cutter. "I suppose this place might have a library, in some time periods anyway. That might be a good place to start."

"Subsistite!"

Jenny looked round. It appeared the Roman had followed them through the anomaly fragment and, judging by the raised sword, he was more angered than amazed by the situation.

* * *

3.05pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

Claudia pulled her gaze away from the strange scratchling creatures that faced her and glanced across at Ian. "What are they?"

He shook his head. He was on the far side of the creatures, backed away against the translucent bubble that surrounded the area.

"Well," said Claudia, fighting to keep calm. "They started appearing when Sophie increased the power, right?"

"Yes, the sealing process involves manipulating the magnetic field of the anomaly. The stronger the anomaly the more power is required."

"So they are attracted somehow by the power? Could we switch it off?"

Ian gulped and looked distinctly unhappy.

"Quickly?" prompted Claudia.

Ian took a hesitant step towards Sophie's workstation. Then in a sudden lunge he seized the mouse and clicked something. The beam from the sealing device vanished.

There was a sudden pulse in the strange scratching noise but no other reaction from the creatures. They began to creep across the floor towards Claudia.

"Didn't work? What do we do now?" Ian looked helplessly at her.

"You're a scientist!" she shouted desperately. "Hypothesise something!"

"Err, well, they could be antibodies."

"Antibodies?"

"Crude analogy. We're somehow within the periphery of an anomaly, between the two ends. Well we might be, that's another hypothesis." Ian frowned.

"Just go with it," suggested Claudia tersely. Cutter would have done.

"OK, well, imagine it's like a living creature and we're like some kind of virus."

Claudia nodded. "OK. Antibodies. Why did they only appear now?"

"They obviously reacted to the manipulation of the magnetic field. Perhaps it gave the anomaly sufficient power to spawn the antibodies. They are small fragments of its magnetic field given some basic ability to hunt down things which are out of place."

"We're out of place? Why?"

"I don't know. I'm just hypothesising."

Ian shrugged a little helplessly again. Claudia now had her back pressed against the strange membrane that seemed to surround them.

"OK, so they're bits of magnetic field. Magnetic fields have a polarity, right?" she said.

"Yes?"

"Well, can you reverse the polarity?" Claudia frowned at the phrase. She had a feeling she'd heard Connor say it, and not in the context of anything sensible.

"I suppose they might be charged in a particular way, in order to exist within the field."

"Reverse the polarity!" Claudia shouted. The scratchlings were beginning to coalesce and flow towards her.

Ian put his hands on the mouse again. Claudia watched him clicking and typing. The sealing device started up once more.

The scratching noise increased, but Claudia noticed the creatures shudder suddenly away from the machine itself. She took a chance and darted towards it. The scratching noise became deafening. She whirled the thing round so that it no longer pointed into the wall, but towards the swarming masses of sparkling light that pursued her. The beam cut into them. As she swept it back and forth it left a trail of normality behind it. Seconds later the floor was clear.

Ian hurriedly hit an off switch.

"That's good," said Claudia.

Ian looked worried. "If I'm right the anomaly will generate more of those things. We just speeded the process up a little by feeding power directly into it."

* * *

3.10pm, Grounds, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Stephen had dropped to one knee and was sighting along his tranquiliser rifle. Jones, he suspected, had had it. Becker's men appeared to be running everywhere

and achieving nothing. Stephen calmly drew a bead on the creature and squeezed the trigger. The dart entered a thick muscle in its leg. Stephen grunted with satisfaction.

"It's hit!" he called.

"Perfect!" muttered Lyle in his ear. "Now all we have to do is keep it busy for ten minutes, right?"

Stephen looked at him coolly and then shrugged. What was he supposed to say?

"OK, men!" shouted Ryan. "You know the drill. Covering fire, drive it away but try not to kill it!"

The regular troops formed a rough semi-circle and began firing, mostly above the creature's head. It paused in its headlong rush, clearly uncertain.

Stephen held out a hand. "Hold it!" he shouted.

He saw Lyle next to him look over to Ryan, who nodded.

"You heard the man!" called Ryan. "Hold fire!"

They all paused, watching the dinosaur as it swung its head from side to side, clearly evaluating the threat. It took a step or two backwards towards Jones' body and then let out a long harsh call.

"What's that about?" asked Lyle cautiously.

"I'm not the animal behaviour expert. But I'm guessing it's warning us away from the kill."

"You don't mess with me, I won't mess with you, kind of thing?" asked Lyle.

"Yes. Will your men be prepared to sit here and let it eat Jones while the tranquiliser takes effect?" Stephen asked quietly.

Lyle made a face. "Let's ask Ryan."

"Ask me what?" said Ryan, walking over to them. He had one eye trained warily on the allosaurus.

"Stephen reckons the beast will fall asleep in a few minutes. It might try to eat Jones first, though."

"Jones' dead. I don't want to lose anyone else messing about. I need to take some men to back up Danny-boy. Lyle, you're in charge. Once the thing is down get Becker's men to secure it. Then I want you, Stephen and the rest of our lot to keep following the tracks. I'm going to take Finn and Blade and double back to the house."

"Yes, boss!" said Lyle.

"Do any of your men have a tranquiliser rifle?" Stephen couldn't help asking.

"Finn does. Don't worry, I'll do my best to keep the thing alive for the Professor."

* * *

247 Million Years Ago, Pangaea.

Sarah gazed around her at a strange landscape. It had a lush, yet arid, feel. Large ferns, some growing on the ground and others tall as trees surrounded her. In between them were things that reminded Sarah of Mediterranean succulents. But there was no sign of grass in between the plants, just bare earth. Sarah wished suddenly that she knew a bit more about prehistoric flora. So far she'd mostly concentrated on mugging up on things that might try to eat her. Speaking of which, mere feet away from her, Sarah could see a pack of what looked like reptiles. Each one must have been a couple of feet in length with long hind legs and shorter front legs. They were grouped around the carcass of some larger beast.

Even as she stared at them, several set up a cry and the others ceased their feeding to look at her. Sarah took a step backwards and instinctively looked behind her for the doorway of light that she had stepped through. It wasn't there, but she could see it, further off, between the giant ferns. She looked at the pack of creatures again and took a second step backwards.

"You're just scavengers, right?" she said in, she hoped, a soothing tone of voice. "You didn't bring that thing down by pack hunting, did you?"

The creatures were gathering to face her, tails whipping from side to side. Sarah took another step backwards, and then another and then, as the creatures darted forwards, she turned, grabbed her long skirts and ran, heading for the light.

* * *

2473 BC, Leicestershire.

Connor looked anxiously around at his captors. "Right!" he said slowly. "I can see you're not happy with this. Maybe we can sort it out somehow."

The leader shook his head, giving Connor a brief moment of anthropological curiosity. The man made an impatient gesture and two of the warriors closed in upon him.

At that moment Sarah appeared, at a run, out of nowhere, wearing an unlikely-looking red dress, with what looked like a pack of Euparkeria at her heels.

"Connor!" she shouted, almost running into him.

The villagers hollered and attacked the small creatures. Connor turned and headed through their ranks to the fragment of anomaly that hung behind them. He felt Sarah running next to him.

"Is it always like this?" she gasped.

"Well, yes and no! The running's typical, the cavemen not so much."

There were sounds of shouts and cries behind them.

"They look more Beaker culture than cavemen," commented Sarah.

"Maybe," said Connor. "Not my period."

Sarah scowled at him and then they jumped through the fragment.

Connor looked about him. The make-shift huts of the village had been replaced by wood panelling.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"17th century manor house," said Sarah. "Keep running!"

She headed down the corridor. Connor started after her but risked a look over his shoulder. Some of the Euparkeria appeared to be following them.

"This way!" Sarah took a sudden turn.

"Which way? Why? Where are we going? Shouldn't we lock ourselves in a room or something?" gasped Connor.

"The library. We have to get to the library."

Connor boggled mentally, several responses and questions vying for precedence. "We know where that is, do we?" he asked in the end.

"I'm a historian. I have a hunch."

* * *

1892, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Abby frowned. She could hear a strange sound, as if something was scratching in the skirting board or behind one of the doors.

"What's that?" she asked.

"What's what?" returned Miles.

"That scratching sound?"

Miles shrugged. "Could be a mouse, I suppose."

"I suppose," agreed Abby doubtfully.

"The library is just up here," said Miles, gesturing at a heavy-looking door. Abby turned around. The scratching noise had become much louder and she had a sense of something behind her. Then she saw what looked like tiny anomalies crouched on the walls and ceiling of the corridor.

"What are those?" she said, more to herself than to Miles, stepping forward, curiosity over-riding fear.

"Good Lord!" said Miles. "I've never seen anything like them!" He walked back and stood next to her.

Abby took another step forwards but Miles placed a hand on her shoulder. "Careful, old girl. Might be dangerous."

"I don't see how?"

"Still, let me go first, eh?" He walked forward.

Abby was just opening her mouth to protest when the scratching sound seemed to heighten for a moment and the lights moved along the walls. They drifted past Miles who raised his eyebrows and waggled them at her.

Abby took another step. The four pools of light sparkled on the walls between the two of them. Then, suddenly, a medieval knight appeared out of nowhere. His face was worn and ancient with deep lines of age. He was screaming and, as he ran past, Abby saw that the armour around his neck was rusting, but as she glanced down his body it became polished and shining. A shimmering cloud of light surrounded him. The lights on the wall seemed to leap and attach themselves to him. He fled towards Miles.

"Miles! Run!" shouted Abby.

She wasn't clear what was going on but she wanted Miles as far as possible from the strange lights and the aging ghost. Miles stepped back, a look of uncertainty on his face. The knight began to crumble to dust, disintegrating from his head downwards. The legs fell forwards and then they too were gone.

Abby stared down the corridor into Miles' shocked face. The tiny anomalies spread out across the corridor between them.

"Abby! Run!" he shouted at her. He was already backing away.

Abby turned and ran towards the library. She braced herself at the door. The room had been mentioned to her so many times in the past hour, that she felt a kind of superstitious anticipation. A glance down the corridor showed her glitters of light slowly moving along the floor in her direction. They seemed to be ignoring Miles who gestured at her frantically to get into the room. Quickly, she pushed open the door and entered. A fire burned in the grate, casting a warm glow over the furniture. Gas lamps mounted on the walls added to the impression of soft light. A heavy wooden table stood in the centre of the room with a couple of books piled on it and two comfortable chairs sat in front of the fire. Shelves lined the walls, packed with books.

But there was no one there.

* * *

3.10pm, Grounds near MoD Bunker, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Quinn ran rapidly through the trees, looking around desperately for somewhere defensive that he could use. He caught a glimpse of something grey and automatically swerved towards it. If there were some kind of building he might be able to shut himself in.

As he got closer he could see it was a squareish concrete structure about the size of a shed, maybe a little taller. There was a big iron door and some kind of opening above it. A chain link fence spread out from it one either side. Quinn thought that he might be able to see people. He suddenly recalled there was supposed to be an MoD bunker in the grounds.

At that very moment a burst of automated weapons fire erupted just in front of him. He skidded to a halt and then veered sideways.

"Oi!" he shouted.

"That was a warning," called a voice. "No trespassing!"

"I'm a little distracted here!"

"Not our problem!"

Quinn turned and fired a shot at the approaching allosaurus. However it was still to far away and the blast did little damaged.

Desperately he looked around and then spotted an oak tree, a short distance away, with wide, low, spreading branches. He started to head for it.

"Keep running!" shouted an encouraging voice. "I reckon you'll get to that oak about the same time it does."

Suddenly Quinn's foot caught in something, some root hidden by the undergrowth and he fell. Instinctively he rolled on his back, pumping a new round into the chamber and firing. The allosaurus reared above him. The main force of the shot went wide of its bobbing head, but he was close enough that the edge of the blast caught the side of its face and neck. The thing screeched and lashed out blindly with one foot. Danny rolled the otherway but the edge of a claw caught the Mossberg and tore it out if his hands. The gun skittered across the ground and seemed to catch the allosaurus' attention. The beast leaped for it and Quinn used the opportunity to climb to his feet and head for the tree once more, pulling his trusty glock from its shoulder holster.

He looked back once he was safe in the branches of the three. The allosaurus had a very mangled looking shotgun in its jaws. He watched it toss the gun a couple of times, biting down, possibly trying to find a good bit to eat. Then it threw it to the ground in disgust and headed after Quinn once more. As it passed, one large clawed foot stamped on the mangled remains of the gun.

"You'll be one of the dinosaur experts then?" asked a second voice.

"That's right. I could use a little help here."

"I'm sure you can handle it. We've strict instructions not to interfere unless our security is breached. 'Let the experts handle it', they said. There'll be no end of inter-ministry trouble if you step on people's toes."

"Thanks for nothing!"

"I'll be interested to watch though. I've never seen a dinosaur hunting expert in action before."

* * *

1642, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Becker had gathered that the library was at the top of the stairs and down a corridor. He kept firing the odd burst back the way he had come, just to dissuade the cavaliers from following, as he checked the rooms. The library turned out to be around a bend and down another length of corridor with a window at the end. Becker jammed a chair in front of the library door and then paused. His plan, as far as it went, was to look up these accounts that Carstairs had mentioned and hope that they would provide him with some clue about how to link up with the others. He hoped Sarah was all right, but was trusting, for the time being, that the sound of gunfire would warn her to hide.

"Aye," said a familiar Scottish voice, "it looks like if you activate the electromagnet in the detectors, it scares those scratchling things off."

"Any idea why?" asked Jenny's voice.

Becker stared around him, looking for his two colleagues. The library was a square room with no apparent nooks or crannies, and they were nowhere to be seen.

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Jenny was still trying to talk to their stray Roman who, she gathered, was called Marcus; Marcus something, something, something Profundus, which meant she had to struggle not to giggle whenever she looked at him. He appeared to be under the impression that they were his prisoners, or possibly druids or very likely both.

Cutter had rapidly dismissed him as an insignificant irritation and was walking them down corridors, regularly checking out of windows and noting whenever he saw an anomaly fragment in the grounds. Marcus was talking very rapidly in Latin and waving his sword around a lot. Jenny was trying to recall what "Ostium"

meant - she had a sneaky feeling, though, that Marcus wanted them to find a way out of the house and towards one of the fragments they could see outside where, no doubt, he was going to sacrifice them both to Mithras, or possibly hand them over to the authorities. Jenny's Latin wasn't quite up to distinguishing which.

At the edge of her hearing, she kept detecting a low scratching sound.

Cutter opened another door. "Ah ha!" he announced. "Library!"

They walked inside, Marcus still trailing behind them. Cutter immediately walked to the shelves and began running his hands along them, taking a quick inventory of the books. Jenny slumped into one of the stuffed armchairs, pleased for an opportunity to rest after all the hiking and running.

Marcus raised his voice to a commanding bark. Suddenly, he grabbed Jenny's arm and dragged her to her feet.

"Oi!" she cried indignantly. Instinctively she tried to pull away but stopped when she felt the point of his sword jab into the small of her back. "Cutter! Nick!"

Cutter turned round and a slight furrow appeared between his brows.

"Jenny, stand very, very still."

Jenny froze. The scratching noise had increased in volume. Judging from Cutter's face, Marcus was the least of her problems.

"Quae?" said Marcus.

"Exspectate," returned Jenny, hoping she had remembered the word correctly.

Cutter was fiddling with the anomaly detector. He switched it on and there was a squeal of static.

"What is it?" asked Jenny, beginning to feel nervous.

"Can the two of you walk slowly towards me," said Cutter.

"Cutterae ambulate," suggested Jenny hopefully and took a step but Marcus hauled her back.

"Tell him to take a look behind him," said Cutter.

"Oh, that will work!" remarked Jenny.

"Just tell him."

Jenny looked over her shoulder and gasped. The door to the library was a pulsating glitter, as if an anomaly had stretched and spread itself across it. Within it, she felt she could see small shapes moving. The word 'scratchlings' popped, unbidden, into her head. The scratchlings swarmed and buzzed, mustering the energy to strike.

Marcus turned his head to follow her gaze. He let go of her arm and Jenny darted across the room to stand next to Cutter. Marcus, in contrast, raised his sword once more. The scratchlings pounced.

They swarmed over Marcus, engulfing him in a flaring glitter of light. Jenny watched as he fell to his knees, arms flailing. Then the flesh seemed to vanish from his bones, the armour rusted and fell away, the clothes fell into rags. Finally all that was left was a fine dust across the library fall. The scratchlings separated, scattered and then regrouped.

Jenny backed away from them and found herself rubbing shoulders with Cutter who was frowning intently at the anomaly detector.

"Ideas?" she asked.

"They're similar in structure to an anomaly. This thing's picking them up. But they're a lot smaller. I'm wondering if I can affect their coherency."

The swarm of scratchlings approached. Jenny gently took Cutter's arm and backed away from them. Cutter allowed himself to be led, but never once took his eyes off the detector.

"You better think of something fast," she said. "Those scratchlings look about ready to pounce?"

"Scratchlings?" he asked, looking up at her.

She gestured at the creature ranged against them.

"Oh aye! Well, here goes." He shrugged and then turned a dial on the detector. The scratchlings appeared to blaze. Cutter took a step towards them and they retreated. He took another step and they scattered. A step further and the scratchlings darted away to the corners of the room where they appeared to wink out of existence.

"You did it!" said Jenny.

"Aye," he said. "It looks like if you activate the electromagnet in the detectors, it scares those scratchling things off."

"Any idea why?" asked Jenny.

"Not sure, I think I vaguely overloaded their own electromagnetic signal. That would be my guess but I'd really need to talk to Connor."

* * *

3.50pm, Near the MoD bunker, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Quinn had been taking pot shots at the allosaurus, as it paced around the base of the tree but the thing seemed impervious to bullets. It was bleeding in several places but that didn't appear to slow it down. Quinn recalled some lecture of Cutter's about cold-blooded animals being a lot less incapacitated by damage.

He'd tried to get a clear shot at the head, but without success. With his luck, cold-blooded allosaurus' could probably function with only half a brain anyway.

The situation wasn't helped by the running commentary from the nearby bunker. Privates Anderson and Wills, it appeared, had a small sweepstake running. On the plus side this meant Anderson now had a vested interest in Quinn getting the better of the allosaurus and he had several times offered advice on shot angles and thoughts about good parts of the anatomy to hit. On the downside Private Wills had a vested interest in Quinn getting eaten by Twinkle-toes, as he had named the dinosaur, and both Privates were clear that any interference from them would void the bet. They were observers only.

He'd run out of bullets. However, he still appeared to have the creature's attention. He guessed Ryan would be on the way so he figured he should try to keep said attention. Every time he thought it might wander off he'd drop down a few branches and shout at it.

"Come on, boy! Come on! What are you afraid of! Come and get me, yer daft ponce!"

"Go on! Twinkle! Grab 'im! His feet are easily within reach!" shouted Private Wills.

Quinn heard the sound of running. Ryan, Finn and Blade appeared in the distance, through the trees.

"Watch out for the MoD," Quinn shouted.

"What was that?" Finn shouted back.

One of the privates in the bunker fired a burst.

"He said, 'watch out for the MoD' " shouted Anderson.

"That's us!" shouted Wills. There was a second burst of fire.

"Flipping hell!" shouted Ryan. "I don't know who you jokers are but one more trick like that and I'll have you up on a charge. Don't waste ammunition! Don't fire warning shots unless you have no alternative! Don't flipping ever point a gun at your own side!"

There was a small silence.

"Noted! Sir!" shouted Anderson.

"Finn, put a dart in that allosaurus!" Ryan said. "Before Pinky and Perky get too excited and massacre the lot of us."

Quinn watched Finn drop to one knee and fire his rifle. The allosaurus turned as the dart embedded itself in the creature's flank.

"Oi! Stupid animal!" shouted Quinn. He dropped to a low branch and reached down to whack at its head with the end of the Glock. It turned its attention back

to him. The jaws snapped at his ankles and he hurriedly retreated back up to his previous perch.

"That wasn't much use was it!" shouted Anderson. "Sir!" was hastily tacked on the end.

"You only say that because you're not a dinosaur expert," shouted Quinn. "You said you wanted to see one in action. Well, watch and learn."

"We've been very impressed, so far," shouted Wills.

"Was that sarcasm I just heard!" hollered Ryan.

"No! Sir!"

"Good!"

The allosaurus started to turn back towards the three men on the ground. "Yer a big ugly mug, aren't you?" Quinn shouted. "And I'm as tasty a bit of human being as you're going to find around here. Keep focused, you silly animal. How long before this thing falls asleep?"

"Do you want me to sing it a lullaby?" shouted Ryan.

"What d'you think I'm doing?" Quinn hollered back. "No appreciation of musicality, you army types."

* * *

1642, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Becker could hear a scratching sound. It was just at the fringes of his awareness. He readied his gun, trying to locate the source while the word 'scratchlings' half-heard on the air floated around his brain.

Taking a sudden decision he switched his gun for the anomaly detector and stared hopefully at the dials and switches. Connor had labelled some of them but none said 'electromagnet'. He shrugged and fished his keys from his pocket and placed them on the table. He put the detector down next to them and started pressing some of the unlabelled buttons he'd never been briefed on.

The second one he pressed immediately caused the keys to twitch and pull towards the device. He grunted with satisfaction and then glanced up.

Several small circles of sparkling light were clustered on the wall in front of him. Becker advanced cautiously, waving the anomaly detector at them. He pushed the electromagnet dial up to full. The lights flared, sparked and then vanished.

* * *

1621, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"In here!" gasped Sarah, flinging open a door at the end of the corridor.

Connor piled through behind her and then slammed the door shut. It swung open, the catch clearly broken. Connor cursed and tried to push it shut again but the small creatures were already pouring through the gap.

Sarah grabbed hold of his arm and dragged him away from the door. Connor glanced around frantically, looking for something to use as a weapon or a defence.

"Maybe we can throw books at them?" he hazarded, kicking a chair over into their path, only to see them hop on top and then over it.

Sarah grabbed a poker from the fireplace and whacked the closest Euparkeria, knocking it to the far side of the room. The pack backed off and began to fan out.

There was a scratching sound. Slowly Connor looked upwards towards the ceiling. It was as if an anomaly had been broken into pieces and scattered over the wooden panelling. As he watched the small agglomerations of light swarmed down the walls, the scratching noise becoming louder, and then, they swept over the Euparkeria.

It was like watching a wave breaking across a rocky beach. The Euparkeria at the back of the group reared up as the light hit them. It flowed around them but their heads were turning to bone as it reached the ones in front. As they collapsed into dust, the others were becoming bones and the light swept on to the front rank. Within seconds the small creatures were gone. The wave of scratching, sparkling light continued on towards Connor and Sarah.

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"Hmmm!" said Cutter.

"Hmmm?" queried Jenny.

Cutter was still squinting at the anomaly detector. "I'm getting a strange signal in here."

"Those scratchlings again?"

"Well, mebbe. Hard to say. Something similar, like there are lots of anomalous readings just in this locality."

"What happens if you swamp the magnetic field again? Or whatever it was you did." Jenny walked close and peered over his shoulder. Not that the flickering lines on the detector's display meant much to her.

"I could up the power some more. Worth a try, I suppose." Cutter flashed her a smile and then fiddled with the dials.

Jenny blinked in surprise as the room slowly filled with people. Becker stood by one wall, an anomaly detector in his hands. Abby stood at the table, a hand lightly touching its surface. Connor and Sarah were backed up by the fireplace. Sarah was wearing some kind of Sealed Knot outfit and held a poker in her hands.

"Expecting someone else?" asked Becker, quirking an eyebrow at Sarah.

Sarah scowled at him. "There were small dinosaur things."

"Euparkeria," said Connor automatically.

"And then these lights sort of aged them to death."

Abby gasped. "I saw those too. They attacked a medieval knight."

Cutter nodded solemnly. "Yes. Same here."

"Any idea what they are?" asked Becker.

"If you look out of the window," said Cutter, walking over, "you can see a sort of perimeter dome around this place, especially from this direction."

"Yeah, I noticed that," said Connor. "Never seen anything like it."

"Right, do you remember that idea for sealing anomalies?"

"Never got it to work, though."

"I think someone has got it to work and we're on the inside."

"But it shouldn't have been that large, should it?" questioned Abby. "I mean, it was supposed to be anomaly-sized."

"Something went wrong with my probe," said Connor. "It was like it interacted with someone else doing something to the anomaly. Best I can tell from the readings I got, anyway."

"So, if someone was trying to seal the anomaly...?" muttered Abby and then tailed off.

"At the same time I was shooting light into it, effectively expanding it."

"You were expanding it!" interrupted Becker. "You didn't think to mention that?"

Connor shrugged. "Only a little. It wasn't an important effect. But if something else was doing something at the same time, who knows? I think it expanded to a large size and we're basically running around the periphery of an anomaly. Normally all the time fractures are too small for us to notice."

"So when I upped the power on the electromagnet in this thing...," Cutter waved his anomaly detector.

"And I already had mine on full," added Becker.

"The two of you created a swamping field effect!" said Connor. "Of course!"

Jenny was amused to see Cutter raise his eyebrows at her. He might have guessed something similar, but Connor's certainty and enthusiasm was infectious.

"You synchronised all the timelines in this location. Made a localised still point," Connor continuted enthusiastically.

"Good job we were all here then," muttered Becker.

"Oh, it probably synchronised on all anomalous time traces in this general location."

"That's just what I thought," said Becker.

"And what about the scratchlings?" asked Jenny.

"The light things? Dunno, some kind of reaction internal to the anomaly perhaps? An automated defence mechanism. Normally we'd be in and out of the place too fast for it to register, but we've been running around its periphery for a while now."

"Right!" said Cutter. "We need to plot the fractures and see if there's a pattern. Can anyone see any maps on the shelves?"

About half an hour later they were surrounded by several plans of the manor house, a sketch of earthworks made by a local historian and a plan of the research institute that Becker had had in one pocket. Cutter was marking on them all the time fractures they had encountered.

"We have a spiral pattern." There appeared to be rows of fractures spiralling out from a central point. Cutter was writing in ball point pen on the house floor plan, showing each doorway and the time periods on either side of them.

Sarah looked at the pattern. "Right, so it starts here back in the Triassic." She placed a finger in one of the smaller segments.

"Aye, probably where the anomaly leads back to."

"Then you move to the Bronze Age village I was in." Connor put a finger into the next segment.

"Then the Romans," agreed Cutter.

"Then the 16th century," continued Sarah pointing to another section that wrapped around and overlapped the first. "Though there may be some stuff in between. Abby mentioned a medieval knight."

"This bit's late Victorian, right?" asked Abby, pointing again. That was the conclusion Sarah had drawn when Abby described the clothes she'd encountered. "But it's all jumbled up. I mean some of the gateways go from World War Two back to the Romans and then from the Romans to whenever we are now."

"Late 18th century I think, going by the furniture," said Sarah.

"It may not be exact," said Cutter. "We're getting a rough pattern here. It's not rigid."

"If this bit's World War Two," said Jenny, "you can see it would overlap the Romans as it comes round the spiral."

"If we get into the grounds then," said Becker. "Most of the light doorway things will lead to the 20th century, I should guess. Closer to the perimeter the better, probably."

Cutter nodded. "Aye, but I think that instead we should head here," and he planted his finger at the dead centre of the spiral effect.

4pm, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire, Bubble Timeline.

Claudia sat next to Ian as he pored over multiple monitor screens where he was running simulations.

She was trying to follow his train of thought, which seemed to involve a second universe, linked to their own via the anomalies. "So let me get this straight. The anomalies don't just go back in time but also somehow through to this other universe."

"Yes."

"Someone in this other universe did something to the anomaly at the same time that we tried to seal it, leaving us inside the seal as a kind of anti-anomaly."

"Aye. I reckon on their side they've probably got some kind of great big sealed anomaly. It's like the rings on an onion. We're in the middle, there's a kind of mixed space in between and then they're on the outside."

"Well? Where's the rest of our universe?"

Ian shrugged. "It's only a theory. However, assuming it's correct ,what we need to do is reverse the interaction of the devices. We'd need to recreate whatever it is they did on this side of the barrier and they'd need to recreate the sealing effect on their side."

Claudia stared gloomily at the bubble surrounding them. "So how do we find out what they did?"

"Well, I have some idea based on the simulation and the readings. I'm going to try an experiment." Ian reached out for a control and Claudia instinctively placed a hand over his.

"What about the scratchlings?"

"A risk we have to take, I'm afraid. We're sealed in, Claudia. Think about that. There's only a finite amount of air in here. We can't afford to sit around waiting for the effect to stop."

Claudia frowned and withdrew her hand. "Well, at least set that sealing device to the opposite charge of whatever you're going to do."

"It's a bit more complicated than that. I'm going to need to use the device to create the effect."

"What about the scratchlings then?"

"I think I can create a dual beam. The second beam will be at the opposite polarity to any field created by the first. We can use that to get rid of any scratchlings."

"That all sounds a bit... well, very hypothetical."

"Hypothetical is all I've got for any of this. I'll need you to get rid of the scratchlings while I operate the control system from here. Do you think you can manage?"

Claudia nodded, standing up to move to the sealing gun or whatever it was. "No problem. Just make sure you've got the science right."

Ian flicked several switches, and once more a beam fired out from the device. This time Claudia noticed it was a different colour from the wall of the bubble and it seemed more like a spiral than a single ray. Two beams of light curled around each other.

"Looks like you've got a dual beam," she said encouragingly.

It wasn't clear if the experiment was having any effect on the anomaly itself. Then suddenly, scratchlings simply swarmed out of the wall. Claudia frantically swung the sealing device, cutting a swathe through them. Ian scrambled backwards from his chair as the creatures swarmed over the monitor screens.

Claudia turned the beam the other way, cutting down the scratchlings behind Ian, but more were swarming out of the walls every minute.

"Ian! Switch it off!" she shouted desperately.

Ian began to move towards the workstation once more, but scratchlings cut off his path. Claudia tried to blast them, but more swarmed up and over him from behind. Claudia closed her eyes instinctively, unwilling to see him die. Then she forced herself to look. She hauled the device off its stand. Sweeping it before her clumsily, she staggered to the spot where Ian had sat. There was a window on the monitor showing some kind of waveform and, thankfully, a "Stop" button. Frantically, Claudia clicked on it. Then she put both hands back on the hefty contraption she was holding and swept it over the scratchlings that were swarming towards her. At least they seemed to have stopped coming out of the walls.

Eventually, all the scratchlings in the room appeared to be gone, but she could see more, dimly, through the strange barrier that surrounded her. They swarmed for a moment and then fanned outwards through the walls and into the rest of the institute.

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

"Oh no!" said Sarah in horror.

Jenny found herself gasping involuntarily as what looked like a wall of scratchlings bore down on them.

Cutter frantically switched on his anomaly detector. "Becker! The detector!" he shouted.

"I know, electromagnet, right?"

They huddled close together as the scratchlings swarmed around them.

"Let's all move together, slowly," said Cutter.

Jenny took hold of his arm and he spared her a surprised look.

She smiled at him. "Just keeping close."

"Abby?" asked Connor and he held out his arm.

Abby gave him a sceptical look. "You've not got a detector?" she observed. "Why am I doing this?"

Connor shrugged. "Charm and good looks?"

She slapped him lightly on the arm.

"That leaves you and me," Jenny heard Becker say to Sarah.

"Don't push it, soldier boy," she returned.

Jenny glanced around. Connor and Abby were standing right behind her and Cutter with Becker and Sarah, pointedly not holding onto him, behind them.

"Off we go then!" said Cutter.

Carefully they continued down the corridor, the scratchlings parting like the Red Sea as they passed.

They had agreed to move inwards on the 'Georgian' arm of the spiral, avoiding, as much as possible, any anomaly fragments. As they approached the putative centre of the effect they found themselves in a large drawing room. Great shards of the anomaly hung in the air around them like floating mirrors in some surrealist painting. Halfway through the room a translucent orange bubble gave them a view into a laboratory space beyond.

Facing them, Jenny saw a mirror image of herself. No, not quite a mirror image, the woman's hair was loose and flowing and her clothes were from a different tailor, one with a more gentle and feminine line. Without thinking Jenny stepped forward and placed a hand on the barrier. The woman in front of her did the same, their hands resting on the same spot either side of the wall of light.

"Claudia!" said Cutter.

Jenny felt her hand touch flesh and she stared at the matching surprise in Claudia's eyes as they realised they were touching fingers, through the partition.

* * *

4.10pm, A607, Leicestershire.

"Thanks for giving me a lift," Annie Harris said.

Vijay Patel grinned at her. "No problem. Saw you at the bus stop, thought I might as well check whether you were going my way."

Annie shook her head, brown hair shaking. "I've got Year 8 first thing tomorrow morning. Anything to brace myself."

Vijay laughed. "They're not so bad. It's the parents that are the horrors. I gather the ambassador has been on the phone to the head twice this week already."

Annie and Vijay both taught at Morton Priory International School. It was an exclusive girls' school with an odd mixture of pupils, ranging from local children, those whose parents weren't British but worked at Leicester or other Midlands universities, and the children of wealthy British people who lived abroard. Fiona Madeline St.John Carlyle, daughter of the British ambassador to Lithuania, was a particular trial.

On this occasion Annie felt able to laugh. "Fortunately for me he approves of Maths, and she's pretty able. So I don't get much trouble from that quarter."

Vijay made a face. "He approves of PE too, but she hates it. I have him on my case almost weekly. Oh, my goodness!"

In the middle of the road, clear as daylight, stood some kind of dinosaur. Vijay slammed on the brakes and they skidded to a halt in front of it. It opened its mouth in an angry roar and smashed its head through the windscreen.

Annie screamed and pushed herself back in the seat as far away from the snapping jaws as possible.

Vijay grabbed a torch from a side pocket. He leaned across and brought it down on the snapping jaws that were reaching in for her. "Leaver her alone!" he was shouting.

Suddenly, Annie heard the sound of gunfire. The dinosaur head vanished and she had a brief glimpse of the creature disappearing into the undergrowth before four soldiers emerged from the trees.

Fear turned to anger and she pushed open the car door and stepped out. "What on Earth is going on!" she demanded in a voice that would have made even Year 8 quail.

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Cutter was pacing up and down outside the barrier. He'd have liked to hammer upon it and break through it but he was uncomfortably aware of many eyes upon him. He'd wanted Claudia back, but not like this, not with a solid wall between them, not with Jenny there to look on and see. He wanted to get rid of the audience, but they had a pressing problem that wouldn't allow that.

"Was this Ian person right?" Cutter looked to Connor.

Cutter had watched Claudia regain her composure as she explained what had been happening, but the words 'You're alive!' had slipped out in her first moment of shock and she had stepped away from Jenny to press both hands against the barrier and stare at him. That sent cold shivers down his spine. He wished Stephen were there, since he had some experience of how odd it must all feel.

Jenny and Claudia were reacting very strangely to each other. He would have expected anger or rejection or something, but instead they mostly stood very close, either side of the barrier, often mirroring each other's movements. They had hardly spoken to each other but he had the strangest sense that they didn't need to.

They both smiled at him and he realised he was expected to say something.

"Wha?"

"Well?" said Connor.

"Sorry! My mind drifted off for a moment there. Too much to take in."

"I said that some parts of his theory don't add up. If it were two universes touching you'd expect a kind of explicit mirror effect. We'd be inside a little bubble in Claudia's world just like she seems to be inside a little bubble in our world."

"Like some kind of Escher print, maybe?" asked Sarah.

"Yes, absolutely!" Connor pointed at her. "Don't you think so, Cutter?"

"I don't know. Physics is something of a recent specialty of mine." He looked around the room. "What does everyone else think?"

Becker shrugged.

Sarah bit her lip. "I'm not a physicist either, but if I understand stuff correctly then, yes. I'd expect the two sides to be equal in some sense."

"So what does it mean that they're not?" asked Claudia.

Connor swallowed. "Well, the physicists have some theories about how temporal physics might work, given the observed effects of the anomalies, including Cutter's report that you got replaced by Jenny and Stephen and Ryan coming back from the dead through an anomaly."

He glanced around anxiously. Cutter watched Abby bite her lip and walk over to Connor, placing a hand on his arm. "What is it? Go on."

"Well, under the theories, bubble universes might sometimes form. They only exist for a few hours. They're a kind of echo of what might have been. But they're not stable. They appear and then vanish and they wouldn't be able to maintain an equal volume, as it were, against ours. Not in this situation." Connor glanced anxiously between Cutter and Claudia. "Sorry!" he whispered.

Cutter found himself actually staring at Claudia. She looked shocked.

"This is all there is?" she asked, gesturing around the lab space she stood in. "All there is of my world, I mean?"

Connor nodded. "It's only a hypothesis."

"But it's going to collapse soon as well, isn't it?" said Cutter.

"Yeah, probably."

"What happens then?"

"Not sure. Probably these barriers will collapse inwards crushing anything between them."

"There's a pleasant thought," muttered Becker.

"And what happens if we can reverse the effects of your probe, like Ian wanted?" asked Cutter.

"The barriers will drop down and the anomaly will collapse back to its normal size. The energy may cause the bubble timeline to pop out of existence. That's assuming it's a bubble. If it's a real second universe then I guess it'll be OK."

"We have only one choice then, really," said Becker. "We try to reverse that effect. If we don't, everyone dies. If we do, we're OK and there is a chance Claudia will be too."

Cutter nodded. It made sense. "Connor, can you tell Claudia how to reproduce the effect of your probe on her side of the barrier?"

"I can, but she'll need this to modify the beam." Connor lifted his handheld device. "We'll need to jury rig something up."

"OK, we'll deal with that in a moment. How about reproducing this sealing thing on our side?"

"That shouldn't be too hard. I think the external part of the probe and the device work in a similar way. If we can get the instructions out to Danny, he should be able to set it up. And if you're right about the spiral effect it shouldn't be too hard to get out into the grounds in the same time zone Danny is in."

* * *

4.15pm, A607, Leicestershire.

"I'm holding you personally responsible." The small Maths teacher glared at Lyle.

Stephen was trying hard not to laugh. Lyle was more used to women's eternal gratitude in these situations.

"I assure you, ma'am. Every precaution is being taken."

"Is she going to calm down?" Ditzy said quietly. He was checking out the other teacher in the car, name of Vijay Patel.

Vijay shrugged. "Never seen her like this before. But then I've never seen her attacked by a... what did you say it was?"

"Kind of lizard," said Stephen. "Very rare."

"Is there somewhere quiet you can both go? I'm worried you'll both go into shock, but it's safer if you can get out of the area."

"And what about the school full of children? You expect them to get out of the area?" The Maths teacher rounded on Ditzy.

"With all due respect, ma'am. You are delaying our hunt for the creature. The sooner we catch it, the safer the school will be."

"The school's in the other direction anyway." Vijay pointed.

Stephen nodded. "I think it's heading back for the hall."

"Well off you go then!" said the woman. "Make yourselves useful!"

"Yes ma'am," said Lyle wearily.

He nodded at the others. They formed up and headed back into the trees. Behind them they heard the car engine turn over.

"How are we going to keep them quiet?" asked Blade.

"Jenny will think of something," said Ditzy.

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire.

Jenny watched as Connor examined various items of equipment Claudia was fishing out of cupboards and drawers. None of them really seemed capable of doing what he wanted. She picked up Connor's probe and eyed the barrier thoughtfully, recalling the slight touch of Claudia's fingers as she had pressed the surface.

Are you absolutely sure you're not missing something. You know what I'm looking for?asked Connor.

Of course Claudia didn't. What did he think she was, a temporal physicist? But Jenny could tell that Claudia was showing him anything remotely possible.

Jenny caught sight of Claudia looking at her. It was strange to be faced with someone so alike and yet so unalike. She found herself watching almost compulsively, noting the slightest similarity or difference.

Claudia stood up and walked to the edge of the barrier. Her hand once again pressed against it. Nodding her head in understanding, Jenny walked over and pressed one hand over hers, clutching Connor's probe in the other. Their hands met. Jenny pushed on through and watched as her hand seemed to merge with Claudia's. She looked up, alarmed, and saw her thoughts mirrored in Claudia's eyes.

Then she took a deep breath, closed her eyes and stepped forwards. Behind her there was shouting but just for the moment she was coping with a sense of overlapping perceptions, memories and experiences. That time she went to a nearby adventure playground as a child and did/didn't fall off the swing and have to go to hospital. The cute boy in the bar on her first day at college who she did/didn't walk over to kiss. That job offer at the Home Office which she did/didn't accept. Cutter's body, broken and damaged, lying in the smoking ruins of the ARC. Grief and anguish hit her like a blow.

She gasped, opened her eyes and found herself looking back out through the barrier into Cutter's startled expression.

* * *

4.25pm, Car Park, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Becker and Sarah were hurrying through the house. Every so often scratchlings swarmed at them, but so far the detector clipped to Becker's waist was keeping them at bay. They had stuck to the Victorian era until they reached the manor house's entrance hall. Then they took a chance on an anomaly fragment there and had found themselves in the bombed out ruins of the building. Fires were still burning in the wreckage. The next fragment outwards took them into the rather drab grounds of the research institute and then to the perimeter.

Through the translucent barrier they could clearly see Connor's device, but Quinn and Becker's Mossberg were nowhere to be seen. Becker glanced at his watch which had been carefully synchronised with Cutter's.

"Ten minutes to go," he said.

"I can see people," Sarah pointed across the grounds.

Quinn, Ryan and Finn emerged from one side, dragging a trolley with an allosaurus strapped to it. Sarah jumped up and down and waved.

She watched Ryan and Quinn exchange some words and then Quinn jogged over to them.

"Good to see you're safe," he said.

"We're a bit pressed for time," said Becker. "Connor's about to activate some machinery inside and that thing," he waved at Connor's main unit, "needs to be set to..." he glanced down.

"5 kHz," interrupted Sarah. She had made notes while Connor was talking. "It has to be turned on at the same time. Becker and Cutter have synchronised watches."

"I see," Quinn said. "Any chance of an explanation I might understand?"

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire. 4.30pm by Cutter's watch.

Cutter watched as Jenny or Claudia attached Connor's probe to one of the machines in the lab. He still didn't know which woman it was. There was a slight uneven effect on the surface of the barrier, a little like looking through cut glass. From one angle he could see Jenny and from another Claudia. Connor had been muttering excitedly about it. The phrase 'Quantum Uncertainty' cropped up a lot. The figures moved in unison, sometimes making gestures he felt were pure Claudia but sometimes moving like Jenny. He wasn't sure if he was imagining the slight distinctions, the moments of Jenny and the moments of Claudia. Maybe Jenny and Claudia had been more alike than he'd allowed himself to believe.

"What about the scratchlings?" he asked Connor. "Claudia said they appeared in large numbers when this Ian fellow switched on the machine."

Connor grinned. "I have a theory."

"Oh yes?"

"I've got Claudia or... err... Jenny to set up close to the barrier. I'm fairly sure that if we stay on this side of it and switch on the detector, then the area of effect will cover both sides."

"A theory?" said Cutter doubtfully.

He stared through the barrier. "Jenny? Can you get out this side again, now you've taken Connor's wee gizmo through there?"

Jenny or Claudia shook her head. "I've tried." She pressed one hand against the barrier. It didn't go through.

Cutter reached out to touch the other side. "I'm sorry, Jenny."

Claudia, or possibly Jenny, flashed him a brief smile. "My decision."

"So we switch the detector on and leave it here?" said Abby.

"I'm not sure there's enough power left in the battery," said Cutter. "I'd rather only use it if we have to. I'll stay." He glanced anxiously at his watch and then up at Connor and Abby. "You two need to go."

"Just a moment more. Jenny, Claudia, can you check the monitor output for me again?" said Connor.

Abby was hovering anxiously by the barrier. "What makes you think this will work?"

"We know this anomaly is getting distorted by electromagnetic effects. I'm fairly sure that if we manipulate the field in here we can distort one of these doorways to lead to the 21st century."

"Should!" said Abby.

Cutter switched on the detector once more. "No effect."

"Turn up the power!"

Cutter did so and watched the hanging panes of light move.

Connor hefted up Cutter's map. "21st century should be somewhere over there. Really, I should stay here," Connor looked at Cutter. "If something goes wrong I'll be able to improvise."

Cutter shook his head emphatically. "Enough people have taken risks already. This is my responsibility as team leader. I want the two of you to get to the perimeter as fast as possible."

* * *

4.35pm, Car Park, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Ryan glared at Becker and Sarah through the anomaly while Quinn tinkered with Connor's machine. Becker was just standing there, scowling dangerously at Quinn. Sarah was hopping anxiously from foot to foot.

There was no sign of Becker's men and Ryan was muttered quietly to himself about incompetents.

The Mossberg had been laid out ceremonially at the head of the dinosaur.

"What did you do to my gun?" Becker demanded for the umpteenth time.

"Nothing mate. Twinkle-toes here took a shine to it, that's all. You sure you don't have a long lost brother who looks like an allosaurus?" Quinn gestured with his spanner in the direction of the dinosaur.

"That is absolutely the last time I'm lending you my gun!"

"Can we leave the gun fetishism to another time?" interrupted Ryan.

"OK, I'm done, I think." Quinn shrugged. "She should be good to go."

"Nine minutes 20 seconds, sir," said Becker.

"Everyone, synchronise your watch with Becker," ordered Ryan. "I want everyone ready to hit that switch if necessary."

"Not a bad idea," said Quinn, nodding towards the tree line.

An injured allosaurus was powering towards them. Behind it Stephen, Lyle and the rest of the squad were visible.

"OK, Finn, form up," shouted Ryan. "Quinn, watch the probe."

Ryan and Finn placed themselves in front of Quinn, facing the approaching dinosaur.

* * *

1168, Morton's Field, Leicestershire. 4.40pm by Cutter's watch.

Cutter had been hopping through anomaly doorways, visiting the Roman era, Victorian era and numerous places in between. He kept close to Claudia in her anomaly bubble and she watched him anxiously.

"Can you tell where these lead at all?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I can't quite describe it. It's like I can see a kind of overlay of all the time zones if I concentrate. But mostly I just see the 21st century. You're all pale, like a ghost."

"I think I go forwards if I move in this direction," Cutter tried another doorway. His feet landed on carpet tiles.

"Oh! You've suddenly become a lot clearer!" said Jenny.

"This must be it then." Cutter glanced anxiously at his watch and looked at the woman. Her face was drawn and anxious. He smiled reassuringly at her, or so he hoped.

"Jenny... Claudia... I..." he felt he should say something but he wasn't sure what exactly. Something about how he'd missed Claudia but still liked Jenny. Something about how whether it was both or just one of them doing this he appreciated it. That being prepared to do this was part of what made them both so wonderful. But everything he thought of sounded trite in his mind. "I hope this works," he settled for, a little lamely.

Claudia, or Jenny, graced him with a wan smile. "I hope so too. Thanks for staying and good luck, Nick."

"Good luck, both of you."

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire. 4.40pm by Connor's watch.

Connor and Abby were running down a panelled corridor, avoiding anomaly fragments.

"Halt!" A voice shouted behind them.

Abby glanced over her shoulder. A cavalier had appeared in the corridor. He held an old-fashioned looking pistol in one hand which was aimed directly down the passageway at them. Abby plucked Connor's sleeve and dragged him to a halt.

"We don't have time for this," squeaked Connor, staring nervously at the gun.

"Do we have a choice?" whispered Abby.

Connor began moving in front of her, his hands held out placatingly. "Look, mate, can we do this later?"

He looked back at Abby. "Get round the corner quick," he hissed. "I'll cover you."

Abby hit his arm. "Don't be daft. We go together or not at all."

"Stay still or I shoot!" said the man.

"We have to go now!" said Abby, glancing at her watch. "You'd better come with us. We'll find a way to get you back. But we have to go now."

Suddenly a swarm of scratchlings burst out of the walls behind the man.

"Too late! Run!" shouted Connor, grabbing her hand.

Behind them came the sound of a shot and a brief scream.

* * *

4.44pm, Car Park, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

Sarah had her face pressed to the barrier, watching as the soldiers fought with the allosaurus. It was bleeding in several places but seemed to be completely ignoring the bullets.

"It's too angry," muttered Becker. "It's not going to be scared off."

Ryan and Lyle had split the soldiers into two teams which were now lined up either side of the creature, but holding a firm formation was proving hard. The allosaurus moved fast and the soldiers were spending a lot of time simply running and dodging out of its way.

Suddenly it broke through their makeshift line and charged straight at the probe. Quinn, who had remained standing next to the machine, lifted his reloaded glock and let off two shots. Then he waved his arms in the air and ran away. The allosaurus swerved to follow him, leaving the probe standing unwatched and unguarded.

"Someone! Someone! The probe!" Sarah shouted.

"Ryan! Sir!" Becker bellowed. "Now!"

Ryan glanced in his direction and Becker tapped his watch urgently. Ryan looked at his own, and then began to run towards them. Sarah stared anxiously

over Becker's shoulder, watching the seconds count down. Behind Ryan she saw the allosaurus turn again, abandoning Quinn. It pounded along at Ryan's heels.

Just as the hand pointed upwards, Ryan's hand slammed down on the device. In almost the same movement, he turned round and emptied a clip into the approaching allosaurus.

* * *

4.45pm, Timeline interface, Morton Hall Research Institute, Leicestershire.

"Here goes nothing," whispered Jenny, or possibly Claudia, and pressed the enter key.

Cutter switched on the detector, standing against the barrier, hoping to protect her. A beam of light shot out of the large machine. Jenny, or Claudia, placed Connor's strange hand-held attachment in the path of the beam and let the light shine through it onto the barrier that surrounded her. She smiled a small strained smile and reached out one hand so her fingers rested on the barrier just next to his own.

Scratchlings poured out of the bubble, swamping the space, leaving the two of them standing next to each other separated by a thin orange membrane. Sparkling light surrounded them in a tight circle.

* * *

1798, Morton Hall, Leicestershire. 4.45pm by Connor's watch.

Abby couldn't help looking over her shoulder as she and Connor ran through the entrance hallway of the great house. Behind them, powering down the corridor was a wall of rotating light, like the edge effect of an anomaly.

"It's working!" whispered Connor, sounding surprised.

"Don't just stand there! Run!"

They burst out through the door. A fragment stood ahead of them.

"This one!" shouted Connor.

Abby made a wish, hoping it would take them to the present day and they leaped through it, hand in hand. As her feet landed on a scruffy grass expanse, a wave of light shimmered around her and passed on. When it cleared she could see a group of people ahead of them.

The sound of gunfire told her it was the Special Forces and, as she and Connor approached, she could see Ryan standing over the body of a large dinosaur.

Impulsively she reached out to squeeze Connor's hand. They had made it!

* * *

4.46pm, Morton Hall Research Instituted, Leicestershire.

The thin orange barrier flared. Bright light rolled past him while at the same time the barrier collapsed to a small spherical bubble and then contracted away into nothingness. Cutter blinked away the stars in his eyes and stared at the woman in front of him. With the barrier gone, her fingers now touched his own. Mere inches apart, he could feel her breath on his face.

"Jenny?" he asked, uncertainly.

The hair was the same dark brown as Jenny's but it hung loose about her shoulders and she was wearing a trouser suit, rather than the pencil skirt she had been in that morning.

Her smile was uncertain and wavered a moment, but then she tossed her head.

"Who else?" she asked.

Chapter 41

Stockholm Syndrome

An Urban Dead Short Story

Part 1

The Escape.

Such a truly stupid idea and yet the rumour caught on like wild-fire; there was going to be an evacuation, the trains would leave from Ellicott Place Railway Station in Owsleybank, they would leave on June 1st, if you weren't there you would be left behind. It didn't help that we pointed out, time and again, that no one would organise an evacuation like this, that no one would let the news be spread by word of mouth alone, and why one particular railway station? and one particular date? The number of people camping out, in and around Ellicott Place swelled. Simply shipping in the water they consumed was a logistical nightmare. The Dunell Hills Police Department was internally divided. These people couldn't die, so we could just leave them to it, on the other hand there were *families* there, people from the 'Green' suburbs where zombie activity was limited to the odd horde sweeping through. Even if they couldn't really die permanently, they could die of thirst and the children did cry with hunger and it was hard to simply turn your back.

And then of course the hordes came and the death cultists and the random murderers, because the rumours were not confined to the survivor population. First it was the odd death, opportunistic murders, then the Philosophe Knights arrived in their blank white face masks, proclaiming their purge of the uneducated and simple-minded. They were followed by Lord Curton's Gentleman's Hunting

Club, killing in the name of the aristocratic right to hunt. On their heels came the hordes; the Militant Order of Barhah and the Ridleybank Resistance Front with feral zombies trailing in their wake. It was carnage. I had never seen anything like it and that is saying a lot for Malton. Ellicott Railway Station was littered with bodies, they piled up high before the victims had a chance to stand and move away. Zombies continually clawed their way out of the piles of bodies and onto the station platforms, swelling the ranks of the undead. We simply could not brew revivification serum fast enough and our labs and safehouses were broken into ever more frequently. The ammunition ran out and, in the end, Brass sounded the retreat. Since the rest of Malton was, presumably, currently empty of zombies, we would move out, restock, lick our wounds and then return.

I broke my leg in the scramble to retreat as the final barricades came down and the Ridleybank Resistance Front roared their triumph to the summer skies, I fell through the damaged floor in a second story room and my leg fractured beneath me. So I was left behind. The harsh reality is that around here the dead can walk. They can certainly walk a lot faster than a member of the living with a broken leg. Either I'd make it out alive or I'd make it out dead. If the DHPD had waited, I'd have slowed them up and more would have died, more precious syringes full of serum would have been wasted.

Thus it was I found myself alone, in the ruins of Dunell Hills, as dawn approached, hobbling along on a makeshift crutch with my leg in a splint.

I ended up in Club Meade, the social hub of the suburb in those rare quiet moments when the hordes were elsewhere. It was ruined. The bar was broken. The many bottles that had once held an impressive range of vodka and tequila cracked and ground under foot. Broken chairs and tables littered the dance floor. I groped through the dark. Club Meade's windows had been boarded up long ago, before the zombies even, long before the rise of the RRF, the Ridleybank Resistance Front, who had invaded the suburb lured by the promise of easy meat at Ellicott Place. I could hardly see a thing but I could hear shuffles and groans. There were zombies in here, but if I found somewhere out of the way, wedged between an upturned table and the wall, perhaps. I might get lucky and remain unobserved until it was comparatively safe to walk the streets again.

That was the plan anyway.

I woke up from an uncomfortable sleep to find a man sitting next to me. A hurricane lamp had been placed on a righted chair and that allowed me to see him. He had greying hair which had maybe once been brown and a lined and weathered face. He wasn't young, but he wasn't old either. Like everyone in Malton he was lean and fit and he inhabited his body with the ease and confidence of a man who

had grown easy with his own physicality. He sat calmly watching me, a pistol resting lightly across his knees.

I raised my head. In the half-light I could see the club doors standing open but no zombies were flooding in. This couldn't be good.

"Hello," he said. His accent was a gentle lilt, the faintest hint of Scottish in his tones.

"Hello," I responded cautiously and sat up, reaching for my crutch. It wasn't much of a weapon to use against a pistol, but it was better than nothing and had the benefit that he might let me pick it up.

No such luck. He cocked the pistol and pointed it at me. "Leave it where it is," he said.

I shrugged. "What do you want?"

"A chat."

"What about?"

"Do you always respond with questions?"

I shrugged again. "Not many other options available to me at the moment. I've got a bust leg and you're going to have your pals come and eat me soon."

"Pals?"

I looked at the open door and the glowing hurricane lamp. "A light in a building, with the doors open, and the RRF on the prowl?"

He smiled. "The intelligence said you were bright."

I think I may have rolled my eyes. There's something about the use of the word intelligence, and it's implications of spies and conspiracies which I find inherently funny. As if we weren't all simply struggling to survive. That said, news in Malton travels slowly and unreliably, I'm not unaware that facts that would be common knowledge elsewhere have a value in Malton. It's just I wouldn't dignify them with the name intelligence.

"I'm Mark Wright." He said it like it should mean something but I've never been good at keeping up with the politics of Malton, even now when it could mean life or death. Or maybe even less now when there is no death - why waste the brain cycles keeping track of every two-bit would-be dictator round here?

He sighed. "Lord Moloch? I'm the leader of Gore Corps, I assume you've heard of them."

I had. They're the human wing of the RRF. They were as dedicated as the zombies to the elimination of the living and the Gore Corps could climb up drain pipes and squeeze in through windows, which the zombies could not. They also had guns where the zombies only had teeth and claws. If anything they were more feared than the zombies were, which made it even more surprising that I was still

alive. I'd also heard of Lord Moloch and the rumours weren't pretty. Mind you no one had mentioned how good-looking he was.

"Are you going to kill me then?" I asked.

"Not just now."

I considered that. In fact I mostly considered provoking him into killing me anyway. It had worked for me before and I didn't suppose he really had my best interests at heart. It was really a question of whether I was interested in hearing what he had to say and whether he was likely to get to the point any time soon.

"We're going to talk then," I said in the end.

"But not here." He tucked his pistol into a holster at his hip. He had a thigh strap.

I gestured at my splinted leg. "I'm not going anywhere."

He looked down at it dispassionately. "You'll manage with help."

He flashed me a smile and then blew a sharp whistle through his fingers. Two men hurried in and he walked over to them. I took the time to make a quick inventory of my assets. This revealed that someone had been through my pockets as I slept and removed pretty much everything. Someone was very good. I'm not a heavy sleeper at the best of times, and sleeping under a table in a ruined, zombie-infested pub with a broken leg, doesn't constitute the best of times. Mark Wright handed over his pistol to one of the men and then walked back towards me, holding out a hand.

"You'll have to lean on me," he said.

I stared stubbornly at the hand, but refused to take it.

"It's that or I'll have one of the zombies carry you in a fireman's lift. With your leg, I don't suppose that will be comfortable."

He had a point. Reluctantly I took his hand. His grasp was firm and dry. He pulled me to my feet and steadied me, one arm about my waist.

"You could let me use my crutch," I pointed out.

"I couldn't let you get hold of a lethal weapon."

"Why not? Even assuming I could brain you to death with it, I'm not going anywhere fast and you'll be up again in minutes, no doubt."

"Syringes are difficult to come by."

That gave something to think about, although it made sense. Making syringes required power and the kind of lab machinery you only got in Necrotech buildings. From everything I'd heard, Gore Corps was small, probably too small to hold such a building and prevent anyone else around making use of the facilities as well. The RRF probably didn't much like other people getting hold of syringes, so that no doubt meant that the Gore Corp had to watch their supplies.

"There, that's not so bad is it?" he asked as we hobbled towards the door.

I grunted. The leg was pretty painful.

"The leg hurting?" he asked.

"What do you think?" I snapped.

"I'd offer you morphine if I thought you'd accept it."

I shook my head. "I'll manage."

"That's what I thought you'd say. I'll be as gentle as I can."

"So where are we going?" I asked moved out into the street.

I was leaning on him more than I'd have liked, but the leg really wasn't taking any weight. He smelled clean, which is unusual in Malton.

"East," he said.

East we went, an eerie procession. Zombies crowded in on either side of us. I didn't flinch. I had become used to the horror of the walking dead long ago. I even had a certain sympathy with those who wished to remain in that state. But the alliance with the living had a certain freakish quality to it. Those parts of me that relished death, revolted at that thought of letting the living walk among you unmolested.

If I'd been in that horde I'd have ripped the throats out of the pair of us.

Part 2

Mark was as good as his word and the pace we kept was slow. He didn't talk much. The only sounds accompanying us were the faint groans of the undead. Even so I tired rapidly, clearly sooner than he had planned for, and we struggled for the last hour or two with Mark murmuring encouragement to me as we went.

Eventually we stopped at Somerville Cinema in Lukinswood. I was tired and my leg was painful. Zombies don't get tired. They could have continued travelling into the night but Mark decided I didn't have to be carried and would be allowed to rest. I sat down amid the remains of the seating. Piles of hard cushions surrounded me, their stuffing ripped out and spread around the empty auditorium.

I didn't think Mark was going to do anything much to me. As far as I could make out I was a hostage, which did mean the most sensible thing I could probably do was throw myself out of the nearest window, but the walk had tired me out. I would have to get past the men and zombies in the room and up some stairs if I could find them and, in my condition, I had the the sense to see that wasn't going to happen.

"I had better check those dressings on your leg," he said as he lowered me to the cushions. "I don't like the smell of them."

He was right, there was a faint but distinct smell which probably meant an infection of some sort.

I winced as Mark removed the bandages. It was a nasty jagged cut. I had fallen on glass and was probably lucky not to have bled to death in short order. Or possibly I was unlucky. If I'd been dead, I wouldn't be in this mess.

"You sure you don't want some morphine?" he asked. "You need to get some rest and I can see you're in pain."

"No thank you." Least I could do was keep a clear head, if I had the option.

"Thought you might say that. Don't worry the worst will be over soon but brace yourself, this is going to hurt."

I gasped as what was clearly disinfectant was splashed on my leg. Then Mark produced clean dressings and began to bind it up again.

"Don't you have some kind of lackey who can do this?"

His gaze was level and thoughtful. "Maybe, but I'd rather do it myself."

Oh.

His hands were firm but gentle. I'd had worse people bandage me up; less competent ones anyway. The leg felt firmer once he'd finished. I tried standing, holding onto his arm, and putting my weight on it. It was still pretty painful but in the right circumstances it might get me to a window. I craned my neck, looking around the cinema, counting the men and the zombies. As I was doing this Mark suddenly hit me, open-handed, across the face.

"What was that for!" I protested.

He hit me again. "That one was for talking back. The first was for thinking about running away. Don't try it. I admire the spirit but I'm afraid I have a job to do and that takes precedence."

I stared at him, shaken. While I had understood that I was a hostage, I hadn't factored in this kind of treatment.

He regarded me a moment and then smiled gently and squeezed my shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll look after you. Just don't make my life difficult, OK?"

I nodded and he helped me sit down again.

"You wouldn't make it in your state anyway," he pointed out.

"Can't blame a girl for trying," I pointed out.

He laughed quietly and shook his head. "Maybe not, can't blame me for stopping you either though."

The laughter was infectious and I found myself smiling. The slaps already seemed to be fading into insignificance. I shook my head. "Well that's me done

for tonight. I won't be trying to escape again until the morning."

"I'll tell the guards to take it easy in that case." He raised a hand to wave and then he left.

A few minutes later another man walked over with a bowl. Steam rose from it, warm and richly flavoured. The man placed the bowl a short way from me and then retreated to sit on an upturned box. He pulled out a pistol. As I watched he began to methodically strip it down and clean it.

I eyed the soup doubtfully.

"It's not poisoned," the man said after a minute or two. "We've got quicker ways of killing you."

"Could be drugged."

"Could be," he agreed and turned his attention back to the gun.

I ate the soup. I didn't think I had a lot of choice.

"So you're doing as Mark wants?" he asked suddenly, while I was eating.

I glanced up at him and shrugged. I couldn't see much reason to respond either way. He stared back at me thoughtfully.

"Have you heard of Stockholm Syndrome?"

"Yes," I'd heard of it. The limit of my knowledge was the name Patty Hearst and something about people falling in love with their kidnappers.

"You know how it works?"

"What's your name?" I countered. That gave me time to consider whether I wanted to answer his question.

"Jayden Nichols."

Jayden Nichols was tall and lean. His skin was black and his head was bald. He wore a clean shirt and grey trousers, they almost looked as though they might be a part of a suit. I felt grubby, and unwashed and unsophisticated.

"Do you know how Stockholm Syndrome works?" he repeated.

"What is this? Good cop and bad cop?"

"Possibly. Are you going to answer the question."

"No, I don't know how it works."

"Well I only know what Mark has told me. He's the man with the degree in Psychology. The kidnapper makes small acts of kindness. He gives the hostage hope that the situation can be negotiated as long as the kidnapper is kept happy. He alternates that with, sometimes almost arbitrary, threats and acts of violence. The victim must invest more and more mental effort into predicting what will please and what will anger the kidnapper. To do so successfully, they need to identify with the kidnapper. Once they identify with him strongly enough, they

stop trying to please him simply as a means to an end, a way to survive and escape their situation, but as an end in itself."

I thought briefly about the soup I was eating and then decided to play dumb. "What's this got to do with me?"

"Mark wants a mole in the DHPD."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I have my reasons."

"What if I tell on you?"

"I guess, in that case, there will be some random acts of violence from me as well."

I finished my soup in silence. At least I now knew they were playing mind games, though precisely who was playing games with whom was a little obscure. However if Mark Wright really was a psychologist then he definitely had the upper hand here.

I slept fitfully, aware of the groans of the dead around me.

Part 3

Buttery Row school stood in the heart of Ridleybank. Wrought iron railings surrounded a tarmaced playground. Heavy panelled wooden doors hung off their hinges. We reached it in the late afternoon. The RRF and the Gore Corp had set a fast pace and my breath was coming in ragged gasps once we arrived. My leg hurt terribly and I felt hot. I had a nasty feeling the infection in the wound was spreading.

"Come on, Purple Cat!" said Mark. "Not far now."

"Where are we going?"

"Caretaker's flat on the top floor."

"Oh joy!"

"You'll make it! Brave heart!"

Somehow we got up the three flights of stairs, although I had to cling onto Mark's waist and he almost carried me for the final stretch. By now I was familiar with the shape of his body and the strength of his arms. I resisted the temptation to rest against him. The flat itself was dim and smelled of dust and wood smoke. Heavy planks had been nailed over the windows, most of the doors were missing, but in the faint glow of Mark's hurricane lamp I could see that there was furniture there. Furniture that was still intact.

Mark set the lamp down on the table. “Lie on the bed!” I must have stiffened in his arms because he said. “I want to look at that wound on your leg again.”

Cautiously I lay down on the bed. There was a scratchy blanket covering it, but underneath I could feel a real mattress. Involuntarily I closed my eyes, but once they were closed the temptation was to stay like that.

“Tell me about the DHPD.” The question came out of nowhere just as he finished securing the dressing.

“Tell me about the RRF,” I countered.

I was suddenly hauled upright and off the bed, my face held inches from his own.

“This is not a game,” he snarled. “I’ve told you once already. Do not talk back.”

I stared at him speechless for a moment.

“Well?” he demanded.

“What makes you think I’m going to tell you anything?”

He laughed harshly at that and pushed me backwards so I stumbled and fell back on the bed again.

“Either you tell me or I kill you. Then, when you wake up as a zombie, I’ll have you put in a cage and used for target practice and we’ll go on shooting you again and again until your soul leaves your body. In between times we might revive you occasionally and ask a few questions. Then we’ll kill you once more. Make no mistake, you are ours now.”

Then he turned on his heel and left the room. The door slammed shut behind him.

I almost asked myself ‘what happened there?’ but Jayden’s little pep talk made it pretty clear what happened there. Mark was demonstrated that talking back wasn’t encouraged. However his elaborate threat did reveal a flaw in the plan. He couldn’t exactly threaten to kill me. I’d been killed enough times in the past few years that it wasn’t a particularly scary prospect. I hoped that would help me resist whatever it was he was doing. On the other hand I had jumped when he shouted at me and was left feeling shocked and a little scared and glad that he hadn’t hit me again. Some things you just react to anyway, no matter what the situation.

“How are you doing?”

I opened my eyes. It was Jayden again. It disturbed me that I hadn’t heard him come in.

“As well as can be expected. How are you doing?”

He grinned at that. "Pretty much the same. Mark says you're to take these. He wants to keep your temperature down."

He handed me some pills and a cup of water.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Paracetamol, we're out of anti-biotics. This is just temperature control."

I stared at them suspiciously.

Jayden sighed. "If you don't take them, Mark says he'll come back in here and make you."

I wasn't up to that tonight, so I took the pills and washed them down with the water.

"You wouldn't have told me what Mark was up to if you didn't want it to fail, right?" I observed.

"You're making a lot of assumptions there."

"I've got nothing else to go on." Broadly speaking, though, either he was working against the Gore Corp or he and Mark were working together to some obscure end out of a psychology text book. I was simply hoping it was the former because if the latter was true I was pretty much doomed.

He shrugged.

"Rather than warning me, why not help me escape?"

"On the assumption I want Mark to fail."

"On that assumption yes. Doesn't have to be obvious. Let me find a gun somewhere or even just an open window. I can handle the rest."

"No."

"I could tell Mark that you warned me. Might even convince him I was coming round to his way of thinking which would work in my favour."

He regarded me levelly. "I would rather you didn't do that."

"I would rather escape than sit around here hoping whatever psychological tricks Mark is playing won't work."

He turned his back on me and walked out.

"Right, let's try talking again."

This time everything had been set up formally. I'd woken with a raging temperature, feeling sick as a dog, but they'd dosed me up with more Paracaetomol. I still felt miserable, but I no longer simply wanted to curl up and die. A rough

wooden table had been placed in the centre of the room. Mark Wright sat on one side and I sat on the other.

"My name is Kate Clark. DHPD Officer. Badge number 2702."

"Name and number? Cute!" He didn't look amused.

Truth to tell I didn't have a clue what I was doing. Getting captured and being questioned wasn't really something we'd ever considered. If Jayden was right and the questioning wasn't actually the point, I thought it probably didn't really matter what I said anyway. The point was just to avoid getting into the habit of doing what was asked.

"Who is the leader of the DHPD?" Mark asked.

I could have said it wasn't a secret. I could have handed out Bob's name. But the principle of the thing was more important than any intrinsic value in the information.

"My name is Kate Clark. DHPD Officer. Badge number 2702." I repeated.

He sighed in an exaggerated fashion. "It looks like I am going to have to ask more forcefully."

He nodded and the goons standing either side of me grabbed my arms, placing my hands flat on the table. I struggled, but there were two of them and a both were bigger and stronger than I was.

Mark Wright lifted a heavy iron bar. I don't know why I didn't speak then and there, except that I was caught in a mixture of horrified fascination and disbelief.

My hand were pressed flat on the top of the table, fingers outstretched. He slammed the iron bar down right across the backs of my knuckles. Pain exploded through both hands even as the blood flowed onto the table.

Part 4

It's true what they say about forgetting pain. I recall vividly that it hurt, but the memory of the pain itself, is long gone.

Mark pressed the end of the iron bar under my chin, tilting my head back even as I strained to curl up into a small ball around my damaged hands.

"Who is the leader of the DHPD?"

I answered his questions. There weren't that many. The point, of course, was that I answered them, not that Mark Wright learned any useful information.

"That wasn't so hard was it?" he asked afterwards as he splinted and bound my fingers with those gentle hands of his.

"I hate you," I said through the tears. There had been a lot of tears and a lot of screaming. Even after I started talking, they hadn't been gentle.

He just tutted quietly and finished what he was doing.

"Now," he said. "because you've been a good girl we've got something for you to eat."

Stew was brought in. It smelled good. There was meat in there somewhere. There was obviously something to be said for the luxury of cooking uninterrupted by zombie incursions. A bowl and spoon were placed in front of me. I tried to pick up the spoon but, with my hands splinted the way they were, it was impossible. Mark sat opposite me patiently. I sniffled a bit but I was fighting to regain some self control so in the end I just placed both my hands in my lap and sat staring right back at him.

"Would you like me to help?" he asked.

I really didn't want to be fed by him, on the other hand, the hungrier I got the less likely I was to be of any use to anyone. I nodded slowly.

"Good girl," he said approvingly.

Then I sat there and let him spoon feed me like a baby.

The stew was good. Real food, actually cooked, something that required space and time.

"What did you do before the zombie outbreak?" he asked as he fed me.

"Is this more interrogation?"

"No, I'm just asking." He smiled at me. I would have said it was a kind smile except somehow I doubt it.

"Does it matter what I did before the outbreak?"

"I don't know. I'd like to know more about you."

"I thought you had intelligence."

He laughed. "It's not much. Kate Clark, sister of Andrew 'Bulldog' Clark. Member of the DHPD for at least four years. Rumoured to be bright but difficult."

"I'm not that difficult," I said defensively.

"I'm not saying difficult is a bad thing. I like bright but difficult, so long as you respect boundaries." He smiled again. It was definitely a nice smile.

"What did you do before the outbreak?" I asked, since we were making conversation.

"Criminal psychiatrist, I worked in police profiling."

"So why are you working with Gore Corps now?"

"Look about you. Have you got this kind of stability in Dunell Hills? We're perfectly safe in here. The zombies aren't going to break in."

"It's all right for you, but not for all the regular people you kill."

"They can always join up. We're not that picky. You just have to accept that it is the zombies who are in charge, not the humans."

I closed my eyes. There was something wrong with the argument, but I was too tired to work it out and there was that invitingly comfy bed to collapse into.

"Your hair needs a brush," Mark remarked. He tucked some behind my ears. It had only ever been held up in a scraggy pony tail anyway. At some point the band had come loose.

"It'll be OK. I'll put it back up in a pony tail," I mumbled and cast about for the band.

"Not with those hands you won't."

Mark fished a comb out of a breast pocket and walked round behind me. Very gently he combed out my hair, teasing out several days worth of tangles. The soft strokes were relaxing and my head began to nod. I also felt hot, the Paracaetomol was probably wearing off.

"Nichols!" Mark summoned his lieutenant. "Take her to the bathroom and then let her sleep."

Jayden took my arm and dragged me to my feet. I let him lead me down the narrow corridor to the toilet at the end.

"There's a gun on top of the cistern," he whispered in my ear as he pushed me through the door.

Normally they left the door open, presumably to make sure I didn't try to strangle myself with the toilet paper or something. This time Jayden gave it a slight push so it swung to, obscuring me from his sight. All very well but I had both hands trussed up like a pair of mittens. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes, trying to will up the energy to act and to convince myself that the risk was worth the potential consequences.

I was sick, dog-tired, and my hands and legs were bust. All I wanted to do was sleep quietly, but I couldn't be sure the gun would still be there next time I was here. I forced myself to open my eyes. With my teeth I managed to remove the splint from my right hand and even managed to wiggle my fingers a little without screaming. They were bruised and swollen but they appeared to be semi-functional. I groped about on top of the cistern until I found the gun, a small hand-gun with a single clip. With difficulty I managed to get one of my fingers between the trigger and guard and just about hold the grip. I walked round the door, raised the gun and shot Jayden through the head. I thought it would probably help his story later. The recoil made me gasp in pain.

Then I headed for the stairs.

There was a guard on the front door. I used my second shot putting him down.

One shot to the back around chest height. I didn't trust myself to make another head shot, especially not in a hurry and from a distance. He was still cursing and bleeding as I stepped over him and into the crowd of zombies. I felt them turn and stare at me.

I told myself that most of them were probably dormant. It was just one or two who were moving, most weren't. I just had to move fast. Which isn't so easy with a broken leg. I limped through the crowd and I felt them wake and their interest grow like a ripple on a pond. There was absolutely no way I was getting very far and nothing I could do about it with only 8 shots left in the gun. I looked around for somewhere a little concealed. I spotted the burned out remains of a smart car. I shoved my way into the front seat, clambering awkwardly through the half open door. Once inside, I lay flat, rammed the gun up underneath my chin and pulled the trigger.

It takes longest to recover from a bullet in the brain than any other part of the body, but anywhere else and it could have taken me hours to bleed to death. As it was cognition returned slowly and the voices of the horde called to me. I lay where I was for a while, listening to their gentle song. Then I sat up and stumbled out into the crowd, happy to be swept up among the shuffling feet. I was dimly aware of shouting and I vaguely searched around for the harmanz and the brainz. Someone was up in front of me, shotgun in hand, shouting something incomprehensible and the idea formed itself that I should maybe be heading in the other direction and away from the comfort of the horde. Then there was a prick at the back of my neck and a searing white light of pain in my mind.

Part 5

When I woke up I was upright, leaning against a wall with my arms stretched outwards. I tried to move them in the first few moments of consciousness and couldn't. I was restrained at the wrists. I kept my eyes closed and did a stock take. My leg and hands were healed, though how long that was going to last was anyone's guess. The infection was presumably cleared up too, I certainly didn't have the slightly muzzy, detached sensation of a low temperature. The gun, presumably, was long gone. It had not been the most successful escape attempt in the world, but I had judged speed to be of the essence and the situation had been against me. However, if I could avoid getting any more limbs broken I was up on points... probably.

Then someone threw a bucket of cold water over me, forcing me to splutter

and open my eyes. Mark Wright was standing in front of me, two thugs either side of him. Jayden was nowhere to be seen. Mark followed up the water with a slap across the face, open-handed. I suppose I should be grateful for small mercies.

"You have made me extremely angry," he said. He didn't shout but there was undisguised menace in the words.

Then he hit me again. This time his hand was curled into a fist and I felt blood in my mouth and realised I had split a lip.

The beating went on for a while. He didn't break any bones, but I added a black eye to the split lip and I can't say I was optimistic about my internal organs. Then he walked out, leaving me wet, cold, bloody and chained to the wall to contemplate my crimes.

So, it would fair to say at this point that I felt pretty sorry for myself. I couldn't even wipe the tears away nor, when my nose inevitably began to run as well, could I wipe that. It wasn't the worst of my situation but it's the detail I particularly recall at this distance, standing alone in the cold with the snot running down my face.

Eventually, I don't know how long I'd been left there, but some time later, Mark came back in. He had a small bowl of water and he proceeded to clean my face wiping away the mixture of blood and snot and tears, as well as the grime of Malton.

"You really were a very bad girl," he said reprovingly as he cleaned me up.

"I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted." He smiled and placed a finger under my chin, lifting my face up towards him.

I think I must have stiffened because he paused and then leaned in close. His face touched mine and his lips whispered in my ear.

"You're worried about what happens next, aren't you."

I closed my eyes. How to find my way out of this one? or whether even to bother. It might be easier at this point just to submit, at least it wouldn't involve any more pain.

"A little," I said.

He stepped forwards, so now his whole body was pressed against mine. I was sandwiched between him and the wall. There was a dull ache everywhere from the beating but at the same time I felt my body reacting to his presence because, heaven help me, it had been a long time. I think I whimpered though I'm not sure if it was from fear or desire or a mixture of both.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to rape you. If we fuck, it'll be because you asked for it."

He kissed me gently on the lips and I felt his breath ghosting across my skin. He lingered like that for a moment, maybe waiting for me to give some sign of reciprocation and believe me I was close to it. Confused thoughts about how sleeping with him might be a situation I could turn to my advantage, or at least be used as a let out from any beatings or further violence, but I hadn't quite reached breaking point.

Then he stepped back. My hands were released from the chains and I staggered. Cramping pains shot through my arms, followed by intense pins and needles in my wrists and fingers. Mark picked me up bodily and carried me to the bed. He removed my shoes, tucked me in, and stroked my hair away from my face.

"Sweet dreams," he said. He turned out the light, and left the room.

I think I was asleep before he got down the stairs. The bed was blissfully comfortable and I was too tired to keep myself awake even with worrying.

When I woke up Mark was sitting at the foot of the bed reading a book. "Hello sleepy head," he said as I stirred.

"What time is it?"

"Early evening, you've been asleep almost a whole day."

I sat up and looked around. Everything was much the same.

"Do you want some breakfast?" asked Mark.

"Yes, please."

He stood up and left the room, locking the door behind him.

Seconds later the door was unlocked. A woman came in. She was tiny, possibly smaller than I am, and dressed in a tail coat with a scarlet waistcoat. Her hair was swept back in long dreadlocks with a top hat somehow perched on top. Her face was painted black with a white skull laid over the top. She moved with the confident grace of authority as she crossed the room and sat down in a chair by the table. Either side of her walked two zombies and they stationed themselves behind her.

I heard the sound of feet running up the stairs and Mark appeared in the doorway. "What is going on?" he demanded.

"Out!" she said. Her accent was cut-glass. Centuries of giving orders and having them obeyed were personified in that word.

"Marinette," he began.

"Out!" she repeated more forcefully and her eyes blazed. Mark scowled and retreated. I was suddenly scared. I wanted his presence there.

"Sit," she said, gesturing to the chair opposite her.

I sat.

"We felt your thoughts yesterday," she started.

"You felt my zombie thoughts. They're hardly coherent."

She leaned forward. "They understand."

"All zombies think like that."

"Eventually, but most of you meat-bags, it's just fear and horror and a desire to return to life."

"Most people would say that's natural."

She smiled slowly. "I don't know about most. There are a lot of zombies in this town. I like to think that some people are just slower to catch on than others. But you do understand so I'm asking, why don't you join us? Why do you persist in being alive?"

"When you're dead there is nothing, only brains. What will you do when everyone is a zombie? There will be nothing."

"When you're alive you feel pain, you have to eat to survive. You get sick. Puke and bile and shit are endlessly coming out of your body. It's horrible and degrading and disgusting and entirely unnecessary. Join us."

"Isn't that the point of this whole little game? I must say this is the first time I've seen the good cop dress as a skeleton."

"I'm Marinette Bwa Chech, Voodoo Loa, I free my people from bondage. I am fierce and unforgiving and my enemies tremble at my approach. But I can free you, if you will let me."

I glanced at her hands which were as pinky white as my own and wondered where she had picked up all the Voodoo business.

"Who are you really?"

"Does it matter? I'm now Marinette, the RRF Papa."

"Mama surely?"

"I prefer Papa. Join us." She drew out the syllables of the words, like a call.

I shook my head.

"It would take you out of the hands of the Gore Corps," she said.

Now that was both attractive and frightening. It would save me from the violence, the fear that any moment I might be beaten or my limbs might be broken. More than that it would take me to a state where it wouldn't actually matter if they did. The zombies of the RRF were more powerful than the Gore Corps. I'd seen that in the powerplay a moment before. They could protect me from Mark Wright where others couldn't.

On the other hand, I knew where I was with the Gore Corps and Mark Wright and Mark would certainly not be happy at all if I went with the RRF. He had other plans. He wanted to fuck me as soon as I asked for it and my mind was already

wandering down byways. What, exactly, might he consider to be 'asking for it' and did I actually want to ask for it or not. I wanted to find out and I wouldn't if I was dead.

Something must have shown on my face. "I see," she said. "Well, if you change your mind, there's a place for you in the RRF."

Then she nodded at the zombies either side of her. One of them groaned loudly stretching its mouth to its teeth and then it lunged towards her throat which was exposed as she tilted back her head. The second simply grabbed hold of her arm and pulled. She made no sound and I sat in shocked silence as the blood and gore spattered across me.

Moments later Mark burst into the room. I felt his arms around me as I was pulled to my feet and dragged away from the scene. In the corridor he held me against the wall, arms still around me.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"They'll be gone in a minute," he said. "Then I'll get the place cleaned up for you. Don't worry. I'll protect you."

I sat in the corridor with Mark. He offered me cigarettes and I hesitated before turning them down. My lungs definitely weren't worth the cost of another beating but cigarettes make me cough and I didn't want to look stupid.

"You're allowed to say 'no'," he said, noticing my hesitation and I shook my head.

"What did Marinette want?" he asked.

"She asked me to join the RRF, as a zombie."

"Something must have impressed her. Normally we let people come to us."

"She felt my thoughts, so she said."

"Well, you are full of surprises. What are you doing in the DHPD if you think enough like a zombie to attract Marinette's attention."

I laughed. "I'm just a drifter. I washed up in the DHPD."

"Why the loyalty then? Is it your brother?"

I laughed at that. "Have you met my brother?"

"No, I'm told he's even more difficult than you are."

"He's more useful though. He's much surer of his purpose."

"That is a matter of opinion. I think people underestimate you. Not many people would have thought to escape like that yesterday."

"It was a crappy escape attempt."

"A little shambolic maybe, but very few people would have even tried. I admire that. Don't sell yourself short."

I watched him as he sat smoking on the stairs. He looked relaxed and thoughtful.

"Anyway," I said. "I didn't escape and I didn't agree to join the RRF either."

"No, there's a lot more to you than meets the eye, Purple Cat. Keep on the right side of me and I think we'll get along famously."

It was dark when I got back in the room. They hadn't left me any lighting, but a pale moon shone outside. Through the bars of the window I could make out the crowd of zombies in the street outside.

Then the drums started. A deep thumping sound that echoed through my body. A slightly off-beat rhythm like the ba-dum of a heart-beat. In fact it was the ba-dum of a heart beat, the faint but distinctive sound of the warm-blooded hiding behind some barricade. Just so much food penned in, waiting to be devoured. I closed my eyes and let the sensation carry me. Down below the zombies groaned.

When I opened my eyes the zombies were all awake, swaying together, driven by the beat of the drums, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. I wanted to be down there with them and away from the pain and the dirt and the fear.

The heart-beat drumming speeded up and the zombies began to sway and shake more fiercely. The groans were almost coordinated now, an eerie ululation echoing out into Malton's dark night.

I jumped when the key turned in the lock. Jayden came in. He was carrying a plate of sandwiches. "Mark has sent food," he said. "He says not to worry about the drums."

"What are they doing?" I turned back to the window.

"Fucked if I know. One of the early RRF Papa's made it up. He'd seen too much James Bond, if you ask me and then he found some book on Voodoo in Boniface Library."

I looked back at the swaying zombies. It made sense of a sorts. Clearly the RRF had bound itself together with a made-up religion and I could see the attraction of borrowing bits from Voodoo to do so.

"Is it a real Voodoo ceremony?" I asked.

"Like I said, fucked if I know. What do you think?"

James Bond and a book from the library, in Malton, North Riding, Yorkshire. "OK, no."

The drums beat on.

I heard a falter in the rhythm. Actually I didn't so much hear the drums falter as hear the disturbance in the crowd. A ripple of silence, a change in the groans. Somewhere the rhythm was being interrupted. I strained to see through the bars. Then I heard the familiar sound of a shotgun and over it all a cry went up.

"Take that you capitalist brain-eating parasites!!"

That could only be one person. I heard more gun shots. There weren't a lot of people out there, but there was definitely more than one. It could have been coincidence, but I suspected that the rescue party had just arrived.

"I need to get out of here."

"You already tried that remember."

"It'll work this time. Give me your gun."

Jayden backed up. "No way! I'm already in the shit house for letting you get the drop on me once."

"And this time I can run. It'll work I promise."

"No. You are going to eat that food."

I grabbed a sandwich and stuffed it into my mouth. No point letting useful calories go to waste. Meanwhile I gestured at him impatiently to give me his gun.

"No. Good night Cat."

He turned and headed to the door. I didn't give myself time to think, because that would mean thinking about how angry Mark would be. I simply grabbed hold of the nearest chair and brought it down, as hard as I could, on the back of Jayden's head. He collapsed to the floor in a very satisfactory fashion.

I liberated his gun and headed out through the open door. There were guards at the foot of the stair, but they were distracted by the shouts from outside. I came down the staircase firing and both fell to the floor. I tucked the, now empty, handgun into the waistband of my trousers and then grabbed one of the guard's shotguns. Then I was out on the streets, surrounded by the beat of the drums and the crowds of the RRF.

I could feel more than see where the disturbance was in the crowd by the way the zombies were moving. I charged forwards, dodging the bodies of the dead, feeling their attention begin to focus upon me.

I could hear voices. "The horde's moving!", "Who's that coming towards us?" and then the report of a shotgun blast and the crowd began to thin ahead of me, even as hands grasped my shoulders from behind.

"BD!" I shouted.

"I got you covered. Drop your head!"

I tucked my head down as best I could and heard the roar of BD's shotgun, Black Betty, once more. I pulled free of the grasping hands and struggled forwards towards the two living men that I could see. They were standing behind a wire fence, firing through it into the crowd. I leaped at the fence and adrenaline drove me up the wire and over the top. I'd say BD and Gabby caught me, but it would be more accurate to admit I just sort of fell on them. We were in the yard

of a warehouse. Already zombies were approaching. They had probably got in through an open gate somewhere.

"Is this a rescue?" I asked once I got my breath back. There were three of us, we were surrounded by the RRF. They were all awake.

BD fired a shot into the advancing crowd. "It's all you've got doll."

"No one else took it seriously when BD said you were captured." Gabby was frantically reloading Slasher, his big handgun.

There was a route to our right, along the edge of the warehouse and towards a smashed doorway. Out of options, we headed in that direction.

"How did you know I'd been captured?" I asked as I ran.

"I have contacts," said BD, shortly. He always says that.

We ducked through the door and plunged into darkness.

There was a bang behind me and then a crash. Gabby had tried shutting the door and it had fallen off it's hinges.

"Fuck!" he said.

A light flashed out and I realised BD had fixed a torch to the end of his gun. The beam swept over smashed tables and chairs and along a large, solid looking oak bar.

"We get behind that," said BD. "We can hold there for a bit and there should be a way through to the back."

We scrambled behind the bar. There was, indeed, a door there. I pushed against it, but it wouldn't budge. "It's locked, or barricaded."

"The fuck?" asked Gabby.

"Gabby concentrate will'ya? Slasher has a better range than Betty. Pick them off as they come in." BD shouted.

"I am concentrating!" Gabby let off two shots. "See?"

"And the third."

"There's another? Oops! sorry! didn't spot him."

"BD, can I have some light," I asked.

The light flashed round on the door.

"Well now I can't see the fuckers!" Gabby complained.

I could see planks nailed across the doorway. "It's been barred on this side. Do you have a crowbar?" I asked.

"I need light!" shouted Gabby. Groans floated into the room.

"There's a toolbox in my backpack Sis. You get it out while we hold off the horde." BD shrugged his backpack to the floor and turned back to shooting.

I groped in the backpack for the toolbox, unearthing a small armoury in the process. I dumped a pile of pistols and clips on the bar. I had a feeling we were

going to need them. As I piled them up I could see the horde pushing through the door of the bar, illuminated in brief flashes by the beam of BD's torch.

Then there was the loud bang of a shotgun and one of the boarded windows gave way. A click and a hum and the beam of a large spotlight flooded through the the space revealing the inside of the club in all its ruined glory. Smashed wood, bare floor and the walking dead, shambling around the walls as BD and Gabby picked them off.

Instinctively all three of us dropped behind the bar. There was another loud shotgun blast and chips of wood rained down on us. Apparently the Gore Corps had arrived, to back up their zombie partners with light and ammunition.

BD popped up his head, let off a wild shot from Black Betty and then ducked down again, feeding shells rapidly into the chamber.

"Looks like a dozen breathers. Not good odds but not the worst if we move quickly. Cat, carry on working the door!"

I looked down at the bag. Now we had light I could see the toolbox plainly and hauled it out.

"Gabby, I'll cover, you aim!" said BD.

I could hear handgun fire and more chips of wood rained down on us.

"They're shooting!" whispered Gabby.

"Wait until they reload," BD hissed back.

I heard several clicks in quick succession. BD instantly stood up and fired Black Betty. Gabby popped up next to him, sighted down Slasher and started shooting. I seized the opportunity to stand and wedge a crowbar under the edge of the top plank on the door.

"Kate Clark! Freeze where you are!"

Part 6

I recognised the voice of Mark Wright and did indeed freeze. Everything seemed to still around me. I turned to see him standing there, shotgun resting against one shoulder. I was vaguely aware that Gabby and BD had both ducked back down behind the bar.

"Stand absolutely still and I won't shoot." Mark took a step closer. The gun still level. I could see his finger curled about the trigger. "Let go of the crowbar. Put up your hands. Tell your friends it will be better for all of you, if you give up now."

"Yeah, right! So you can feed us to your zombie friends!" shouted Gabby. "Fucking moron," he muttered quietly.

"Cat, get down," hissed BD.

"Cat, if you don't do as you're told, right now, you will regret it," said Mark.

A weight suddenly landed on my chest and I found myself lying behind the bar with Gabby sitting on me. There was a loud bang and the wooden plank splinted, exactly where my head had been moments before. The crowbar fell to the floor as the plank fell apart.

"Shit Cat! Snap out of it!" Gabby said.

"They're going to get round the end of the bar," muttered BD.

The bar was thick and solid, made of oak. It formed a long L-shape, one end meeting the wall, off to the left of the barricaded door. To the right it was open though. BD scrambled on his belly to the open corner. He edged round at floor level and let off three shots in quick succession. Then he dropped back.

I pushed Gabby off me and grabbed the crowbar again. Two more planks to go. Gabby was pushing bullets into Slasher's cylinder.

I saw him look up and raise the gun. Following his gaze I realised someone had leaped up onto the end of the bar where it joined the wall, a woman in goth-chick clothing, hair in bunches and a pistol in either hand. Gabby shot her three times and she toppled backwards.

"They're creeping up on the left," he shouted, "using the bar as cover."

Gabby suddenly surged forward. He charged at the end of the bar, rolled over the top close to where it joined the wall and dropped out of sight on the far side. I heard shooting.

The second plank came free as I forced my weight against the crowbar.

"Gabby! Are you all right!" I shouted.

"Yeah! Got them! Now I just need to get the fuck back to you."

A shotgun shell hit the top of the bar between us. I could see zombies approaching near to where Gabby was hidden.

"Fucking bullets!" complained Gabby. "Go into the fucking cylinder!"

"Where's he gone?" asked BD, glancing back at us.

"Over the bar. We were being crept up on," I replied and wedged the end of the crowbar under the last plank.

I pulled at it and then glanced back towards where I'd last seen Gabby. The zombies looked awfully close. I abandoned the crowbar and grabbed two pistols off the top of the oak counter. I emptied both clips in the direction of the zombies and watched them stagger back.

"Who was that?" asked Gabby.

"Me!" I grabbed another pistol. "On five, come back over the bar. One, two..."

Gabby's head popped up. Unprepared I staggered to my feet and fired the pistol indiscriminately in into the crowds of zombies that pressed into the pub's interior. I could see the odd gun and tried to focus on the living Gore Corps members who carried them.

I heard loud shots above me. I glanced up and saw Gabby walking briskly down the top of the bar. He was firing as he went, using the height and the clear view to pick off the Gore Corps one by one.

A young wiry man jumped up onto the bar behind Gabby, his steel toe-caps ringing out as they contacted with the hardwood surface. Gabby turned and shot him through the eyes, before he even raised his gun. A zombie groped for Gabby's legs and he kicked it away. Some distance across the room a woman was raising what looked like an automatic. I emptied the remainder of my clip in her direction and watched her fall.

Above me Gabby continued to shoot: five clear shots, one for each bullet in his cylinder then he jumped down off the bar. I ducked and the shooting resumed.

"What happened to counting to five?" I hissed.

"Thought I'd surprise them. They can hear what we're saying you know!"

"You could have been killed?"

"So? BD has syringes."

"Cat! Door!" shouted BD. "Gabby, get your butt over here and help out!"

Gabby crawled over to where BD had been keeping up a steady fire from his shotgun. I wasn't sure how many of the Gore Corps were left in the crowd, but hopefully they were being cautious. Meanwhile zombies shuffled constantly into sight. I pulled at the final plank and it popped free. When I grabbed the door handle, it was still locked.

I picked the last of BD's handguns off the bar and aimed it at the lock, pulling the trigger. The wood splintered and the lock fell away. I pulled at the handle again and watched in satisfaction as the door heaved open.

"Purple Cat, if you go through that door, I will be very, very angry." Mark's voice echoed through the room.

"Like she cares," shouted BD. I found myself being bustled through the door.

I was facing backwards, still straining behind me to see Mark as Gabby came through the door. I saw Gabby's silhouette against the light that shone in through the pub's broken window and behind him, shotgun level at his shoulder, I could see Mark.

Without thinking, I shoved Gabby to one side. But I was too slow. There was a bang and I heard Gabby cry and saw him fall.

I briefly glimpsed Mark once more, his face dark and angry. Then the door banged shut.

"Ah fuck!" cried Gabby.

I groped for him in the dark. "Where are you hit?"

"Arm! I can walk, I think."

"Then let's move," said BD. "Cat help him!"

I grabbed hold of Gabby. I felt the wet blood over my fingers. "He's bleeding pretty badly."

"No time! We'll fix him up in a minute. Now we move."

Gabby staggered and I dragged his good arm around my shoulders. Then we followed the bobbing light of BD's torch down a narrow corridor.

We came out into an alleyway at the side of the railway arches that carried the now disused tracks north-south from Cribb Row station to Hubbard Boulevard. There weren't too many zombies in evidence as we took a sharp right, but the groans of the horde were loud to the south of us. Gabby began to lean heavily on me. I could see the blood now and it was flowing freely.

"I need to see to Gabby," I hissed.

"Almost there," said BD.

"Almost where?"

BD looked around. Three zombies were shuffling towards us down the road. He raised his gun and shot each one in turn, until they dropped.

"That was a waste of ammo wasn't it?" I asked.

"Didn't want them seeing where we go."

He headed into an old factory building ahead of us. Once inside BD threaded his way between rows of smashed machinery and into a small back room. I think it had once been an office. BD marched up to a safe set into one wall and started spinning the dial.

"What are you doing?"

The safe swung open. "Quick! Inside! You may need to help Gabby."

I could see a tunnel behind the safe door. I scrambled in, squirming round in the concealed space. BD had to more or less hoist Gabby in behind me while I pulled at his shoulders.

"I'm feeling a little faint," muttered Gabby.

"I'm not surprised, the amount of blood you've just lost!"

BD scrambled in after us and pulled the safe door shut behind him. I heard the dial spin in the pitch black.

"Bandages!" I said, "and light."

BD's torch switched on. We were packed into a small tunnel, but I could see that it continued for some distance. If I squeezed, I could just about sit. Gabby was lying flat on his back, his eyes closed. BD was lying on his front, his backpack in front of him. He rummaged through it, and tossed me a couple of bandages.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Fuck knows. One of the MPD guys knew about it, I think he worked security here before the outbreak. He passed the information on to me, because he owed me a favour. The tunnel takes us up to a rooftop apartment, if we can get Gabby up there."

I was already binding up Gabby's arm. He groaned a bit and his eyes flickered.

"I think he's fainted," I said.

"I don't faint," whispered Gabby. "I'm very manly."

"Right then! Oh manly one!" said BD. "Let's see you get off your backside and up a ladder."

"Cat!" whined Gabby. "Tell him I need to conserve my strength. You might need rescuing again."

BD and I exchanged glances. Then we both hit him.

"Ow! Is that what you guys call gratitude?"

"Come on! Get up the ladder and you can lie down again and I'll soothe your troubled brow in an adoring fashion," I said.

"Will you feed me grapes."

"No but there are tins in BD's pack. I can feed you cold whatever's in them."

Gabby groaned. "It's corned beef. I suppose I'll just have to imagine it's grapes."

"Head on up Cat!" said BD. "I'll get this waster to follow you."

I turned and crawled to the end of the tunnel. I felt the rungs of a ladder and began to climb upwards. Behind me I could hear Gabby whining some more and BD chivying him.

The apartment was more a storage room, although mattresses and a small camping stove had been put there by someone. There was also an exciting armoury of weapons and ammunition, even a rocket launcher. Someone had put a lot of effort into this place.

"Who did all this?" I asked.

There was a small generator in one corner and BD switched it on. A single light bulb lit up in the centre of the room.

"Ghost Squad have been setting it up for a while," he said. "I figured we might need a supply dump in Ridleybank one of these days. This place was too good to pass up."

Gabby slumped down on one of the mattresses. I checked the dressing on his arm. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. I tucked the blankets around him to keep him warm. "He'll be fine in a couple of hours, assuming he rides out the shock." Our half-zombie bodies recover rapidly from trauma.

"He doesn't deserve to be, after that stunt he pulled on the bar."

"That's not how he got injured."

"Karmic revenge, I expect. You OK Sis? Did the RRF hurt you? You've got quite a shiner over your eye."

I touched my face in surprise. The adrenaline of the escape had taken my mind off the beating I had taken earlier. Then it all came out of course, Mark and Jayden and Mark's plan to switch my allegiance, the broken fingers...

"Which one was Mark Wright?" BD demanded. "We've got some talking to do. Ghost are going to round that one up for sure."

I had a horrible vision of Mark Wright sitting there, while BD pounded his fingers with an iron bar. "No, don't!" I said compulsively.

"What the fuck?"

"Don't, just leave it."

"Sis did he get to you? Did he already start getting into your head?"

"No!"

"Then what's with the concern. The man's a louse. He deserves what's coming."

I knew Ghost did this. I pretended I didn't. Lots of us pretended we didn't. We didn't ask where BD got his information from. We didn't ask what he meant when he said someone had been paid back for the trouble they caused. But I couldn't face the idea of it happening in my name. I couldn't face the idea of it happening to Mark.

"No, BD please!"

"He's got into your head, Cat. He's got to learn he can't play games with us and ours. We let him get away with this and he'll try it on someone else, on Brittney or Jada. Fuck, looking at your face, he'll probably come round and pick you up again just to finish what he started. Do you want that?"

"No."

"So I'm teaching him a lesson. I'm going to send a little message that he doesn't get to play mind games with us."

"There are other ways," I began.

"There are no other ways Cat. There's no law in this town apart from what me make ourselves. There's no cell that will hold a zombie. We can't fine them or take out injunctions or confiscate their property. We can't even kill them. All we

have is pain and if we're going to send a message then it has to written in pain. Pain is all we've got Cat."

"BD..." but I had no arguments. I felt sick and frightened and, frankly, scared of my brother, but I couldn't think my way out of the situation.

Then the drums started up again. A deep pounding beat that echoed through the streets of Ridleybank.

Part 7

"What's with the drums?" grumbled BD.

"Not sure, they've come up with some kind of cod-voodoo religion."

BD made a disgusted noise.

"Can we see out of the windows?" I asked.

"Turn out the light first and remember to put the blackout back afterwards."

I switched off the light and then peeled back the corner on the thick blanket that was taped across the window. The drums continued to beat. In the street outside I could see burning torches and a small procession of zombies shuffling past.

"They must know we're around somewhere," muttered BD. "They're putting on a show for us."

Then I gasped. "That's Jayden!"

"Who?"

"The guy who helped me. They've got him chained up."

Jayden was alive, but he was bare-foot and stripped to the waist. His hands and feet were chained, forcing him to shuffle along in the centre of the crowd.

"Gotta hand it to them," said BD. "They've figured out he helped you and now they're trying to lure you out."

"What are they going to do to him."

"Hurt him, I imagine. He looks tough. He'll survive."

"BD! We have to help him!"

BD sat back thoughtfully on his haunches. Then he pulled the blanket back down and taped it across the window.

"It's a trap," he said.

"Well of course it's a trap. We just have to think our way round it."

"No, I mean, what if the point was never to break you, but to plant their own man in the DHPD?"

"What? Jayden?"

"Yes Jayden, what do you know about him? Why is he with the RRF? Why did he help you?"

"Well, he's..." I tailed away. I had made some assumptions, but I knew nothing.

"Cat's right," murmured Gabby from the bed. "We can't just leave him. We'll just have to be careful."

"Aw fuck!" muttered BD. "Here was I thinking we'd hole up here until you were moving again and then we could bug out quietly."

"More fun this way?" I suggested.

BD grunted. "Gabby, can you drive?"

"Of course he can't drive!" I objected. "He's never learned."

"Cat I hardly need to know the fucking highway code around here," complained Gabby. "How difficult can it be?"

"It'll have to be an automatic," I said.

"Don't worry, it is," said BD.

"You have a car?"

"Ghost have a vehicle, yes. This is Ridleybank, you can't just tango in here and make do with government issue pea-shooters. We've been preparing!"

I left the issue of why Ghost had been preparing for an assault on Ridleybank. BD would have dropped hints and I'd have been no wiser about whether the DHPD, or some wider alliance of Malton survivors, had some plan to attack the place, or whether BD was simply operating in some fantasy land where he would get to teach zombie a lesson.

The drums didn't get any quieter. The procession stopped in the street, not far from the factory. The whole show was clearly for our benefit. They knew were were here somewhere. BD made us converse in whispers. The factory was probably awash with zombies, swaying quietly in the dark, waiting for us to show up.

There was a second ladder from the safe room that took us up onto the roof. BD loaded us up with an infeasible amount of weaponry and we climbed up there. In the street below a rough framework had been erected and Jayden had been tied to it, arms akimbo. A figure stood in front of him waving a knife. It was a caricature of the devil, drenched in blood from its shoulders to it's waist, naked apart from leather trousers and a horned headdress.

"We have to hurry!" I hissed.

"No we don't. We can rescue him whether he's dead or alive. I'm more concerned that we get out of here once the rescue is over."

BD anchored one end of a zip wire to several struts and then looked at me. "You sure about this Cat? It's going to make our lives a lot more complicated."

"I'm sure."

He shrugged and fired the other end of the wire from a small crossbow. It thudded into the side of a building across the street.

"Now or never, Cat," he said.

I'm not sure I've ever been quite as loaded down with weaponry as I was when I slid down that zip wire. BD had strapped a makeshift holster for a fire axe to my back. I had two pistols in shoulder holsters and two at my hip, four more in a small backpack which BD had made me wear on my front 'for easy access' and a knife in a small holster bound to each ankle. When I walked I moved a bit like a sumo wrestler, arms and legs held wide.

The wire ride carried me down from the top of the building, the night air rushing past me and almost straight into the path of the devil figure. It turned towards me and snarled and I realised, with a shock, that it was Mark Wright.

He lunged. BD had aimed the wire so my descent would come close to Jayden. Mark grabbed me round the waist, pulling my hands free of the wire and wrestling me to the ground.

"Back in the arms of Lord Moloch!" he whispered in my ear and he dragged me to my feet. "Stay with me, Cat," he said.

I grabbed one of the knives from my ankles and slashed. He cried out and let go of me. I ditched the knife and pulled the fire axe from its holster. I ran over to Jayden and brought the axe down as hard as I could on the handcuffs that tied him to the wooden posts.

The first one gave to my second blow.

"You won't escape from me. We belong together." It was Moloch. I drew one of the pistols and aimed it at him.

"Don't count on me staying."

"Your soul is mine, you just don't know it yet. Lord Moloch will triumph." I hardly recognised him. It wasn't just the blood red facepaint but his whole persona seemed different.

He took a step towards me. I could see the bleeding gash in his side where I had struck him with the knife. He flexed his arms and the muscles across his chest rippled. The drums beat inside my head.

"It's me, Mark," he whispered. "Stay with me. I can keep you safe." He took another step closer.

"Rrn rh," growled a zombie. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Marinette. She was hunched and approaching cautiously from my other side. It should just have been noise but I understood her meaning well enough. "Join us!" she called to me. I could fall into the arms of Lord Moloch or I could join her in death but either way I belonged to the RRF.

"Give me the gun! I can hold them off while you free my other hand." It was Jayden. He reached out his one free hand towards me.

I stepped back smartly and handed him the gun, blinking back the fog of nightmare. Then I turned my back on Moloch and Marinette and swung the fire axe down on the second chain.

There was a loud explosion somewhere off to my right. BD had obviously broken out the rocket launcher. I shucked off my back pack and passed it to Jayden.

"More guns in there!" I said and then turned to face the horde. Moloch and Marinette stood at their head, man and woman, live and dead, side by side.

I dropped the fire axe and drew two pistols.

"Going to shoot me?" asked Moloch. "You must know I'm only going to rise and rise and rise and I'll keep coming for you."

He wasn't armed. I forced myself not to bother and instead shot Marinette through the head. She toppled backwards into the crowd. The swarm of the undead surged forwards.

I pressed my back up against Jayden's and we kept up a steady fire as the horde swayed towards us. Each zombie we put down was replaced by another. Explosions continued to rain down over our heads, thinning out the horde for us. Moloch had vanished somewhere into the crowd. No doubt off to fetch the rest of Gore Corps and some guns.

"Was this supposed to be a rescue?" asked Jayden.

"Just hang on. Help is on the way."

At that moment the doors of the factory burst open and Gabby arrived driving a vehicle that looked more like a tank than a car. The thing had once been a four by four, flatbed truck, but Ghost squad had clearly been having way too much fun with it. The Ghostmobile had armour plated sides, blades and spikes sticking out in a number of improbable directions and big headlights that illuminated the night sky. The sides of the flatbed had been raised to form defensive positions with holes cut in the metal at strategic places for firing through.

It obviously also had massive loud speakers somewhere. Guns N'Roses boomed out down the street as the vehicle careened haphazardly in our direction, knocking zombies down like skittles as it went.

"What's that?" asked Jayden.

I shrugged. "Apparently my little brother has been preparing an assault on Ridleybank. That's the transport."

The car shuddered to a halt near us. It then lurched forwards slightly and promptly stalled.

"Who's driving?" asked Jayden.

"Don't ask."

I dropped my empty pistols and drew the next two. Then I started fighting my way through the crowd towards the Ghostmobile. I heard Jayden's guns click empty behind me.

Gabby leaned out of the window. "It's broken, Cat!"

"You've just stalled it. Start it up again and drive forwards slowly."

"K." The Ghostmobile's engine coughed into life. It jumped forward and stalled again.

Gabby leaned out the window with a shotgun and started blasting at the zombies between us. "I think you had better drive Cat."

A large explosion blossomed directly between us and the Ghostmobile, clearing our way.

"Get going Sis," shouted BD's voice. "Meet up with you at the corner by St. Jude's."

I reached the door of the Ghostmobile and hauled it open. Gabby scrambled across to the passenger seat. Jayden hauled open one of the back doors and clambered in behind us. Then I started the engine, floored the accelerator and began to carve my way through the crowd.

It was very odd simply to drive through the zombies, treating bodies as skittles, even if they were rotting bodies. The car jumped and veered with the impacts and we were tossed around as we drove over the carcasses of the fallen. Gabby and Jayden hung out of the windows letting off shots.

Above us I could see BD running along the rooftops, jumping from building to building, where they were close. He made use of the network of ladders and planks that survivors tended to leave in their wake where he could.

I could see figures up on the roof behind him and more on the other side of the road. Someone dropped to one knee and I saw a rifle thrown up to a shoulder. I didn't hear the sound of the shot, but I saw BD duck suddenly behind a parapet.

"Watch out where you're going!" shouted Gabby. I swerved hurriedly to avoid a lamp post. "Bloody wimmenz!" he grumbled.

"Gore Corps are up on the roofs." I snapped back. "They're chasing BD!"

Gabby peered out of the window and shot. “We’re going too fast to aim properly.”

I steered the Ghostmobile up onto the pavement so that we were directly beneath BD.

“Jesus!” shouted Gabby.

I steered rapidly around a rubbish bin and knocked yet another zombie into the street.

“I’m going to die,” said Gabby.

“You’ve died half a dozen times this month already. Quit moaning.”

I slowed down once we reached BD and began pacing him. Zombies clawed at the sides of the truck. The door next to me swung open suddenly and arms reached in. I tried kicking sideways and the truck slowed to a standstill as my foot left the accelerator.

“Cat, down!”

Gabby had one arm around me pulling me towards him. I ducked my head down into his chest as he blew the zombie away with the gun in his other hand. There was a tearing sound.

“So much for that door,” said Jayden from the back seat. He leaned forwards and fired through the open space. “Let go of her. She needs to drive.”

“I can’t shoot if she’s sitting up.”

“Well I can!”

I struggled upright and eased the car forwards again. Gabby reached one arm behind me along the back of the seat and joined Jayden in firing out into the horde.

There was a sudden crash in the flatbed behind us. I glanced in the mirror. Jayden swivelled to look through the back window.

“That was BD,” he reported. “Let’s go!”

I floored the accelerator. Progress was initially slow because of the press of zombies on the front of the car, but Gabby and Jayden managed to clear a path. Arms still reached in through the missing door to grab at me, but I had my second knife free now and could steer with one hand, while slashing with the other. Someone bit into my leg at one point, but Jayden shot them when I screamed.

Gradually we began to move and, as we picked up speed, the zombies became less of an obstacle then, suddenly, we were free and on the move.

I got us to the border of Ridleybank by which time I was running a raging temperature and had to take some anti-virals and lie down in the back. Gabby insisted on driving, I could hear Jayden in the front trying to explain what the low gears were for. I’d checked the back. BD’s head lay at a strange angle to his body, neck clearly snapped in two. There wasn’t going to be much we could do for him

until he sat up. We agreed to circle round Ridleybank and hole up a couple of suburbs away. Then we could cook up a syringe and bring BD back to life. After that, who knew?

I listened to Jayden's low tones in the front and wondered if BD had been right. Were we bringing a spy back into the DHPD? Then I closed my eyes and let myself drift asleep. For the time being, at least, I was as safe as I could get in Malton. Deciding what to do about Jayden was not my problem alone and, moreover, it was a problem for tomorrow. Tomorrow would be another day. I would cope with it's problems once the sun had risen once more.

Chapter 42

Celebrations

A Primeval Drabble Cycle

Christening

The special forces team were all there, showing their support.

Most of them had missed the funeral. Those that had survived the IRA blast had been in hospital. But they weren't going to miss the christening of the commander's first born.

Hannah Ryan fought back tears as she saw them lined up in the pews in their dress uniforms. She wished Thomas could have been here.

The baby slept quietly in her arms, but he would wake up and ball when the cold water hit him.

"Grow up to be a good man," she whispered. "Like your father before you."

Birthday

"... Like my father before me." Connor tossed his new lightsaber to one side.

Becky rolled her eyes and sighed. "So be it! Jedi!" and she raised her hands.

"Aaargh!" Connor raised his arms, stepped backwards and promptly tripped over Bob who was playing the defeated Darth Vader.

"That's it!" pouted Becky. "This is a silly game."

"Please, Sis!" said Connor. "It's my birthday."

"Never mind," said Bob, scrambling up and grabbing the other new lightsaber. "Let's do the fight between Vader and Obi-wan on the first death star."

Connor grinned happily. You could always count on your best friends.

First Job

You could always count on your best friends.

Claudia giggled over her wine. “Thanks for coming, Fiona.”

Jenny sipped her Martini elegantly. “Thanks for coming, Fiona.”

Fiona smiled back. “I couldn’t miss celebrating your first job! What’s the place like?”

“It seems nice enough,” they both said. Jenny managed to make the comment sound slightly arch.

“Jolly good,” said Fiona. “Onwards and upwards eh.”

Jenny and Claudia both laughed. If they had been sitting side by side, they would have been identical in that moment.

She raised her glass. “Congratulations! To the first day of the rest of your life.”

Wedding

“Congratulations! To the first day of the rest of your lives.”

The room echoed back Helen’s father’s good wishes.

Helen had a glint in her eye. Her father had relished the opportunity to rib her mercilessly.

Nick hid his grin and his sudden excitement. Helen was looking ravishing. She had opted for a scarlet mini-dress and it showed off her figure to good effect. The danger in her expression only made her look better.

Her father caught his eye and winked. “That’ll get her going,” he mouthed.

Helen was at her best when challenged. Nick sighed. Like father, like daughter.

Wedding Anniversary

‘Like father, like daughter,’ mused Kathy Lester, despairingly.

“Liz,” she pleaded, “I know you don’t like Amanda much, but its just one night.”

Liz raised an eyebrow at her. “OK,” she said, eventually. “I suppose it’s preferable to listening to you and Dad shag.”

With the children gone, Kathy lit the candles and slipped into her slinkiest dress. The surprise meal was in the oven.

At midnight she blew out the candles and put the uneaten food in the fridge.

“Happy Wedding Aniversary, Kathy!” She whispered to her reflection. Then she took of her face and went to bed alone.

Retirement

Then she took of her face and went to bed alone.

It had been a good day. Her feet hurt because she’d been standing up for most of the reception. The speeches had been tiring but she’d enjoyed talking to old friends and colleagues and was touched that so many had come to her retirement party.

Dame Abigail Maitland had had a good career and, better than that, she had done good with it. All in all she didn’t have much to complain about. A handful of regrets and an empty bed. But a job well done and many friendships.

Wake

“A job well done and many friendships made,” Lester had said at the funeral.

Nick hated wakes and this one was worse than most. Stephen’s parents stood shoulder to shoulder in their grief.

“We’re here to celebrate Stephen’s life,” his mother had announced at the beginning of the party with fragile determination.

Abby silently nudged Nick’s arm and smiled consolingly at him. Connor stood at her shoulder.

It was true, mused Nick. The job had been well done and many friendships made. When he looked around the room he saw the special forces team were all there, showing their support.

Chapter 43

The Haunting of Yun Manor

Part 1

The crew of Firefly class ship Serenity were back on Persephone. Persephone was the kind of place where trouble easily found the unwary, and the crew of this particular Firefly class ship had a peculiar talent for trouble. Today, it was just the usual trouble, namely money. That particular variety of trouble was sufficiently everyday not to raise much comment among the rag-tag bunch of petty criminals, aristocrats and retired alliance officers that somehow gathered together under the wings of Captain Malcolm Reynolds.

Zoe might have been first mate of Serenity on a more conventional ship, but she had started her relationship with Malcolm Reynolds as his Corporal and, excepting the requirement for a measure of conmanship, that was how she remained. Sitting beside him in a dingy bar in downtown Persephone she looked more like a bodyguard than a business partner. It is entirely possible that Captain Reynolds liked it that way.

Xiao Hoagg, sitting opposite them, knew none of this. He knew only that they were a crew for hire; that they were going in the right direction and that they could leave soon.

The rest of the crew were playing pool on the bar's new 'hard-light' table. "Tired of unconvincing feedback mechanisms in your pool cue?" read the standard publicity. "Want to experience the sensation of genuine physicality?" the more risqué advertising went. Mind you, the more risqué advertising generally wasn't for pool tables. The table was new and the game had attracted a big crowd, interested in the novelty of holographic billiard balls that you could touch. It

was leading to more than the usual amount of betting and cheating. Suddenly you could nudge one of the balls with your fingers or an accidental bump on the table, not just with the electronic pool cues. This was a circumstance that had escaped the notice of neither players nor onlookers.

Mal wasn't giving an alliance credit away, but then he rarely did during a deal. Them as knew him well would have detected a faint hesitancy in the way his eyes flicked from side to side. He smelled a rat but for the life of him, he couldn't justify the instinct and with Zoe sat by his side he couldn't walk from the deal without good reason.

"Twenty per cent in advance," he said.

"It's only a short hop, Captain. Not much of a risk and the price is handsome."

"I don't carry goods out of charity, especially not for strangers. I ain't waiting 'til I arrive for payment."

"I can easily employ someone else." The man looked bored.

"No you can't, else you wouldn't be asking me to transport fancy party-food to some luxury moon in the first place. We ain't exactly caterers to the rich and prosperous. Don't take well to bowing and scraping for a start."

"I'm not asking you to bow and scrape. Just deliver the gorram food and try not to break anything on the way."

"Not breaking stuff costs twenty percent in advance."

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen I can see my way to accommodating."

Fifteen would barely pay for fuel to the holiday moon, on top of other supplies Serenity badly needed. But Xiao Hoagg was also correct. He had other options and the final price was good.

The crowd at the pool table cheered. Jayne Cobb, Hero of Canton, only once described as Firefly's public relations officer, paraded around the table, his pool cue raised. Then his opponent threw one of the hard-light balls at him and things went downhill, or uphill, from there, depending upon your viewpoint. Jayne's particular expertise in public relations was ideally suited to the situation. If anything, it got even worse when the publican turned off the hard-light balls and the company resorted to the traditional methods involving fists and beer bottles.

The evening, having therefore ended to the satisfaction of all involved, the following morning found Serenity flying free. Its crew went about their various activities on the bridge, in the cargo bay and the engine room or simply occupying their time in their quarters. It was a peaceful trip until moonfall when a hitch arose.

The bridge of Serenity was large enough to hold the whole crew, just about. But when Jayne Cobb was angry, as he was once the details of said hitch had been communicated, he could seem to dominate the space some.

"What do you mean he's not going to pay us?" demanded Jayne. "We delivered the gorram food!"

"*Bun tyen-shung duh ee-dway-ro*," replied Mal, giving his opinion of their employer. "Says his party was cancelled three days past. Ain't his fault we didn't see the communication." Mal thumped at the bulk-head.

"But even if we had, right? We'd still have been en route. What would we have done? Still had a ship full of luxury food items." Hoban Washburne liked to keep out of fights, and that included fights that some of those involved preferred to class as strong disagreements. He sat in the pilot's chair and kept his head down. But sometimes something not making no sense forced him to butt in. Their employer's excuse didn't appear to make no sense at all.

Jayne carried on complaining, like Wash hadn't said nothing much at all. "Said we shouldn't have taken the job. There was a reason the regular suppliers wouldn't touch him."

Mal scowled. "The docket said it was a rush job. We were in port. Looked like an easy cargo."

Wash decided to ignore the bickering and check the local situation. The network wasn't encouraging. "I'm not sure we can even afford to refuel," he muttered. "Local prices are oddly high."

"Our client controls those prices." Zoe's voice was calm but laced with irony. It was the sense of poise that Wash loved about her. That and the poise itself, and the fact that if it did get nasty in here any time soon, he'd be safe hiding behind her.

"Wait? Are we being stitched up?" asked Jayne.

As if in answer the communications array pinged. Wang Ruan, nobleman, businessman and, as Mal had said, *bun tyen-shung duh ee-dway-ro* appeared on screen.

"Gentlemen, it seems I may have a solution to our mutual problem."

"Stitch-up," muttered Jayne.

"We're listening," said Mal.

"My party had to be cancelled because of an unfortunate lack of staff. Now if your crew were prepared to perform a little minor waitressing, perhaps provide some minimal security, then I'm sure the party could be re-scheduled, you would be paid and everything would be tickety-boo."

"Lack. Of. Staff." Mal enunciated each word to make sure he'd understood.

"Lack of staff, indeed."

At this point, it must be owned, several thoughts chased through the mind of Captain Malcolm Reynolds, one at a time. Most of these thoughts were variations on the idea there was clearly more to this situation than met the eye. These thoughts wondered variously if it were a trap, and if so whether said trap was designed specifically for the Serenity. They considered the possibility that the whole set up was an elaborate con or that the crew of the Serenity were being set up as fall guys. But the final thought in the stream pointed out they couldn't afford the fuel to get their boat off the moon. Therefore they didn't have a lot of choice.

"We get a free refuel," Mal said.

"After the party."

"No, we get a free refuel now. We get decent food while we stay here and we get paid after. The fuel don't cover even half of what we're owed."

"Not at regular prices anyway," whispered Wash.

"Very well, Captain, you have a deal."

"Waiters!" sneered Jayne.

"You're security. Where's Inara? She's used to fancy customers."

"You going to ask her advice?" Zoe sounded amused.

"Ain't gonna pass up an advantage. She says we're being played we take the fuel and go. Else we eat the man's food and earn us some pay."

Less than an hour later, the crew were being shown around Yun Manor, the luxury holiday home of one Wang Ruan. The tour went surprisingly well, all things considered. All things being the understandable truculence on the part of the crew of Serenity coupled with their inherent individuality. Wang Ruan found them unruly and ill-disciplined. If they had been from the inner planets or, in the case of River Tam, better dressed, he'd have described them as eccentric, but in general they were not so he didn't. The Companion who travelled with them clearly was eccentric, at least in her choice of fellow traveller. She was not a part of the crew and, at any rate, it was inconceivable he could hire a Companion as waitressing staff. Unable to afford her rates as a Companion, and uncertain she would agree to be hired anyway, Ruan had compromised and invited her as a guest. Of the remaining gaggle only the Doctor, Simon Tam, and the Shepherd, Book, had even a veneer of civilisation.

The manor was timber-built but had been constructed in a style known in some circles as neo-Georgian. The combined effect was some way between a ranch house, a Spanish hacienda and a British stately home. The long wings of the house, and its large windows, enclosed a shaded, dusty courtyard with terraces and balconies floating off the main structure like flourishes on a wedding cake.

River Tam, the Doctor's sister, had begun the tour by enumerating each feature and tracing its stylistic ancestry. It was a speech Ruan had given himself many times and he was discomfited to hear words so like his own coming from the mouth of an urchin, with long straggling hair and hob-nailed boots, even if her accent, and brother, suggested good breeding somewhere.

The tour was restricted to the main areas where the crew would be working, and then took them up to the third floor and a narrow corridor next to a winding stair that lead up to the attic.

"These are the servant's quarters," said Ruan stiffly. "I'll expect you all to keep to them, except when required elsewhere."

"We'll sleep on Serenity," said Malcolm Reynolds.

"I expect my servants to be on call at all hours. Sleeping on your ship isn't an option."

"Now wait a minute..." started Mal.

"Surely you only need a few people here," interrupted Inara. "The rest can stay on Serenity."

Torn between asserting his authority and contradicting a Companion, Ruan adopted a bored expression. "As long as there are people available and my guests aren't bothered by unnecessary tramping about, Captain Reynolds' crew can sleep where they like."

Mal looked at Inara and scowled. It was clear from his expression that he was wondering if fuel was actually worth the attitude. She frowned back at him. Try not to be too uncouth, the expression said.

There was a sudden bang and the windows in the dusty corridor started to fly open, one by one, the shutters crashing back against the walls. All the crew felt the sudden rush of air. Dust from the terraformed plain danced in the breeze, making them cough and then all was still once more.

"*Ta mah duh!*" said Jayne.

"What was that?" asked Mal. His tone made his words only a fraction more polite.

Ruan shrugged. "Atmospheric effect, side-effect of the terraforming. Pay it no mind."

He moved on. Mal made another face at Inara but she ignored him.

Wang Ruan stopped abruptly at the end of the corridor. "That concludes the tour, Captain. I hope all the duties are clear."

"What's through there?" asked Mal, gesturing towards the door at the corridor's end.

"Just workshops, but there is valuable equipment in there. I don't want it broken so your people are to keep out."

"Right you are then."

The look Malcolm Reynolds exchanged with Jayne Cobb behind Ruan's back did not go unnoticed by most of Serenity's crew. As Wash said to his wife in the privacy of their cabin later that night, "I hope Ruan realises that door's going to be open and things broken, first sign of trouble."

River had not walked down the corridor but she stood at the foot of the winding stair leading upwards. "What's in the attic?" she asked suddenly.

"Nothing," said Ruan. "It's empty."

River smiled a secret smile and remained silent. But her hand rested on the wooden wall by the stairway.

In these times of post-war austerity it had become fashionable for the rich to fend for themselves to a degree. Inara, for instance, had endured many a laboured boast on the correct way to make an omelette, or the construction of the perfect garnish to turn a simple sandwich into an act of perfection. The sober reality, of course, was that automation had boomed. The modern kitchen groaned under the weight of devices to automate the production of food while the aristocracy groaned in turn at the bland homogeneity of the food so produced.

These observations lead us, inevitably, to Wang Ruan's kitchens.

"Will you look at this?" asked Kaylee wide-eyed. She stood at the heart of the kitchen, while engines hummed around her.

We have not yet introduced our humble reader to Kaywinnit Lee Frye. She needs little introduction, you can tell her essence in a glance, like looking at a ray of sunshine with a smudge of engine oil on its nose. It's only when you get to thinking about it, you wonder at the reserves of strength that allow the sun to shine in the sorts of places Kaylee found herself.

Kaylee had kept silent when Ruan had shown them round, Mal having had some words to say on the subject of everything going smoothly and how that probably followed from letting him and Inara do all the talking. In extremis only, Simon was allowed to speak. Zoe had had words to say on the topic of Malcolm Reynolds doing the talking, aristocrats who were witholding money, and the smooth running of events, but in the end she was prepared to back him up.

"What is it?" Mal asked. Machinery clattered and whirred.

"It *was* one of them automated kitchen assistants but it's been modified some," said Kaylee.

"How much is some?"

"A lot, but it's all shiny, I can tell. Look at this! I bet this can make a whole meal from fresh ingredients without any interference."

"That's good. I wasn't sure who was going to do the cooking. I can't see Mal here as the King of modern cuisine," said Simon.

"The food has instructions," said Mal, defensively. "With the possible exception of your sister, we're all capable of putting food in an oven and taking it out again when done."

"If you look, you'll find the instructions are a bit more specialist than that."

It wasn't just the instructions on the food that turned out to be a bit more specialised than first anticipated. Waitressing, even to 'basic' standards, as defined by the aristocracy of the inner planets required a little more effort than dumping a tray on the table and saying 'there you go then.' None of Firefly's crew had any experience waitressing except for Jayne who, when pressed, mumbled something indistinct about a job and wouldn't be drawn further. Thus it fell to Inara and Simon, as persons accustomed to being waited upon, to bring them as would be serving folk, up to a modicum of respectability. Hence we find Inara, Simon, Book and Kaylee in the kitchen practicing. River observed, but by mutual unspoken agreement no one proposed to put her in a frilly apron in front of the assembled dignitaries.

"No, no, Kaylee! Hold the tray in the centre," cried Simon.

Kaylee wobbled slightly, tray balanced on one hand. "Don't see why I can't hold it with both hands, that would be safer."

Simon scratched his head. Unpacking the answer to that question would require several detours through history and a grounding in the workings of class privilege. Somehow he didn't think Kaylee wanted that answer. "You'll be expected to hold it with one," he said lamely.

He looked to Inara for support. She nodded and walked up behind Kaylee. She placed her hands one on Kaylee's hips, straightening the line of her body, and the other just under the one holding the tray.

"Stand like this. Keep your head straight. Now try again."

Kaylee humphed. She began to walk across the room.

"Smaller steps, Kaylee," said Inara. "Imagine you're gliding."

"No one will be looking anyways," objected Kaylee. "Not in that ugly dress I have to wear."

"You'd be surprised," said Book, who was struggling in turn with his own tray. "I expect the dress is an attempt to stop you outshining the guests."

"Oh Book! You do say the sweetest things." Kaylee looked over her shoulder to beam at the shepherd and wobbled in mid-stride. The tray began to slide from

her hand.

"Watch out!" shouted Simon.

There was the briefest moment of doubt and then Kaylee regained her balance. She frowned at the tray in a confused fashion. River giggled. She was watching proceedings from one of the counter-tops, where she sat cross-legged.

"Are you all right, Kaylee?" asked Book in concern.

"I don't rightly know. It was the darndest... I'm shiny. Let's continue."

"What was it?" River questioned Kaylee later that night in the small garret room that they shared at the foot of the winding stair.

"Don't rightly know," Kaylee repeated. "I had the strangest feeling. Like someone caught me as I fell."

"The kitchen likes you," said River with confidence. "It told me so."

Above them in the attic the timbers groaned and the wind crept in through cracks in the boarding.

Part 2

The guests arrived in a cavalcade of carriages, ground cars and lightweight flyers. These parked variously in the grounds, all of them dwarfed by the vast bulk of Serenity. The crew were kept busy carrying cases up the stairs to the guest rooms and fetching and carrying for the wide range of sudden and urgent errands the guests required.

Only one box of jewellery accidentally went missing and it was found by Captain Malcolm Reynolds within a half hour. After that Jayne Cobb was excused from meeting and greeting.

By mid-afternoon, the guests were assembled in the front hallway and the courtyard beyond. Their dress was a mixture of exquisitely tailored sombre greens and browns, and they carried with them a small armoury of rifles. The afternoon was to be spent in the historic activity of shooting grouse, for which specific purpose the local woodland had been stocked with birds flown in at no small expense.

In the bustle, Captain Malcolm Reynolds chanced to brush past Zoe. "All going well so far, sir!" she murmured.

"*Tyen shio-duh!*" Mal gestured helplessly at where Jayne stood nearby rather obviously leering down a young lady's décolletage.

"All things considered," amended Zoe. She gazed over at Jayne and the young lady for a moment. "There haven't been any fights," she offered.

"If we get back from this *ai ya* grouse shoot without any killing, it will be a small miracle."

"Lout!" The young lady with the décolletage slapped Jayne. He smirked and rubbed his cheek.

"No fights yet," amended Zoe.

"All ready for the hunt!" asked Ruan. "Tally ho!"

The guests issued forth from the house with Zoe, Mal and Jayne at their heals. The small moon of Arden had been terraformed into a tough grassy heathland. Like all the terraformed moons, it was inclined to be dusty rather than green, and harsh winds had stunted the growth of trees, turning the estate's woodland, such as it was, into a tangle of gnarled and twisted branches. On the heath itself though, heather bloomed, creating a springy purple quilt within which the birds nested.

The party halted at the edge of the heath while beaters from the nearby village departed to frighten out the grouse. Mal, Zoe and Jayne stood silently behind the shooters handing out guns on request. Jayne somehow managed to appear insolent, even in silence.

"Anything?" asked Mal, as he handed a new fowling piece to Inara.

"Ruan is trying to sell the house. He bought it as an investment that didn't pay off. The guests are all potential buyers."

"*Qiongqi*," murmured Mal under his breath. "So we're part of the show. That's information it's mighty useful to know."

"Why no staff?" asked Zoe.

"It's supposed to be haunted."

"Haunted so bad he can't get ahold of staff?" Mal sounded incredulous. Captain Malcolm Reynolds might not have had much acquaintance with the fancier side of life, but he had a good instinct for risk and reward. Nothing so strange had happened in the house to explain a lack of any staff at all.

Inara shrugged, an elegant gesture, refined over a hundred years by the Guild of Companions to convey the message 'why are you asking me? Do you think I'm psychic' with an added overtone of 'I'm already doing you a favour'. Captain Malcolm Reynolds, as was his want, ignored the subtleties of the gesture.

"That why he's selling?" he asked.

Inara shook her head. "He needs the money. His little business empire isn't doing so well. The cost of fuel wasn't set so high just to make your life difficult, Malcolm Reynolds."

"Haunted eh?" mused Mal, as Inara walked back to the guests. "Now ain't that something."

Wang Ruan, on observing the skills of his so-called staff, had decided upon a cold supper for the first evening, which would be prepared and set out while the guests were out shooting. Insofar as the servants were required to do anything after that, it was simply to keep out of the way.

The large table in the kitchen, even though it was surrounded by the vast mechanisms of the kitchen assistant, and the prospect of real food drew his staff together none-the-less and they also sat down to a cold supper, one as well supplied as that elsewhere but among company more boisterous, if less refined.

"Ain't no such thing as demons," declared Mal, conversation having naturally turned to the subject of the haunting.

"I don't know. Don't you like to think that there might be, you know, something after death," Kaylee smiled at him.

"Not much, no."

"Despite thousands of years of human endeavour there are still many questions we can't answer without recourse to some being greater than ourselves," began Book.

"First," said Mal. "I don't believe in God either, and second, we ain't talking about God anyway, we're talking about demons, ghosts, *huli jing*."

"Nevertheless, there may be more things in heaven and Earth..."

"I agree with Mal," said Simon suddenly. "There is no rational basis for a belief in demons or," and here he looked a little embarrassed, "God. Superstition is the refuge of the uneducated mind."

"Well, that's you told, Kaylee," laughed Jayne.

"I didn't mean," began Simon and he glanced anxiously in Kaylee's direction, the faintest blush detectable on his cheeks.

"Yes, you did," said Jayne. "You just didn't think through very well."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Jayne?" asked River, suddenly.

Jayne looked down at his food suddenly. "No."

"Not afraid of unseen hands, the light tap-tapping of something at your window? Mamma's tales of signs and portents: Don't forget to leave milk for the boggart; Don't anger the forces beyond your control."

"No."

"Not afraid that something might lurk in the dark, cracked and broken, patient and remorseless and hungry, waiting to drag your soul down into the pit of hell?"

"I said no!" shouted Jayne. He slammed his dish on the table and stood up. "Man can't even eat his dinner in peace around here."

"You *are* scared aren't you?" said Kaylee, amazed.

"Did you see a hobgoblin when you were a kid?" Wash was beginning to laugh.

"Or maybe a pixie?" said River, staring intently at Jayne.

"I didn't seen nothing. Mal back me up here."

Mal shrugged. "Jayne says he didn't see nothing. Wouldn't like to doubt his integrity."

"Does he have any?" asked Wash, curiously, and the conversation turned away from the subject of demons.

The casual observer would be fooled, watching the crew of Serenity talk, into thinking they were just so much scum. The flotsam of the alliance washed up on a frontier shore with nowhere else much left to go. Men and women with neither the wit nor the resources to make much of themselves. Wang Ruan, strapped for cash as he was, was already half-disposed to make such an error and his observations of the day gave him a confidence that was misplaced.

"Ah! Captain Reynolds." Ruan hardly looked up from the papers on his desk as Mal entered the room.

"You called?" The irritation in Mal's tone should have been painfully apparent, even to one who did not know him, such as Ruan.

Ruan's mind was made up, however, and he failed to notice the warning sign. "The young lady, River Tam, was impudent to Mr Chan this morning. I shall be docking your pay. Further penalties will follow any further incidents."

"Now, wait a cotton-pickin minute."

"I'm a busy man, Captain." Ruan looked up, his face a picture of supercilious dismissal.

Mal slammed his hands down on the desk. "There seems to be a misunderstanding, Mr. Ruan, about the nature of our business relationship."

Ruan rocked back slightly in his chair but said nothing.

"Now I, and my crew, are not servants. We are helping you out by acting as servants and waiting upon all your fancy friends because you represented to us that it would be impossible to pay us for the *work we have performed* without bodies to fetch and carry food and other fancy stuff for your guests. Well, my crew are fetching and carrying all dainty like. They are also chopping wood for your fires, managing and, may I add maintaining, the monstrosities of those machines you call the cook and the laundress, and generally being polite when your fancy friends treat them like so much dirt beneath their feet.

"Now if you don't want us to walk out of here and leave you and your friends to, god forbid, pack their own bags and close up this little party smart-ish, losing

you, if I may say so, the opportunity to turn a little profit on this house, then I expect to hear no more talk about docked pay. *Dong luh ma?*"

"Impudence can not be tolerated."

"You will tolerate a little, when the person in question is in unusual and straightened circumstances, just as I'm tolerating a little defaulting on payment on your part due to your unusual and straightened circumstances. I repeat *dong luh ma?*"

Ruan looked thoughtful. "As crystal, Captain. I hope we understand however that the house will fetch a higher price if all appears proper and correct."

"You mean you don't want your friends to find out about the so-called demon."

"If you put it that way. I must say you are remarkably well informed about my activities, Captain."

"Don't worry Mr. Ruan. I ain't got no problem concealing the existence of something. Least of all something I don't believe in, in the first place. As for the second remark, I like to be well-informed about them as I choose to do business with. Not being well-informed got me and my crew here in the first place. I don't intend to let you get away with any more *hun dun* tricks like that, *dong luh ma?*"

While Mal clarified their respective positions for the benefit of Mr. Wang Ruan, Shepherd Book and Inara stood on the terrace of Yun Manor. The evening sun was just dropping below the horizon, casting long shadows and throwing the sky into a startling shade of pink and yellow.

Ostensibly Book was serving drinks while Inara took the air. But even though the Shepherd stood rigidly to attention, all outward appearances proper, Inara reserved him a secret smile that acknowledged their friendship.

"What do you think of this place?" asked Book.

"Apart from the demon? It's a rather dull business house party. Ruan hasn't spent enough money on it and it shows. He's not a good host."

"There was some discussion of spirits at dinner."

"While I was upstairs dining with the guests?"

"Yes, Mal doesn't believe in ghosts."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Not really, but I'm curious to know your thoughts."

"What would have me say Shepherd? You already know I believe there is something beyond us, something spiritual to use an old-fashioned term."

"So you believe in demons?"

"I didn't say that. I believe there is a spiritual dimension to life. I believe that without spirit there are no dreams and without dreams we become hollow shells. That may flow from your God, Shepherd, or it may flow from something else. I

don't believe in *Huli Jing* lurking in the garden and playing tricks, any more than our estimable Captain does."

When said estimable Captain made up his mind to something, like, for instance, not being taken in by any more *hun dun* tricks, he liked to takes steps to make secure his position. Since there was at least one clear mystery in Yun Manor, one to which his attention had been drawn, he intended to do away with said mystery. So it was that, not long after his conversation with Wang Ruan, Malcolm Reynolds, Jayne Cobb and a crowbar, were positioned outside the mysterious locked door in the servants' wing.

"Why are we doing this?" asked Jayne.

"Because I want to know what Ruan has locked up in there."

"But he'll dock our pay."

"He's going to dock our pay anyway if he can, any time Kaylee drops a glass or you leer down another dress front. Don't like being kept in the dark and messed around with and all my instincts tell me I'm being kept in the dark and messed around with something special. I want to know what else Ruan isn't telling us."

"So we can blackmail him?"

"That or steal it, yes."

"Sounds good to me." Jayne grinned happily and tapped the crowbar in his hands.

"That said, he'll dock our pay for sure, if he finds out we broke in. Let's see if the keys work first." Mal started trying out a set of keys on the lock.

"Where'd you get them?"

"From the drawer in his office."

After a second the padlock clicked. Mal pushed open the door to reveal a massive workshop, bathed in a harsh light.

Jayne whistled through his teeth. "Sure would like to see Kaylee in here. She'd be happier than a pig in shit."

"Who are you?" a small man leaped out from behind a piece of machinery, goggles perched high on his head. He had dark hair and eyes. His chin receded ever so slightly giving a soft look to his visage. In short, his resemblance to Ruan was uncanny.

"I'm the butler, who are you?"

"We don't have a butler. Too scared. Too up-tight. Jumped up nouveau riche. Should show more respect to his training. Don't get to be a butler by growing up on some *shee-niou* outer planet full of *Huh choo-shung tza-jiao duh tzang-huo*. Education is specialised and expensive."

"Right," said Mal slowly. "I'm the *new* butler."

The man looked at him curiously and sniffed. “Not a usual butler. Cordite on your clothes and blood on your hands.” He moved forward and circled Mal.

“Shit!” Jayne muttered quietly.

“Lights and guns. Lead the men. Keep them going. Help will be here soon. Do what you must. Keep flying.”

“Something like that,” Mal said blandly.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d leave my brother alone,” said Ruan suddenly from the doorway.

Mal marched up to him, towering over the man. “Why’s he locked up?”

“In general, he isn’t. However, as I believe we agreed, we both make money if everything here appears normal and proper.”

“What happened to him?” asked Jayne.

“He had a breakdown while he was still at school. He’s brilliant but unpredictable. He made most of the modifications to the household appliances. However when there are strangers in the house it’s safer for everyone if he keeps out of the way.”

“Mad as a loon then,” said Jayne.

“I prefer the words sensitive and brilliant,” said Ruan blandly. “I asked you not to come in here.”

“You also kept threatening to dock our pay,” said Mal. “That makes a man like me antsy.”

“We don’t like not getting paid,” Jayne thumped the crowbar against his hands suggestively.

With the attention drawn away from him, Li Ruan, for such was his name, had seized a wrench and begun a quiet approach upon the interlopers within his domain. The new butler that wasn’t, he had deduced, was the chief threat, despite the physical dominance of the other man. A foot away from Malcolm Reynolds, Li Ruan raised the wrench to bring it down in one forceful blow. Mal turned fluidly and threw a punch directly at him. Li ducked surprisingly swiftly, but Mal swept his feet from under him, leaving him sprawled on the floor.

“That’s another reason he is kept away from guests,” remarked Ruan.

“Consider this a good reason to make sure we get paid,” said Mal. “Or your guests will know all about your mad brother.”

Darkness fell, Kaylee and River, sharing a small room by the winding stair that led to the attic, giggled and whispered until they finally fell asleep, oblivious to the faint rat-tat-tat on the ceiling and the sparks of glittering dust that fell around them and gradually melted into the floor. Jayne slept soundly. The shutters on the window banged but he ignored them. His subconscious could tell the difference

between the wind and a gun-shot, and it had no time for the former. Only when he was awake was he troubled by half-remembered tales his mother had told. Unconscious, he was calm and serene. Malcolm Reynolds lay awake and listened to the wind that blew around the house, rattling shutters and carry the faint unmistakable sounds of battle into his room.

"Serenity Valley was a long time ago," he said and turned over pulling the blankets above his head. "Ain't no call to go dredging up the memories now."

Wash and Zoe were curled up in their little berth aboard the Firefly Class ship named after both the place and the battle that Malcolm Reynolds now claimed to wish to forget.

"Do you believe in demons?" Wash asked.

"No. You don't either." Zoe stretched and turned in their cramped bed. Space on board Serenity was scarce and precious. As a result, Wash and Zoe were always crammed together when they were alone in their quarters. Not that they minded.

"I don't, do I? Why are we sleeping on Serenity then, and not in the creepy haunted house?" Wash was smiling but he was always genuinely fascinated by her. In some respects his wife remained a closed book to him.

"So you can mind the ship, honey, don't you remember?" Zoe poked him under the covers.

"Oh yes, I forgot that. Still how did you know I don't believe in ghosts?"

Zoe kissed him. "Some things I just know."

In the depths of his workshop, Li crouched and gibbered to himself. There were voices in his mind and the machines that ought, by rights, to have been singing to his gentle tune were grinding and screeching. They whirled and turned in a fashion beyond his control and faint laughter drifted upon the air.

"No, you are mine. This can not be happening!" he shouted impotently into the darkness.

There was a harsh cry of triumph. The lights in the workshop flared brilliantly once and then all was silent.

"I created you," Li whispered with faint defiance.

Nothing replied.

Part 3

In a large house there is always work to be done and when a party is in full swing and the intention is to make the house look as pretty and homely as possible then there is extra work to be done, especially for them as are filling in as servants.

Jayne was up early chopping logs in the yard. You'd think, he mused to himself as he sliced the wood in half, that with all the fancy labour saving equipment in the house they'd have some kind of a log-chopping machine. But no. Li wasn't allowed out and that meant the desire to build and modify which was everywhere evident inside the manor was absent from its grounds.

Outside logs had to be chopped.

Around Jayne's feet a small skirl of wind lifted the sand into tiny eddies. "Gorram atmospheric effect," he muttered to himself, keeping his eye doubtfully on the trails of dust.

He selected another log and placed it on the chopping block.

"Really?" whispered a voice.

Jayne whirled around, axe at the ready, but there was nothing to be seen.

"Atomspheric effect," Jayne repeated to himself and turned back to the chopping.

The axe was torn out of his hand. Jayne gaped as it spun through the air, flying down the yard. It paused, hovering, as if waiting for some signal. Then it spun on its axis and flew back towards him. Jayne flung himself to the ground as the axe flew over his head and embedded itself in the side of the stables.

"Right," muttered Jayne. He set off towards Serenity to fetch Vera.

"What's that for, Jayne?" asked Kaylee, encountering him leaving the ship, Vera clutched in his hands.

"Nothin'" said Jayne defensively.

"You seen a ghost?" she teased.

"I ain't saying I have, and I ain't saying I haven't. But someone is in trouble with me and that's no mistake."

Up in the house, Book was helping River to turn down the beds in the guest rooms. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say, that Book was turning down the beds and keeping an eye on River at the same time.

"Do you think the fair folk like it here?" asked River.

Book frowned momentarily at the archaic and foreign terminology. "I'm surprised you believe in the *huli jing*."

"Don't you believe in them?" she asked, looking disappointed.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," he confided.

"But you believe in lots of other things."

"I've been thinking about that. What I believe isn't in anything as tangible as a *huli jing*."

The door to the room banged shut noisily and Book couldn't help smiling. "Even when they're slamming doors."

Somewhere thunder crashed, causing Book to look out of the window.

"They didn't like you saying that," said River.

Through the glass of the window Book could see black clouds in the sky, rolling towards him. "There's a storm coming," he said.

River stared upwards, as if she could see through the ceiling of the room and into the attic reached by the winding stair and out of the attic into the sky above. "The *huli jing* are angry, and tumultuous, and afraid."

Book forced himself to turn his back on the view out of the window where the storm clouds boiled and at River where she stood. "It's just a storm," he said firmly.

There was a sudden crash and the glass pane of the window shattered. A fizz of electricity darted across the room, leaving a burning smell in its wake and a stark burn in a jagged line across the clean white sheets.

Book whirled back and found himself staring through the broken glass into bright blue, untroubled skies.

Captain Reynolds heard the sound of breaking glass and instincts long honed to the detection of trouble drove him to the stairs and up them.

"Captain Reynolds, a word?" Ruan stood at the foot of said stairs, examining his fingernails in a supercilious fashion.

"*Wuh tzai chien shr ee-ding ruh dao shuh-muh run luh bah*" muttered Mal quietly under his breath. "And what may I do for you?"

"The ball tonight. It needs to go well."

"Don't see what you expect me to do about it. My people are solid, a little unpolished, but solid. So long as your *atmospheric effect* keeps out of the way..." Mal allowed himself an eloquent shrug.

"If it doesn't go well, your chances of payment are low. I need to sell this house."

Mal walked down the stairs so that he stood eye-to-eye with Ruan. He spoke low and gently. The overall effect was one of quiet menace. "We're all well aware of that, Mr Ruan. In fact I do believe we have discussed the full complexity of the situation already. However, in case you had temporarily forgotten some of the more pertinent points, let *me* remind *you* that if it doesn't go well, your chances

of getting out of this without having your legs broken are also low. Just so we understand each other."

Ruan blinked once and then his face contorted into an expression of distaste. "It's a good job you never attempted to get employment in service, Captain."

"So I have been told."

"I want no more of this *huli jing* nonsense, Captain!" Ruan hissed through clenched teeth. "I've heard your people talking."

"It's not our fault. You didn't say nothing about no *huli jing* when we signed up. "

"There are no *huli jing*. It's an atmospheric effect. But it has clearly got worse since your arrival. I've had five guests complain that their rooms have been disarranged and Miss Chan thinks someone tried to push her down stairs. I hold you and your crew responsible."

"Oh, *juh jen sh suh kwai luh duh jean jan*" complained Mal. "I have half a mind just to take my crew out of here."

"Let us be plain with each other, Captain Reynolds. If I do not sell this house, you will not get paid. Now see to it that the sale goes through smoothly. Get rid of the demon or *huli jing* or whatever it is, if you have to. That may be a task more to your liking and talents."

Mal's boots stamped as he carried on up the stairs but his expression was thoughtful. He was no servant, but he remained a soldier and he understood how to fight an enemy.

"Captain, a word?" It was Inara, standing serenely in the corridor outside her guest suite.

When Mal had challenged her about the suite, Inara had claimed that she was seizing the opportunity for a holiday. Ruan had invited her to the party and there were no strings attached. If truth be told matters were a little more complicated than that and Inara was too well trained not to be aware of the fact. If we are charitable we must allow that perhaps she had chosen, in this instance, not to examine her motives too carefully and simply enjoy the change.

She gestured with one elegant hand, inviting him into her chambers. Malcolm Reynolds froze momentarily and she registered the expression of surprise that crossed his face. She turned and entered the room swiftly before he had the time to think of some comment or retort to reassert the barriers that stood between them.

The guests' suite was lavish, if simple, and Inara had done little to it but bring across a suitcase full of clothes. That morning, however, she had returned to Serenity and collected her tea service. Kneeling on the floor and arranging the

cups, she felt her hands slipping into a routine. Already the guest suite began to feel like a place of work. But that was good. In this instance she needed to be business-like.

"You're inviting me for tea?" Mal sounded both intrigued and suspicious.

"So I am, Captain, please sit down."

"Why?"

"People normally drink tea while sitting down."

Mal scowled. His face betrayed that he was vaguely aware that something was coming up. He sat cross-legged on a cushion opposite Inara.

"Right! Tea!" he frowned again. "Do you want something? Are you trying to seduce me?"

"I'd hardly need to offer you tea to seduce you," Inara snapped.

"I thought maybe business was suffering. Ruan's guests don't seem like the paying customer type."

"Tea for two!" Inara snapped and clapped her hands.

The teapot rose into the air of its own accord and poured two cups of tea.

"Well I'll be..." Mal's words trailed away. "How long has this been going on?"

"It started early this morning, handing me clothes." Inara clapped her hands again and the teapot dropped down on the table slopping tea onto the cloth. "It's a little bit directed for an atmospheric effect, I think."

Mal glanced around the room. His face betrayed confusion and some anger. "It's a *huli jing* that serves tea!"

"Not very well," said Inara. "It's broken one cup already. It has the basic form of the ceremony and appears to understand simple instructions, but within limits."

Mal's face went thoughtful. "Simple instructions, within definite limits."

"Yes."

"Well, that's mighty interesting and no mistake."

"I thought you would find it so. Now drink up your tea, Captain, and try not to spill any on the cushions."

When Mal finally made it to the source of the sound of breaking glass there was nothing to be seen except the smashed window. It was only later in the day he learned the story when Book accosted him in the manor's courtyard.

The house party was setting out on another grouse shoot, which served to satiate the guests' blood lust and keep them clear of the atmospheric effect which, so far, had confined its activities to the manor's close environs.

Book found Mal in the yard, smiling sweetly at miscellaneous guests as they loaded up into carriages and mounted horses to take them to some particularly auspicious spot.

"There's something odd about this demon," began Book.

"Ain't no demon."

"There's certainly a something."

"I know that but it ain't no ghost, nor demon, nor *huli jing*."

"Simply because you don't believe in ghosts? That's a little dogmatic, Captain."

Malcolm Reynolds lifted his eyes upwards and Book saw the faces of men pressed against the windows of the Manor house. They were dressed as soldiers.

"I have plenty of ghosts, Shepherd. It's just that this ain't one of them."

"Let me tell you what I saw."

The ball was to be the centre-piece of the house party. While the assembled guests once again took themselves into the scrubland to shoot grouse, those left behind set about their preparations.

"Isn't the room going to look pretty?" asked Kaylee as she looped more decorations on the ballroom's walls.

"A golden cage," whispered River. She was surrounded by origami cranes. It turned out she was deft at making them, and Ruan had decided he wanted the whole room filled with cranes in honour of Ancient China. River had started to talk about the cranes coming from somewhere else entirely but Mal had clapped a hand over her mouth and said they'd be happy to oblige with the decor.

"It'll be lovely once we have those birds hung up," added Kaylee. "Gonna be a lot of work to do though."

"Flying away on the breeze," whispered River.

At her words a faint draft wafted through the room, stirring the pile of cranes into a drift across the floor.

"What was that?" asked Kaylee. "Is a door open?"

"It wants the birds to fly free."

River stood up, stretching out her arms and the paper cranes lifted into the air, spiralling gently round her head and up to the ceiling.

Kaylee's mouth dropped open. "Are you doing that?"

"No."

"Then what?"

The birds dropped gracefully to the ground, one by one, covering the dance floor and side tables with pink and green confetti.

"A friend. Don't be scared. It's here to help."

Returning from the shoot, Zoe found Wash in the stables. There was a small workshop-cum-smithy attached. Li was allowed thus far, through a connecting door, but for the time being it lay idle and Wash was using it, on the side, to fabricate some spares for Serenity.

"How did it go?" he asked as she came in.

"They shot birds. We watched."

Wash grinned. "That exciting, huh?"

"I don't even know why he wants security. The guests were all vetted in advance."

"We're here to protect them from the ghost, you know. Kaylee saw something earlier. She's buzzing."

"There's no such thing as ghosts."

"I don't know, for a moment earlier, I had the strangest..." Wash's voice tailed away, his jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. "Zoe, you might want to take a look behind you."

Zoe whirled round. Facing her was an alliance soldier, gun at the ready. She didn't hesitate. Reflex responses she had thought long forgotten swung into action. She almost heard the sounds of the artillery and the flypast of the fighters. She shouldered the shotgun she was carrying, and fired. Then she dropped to the floor as a laser seared over her shoulder.

"*Tyen shiao duh*, those are real lasers!" shouted Wash.

"Said there's no such thing as ghosts." Zoe scrambled away, behind some hay bales to find Wash already crouched there.

"This isn't good cover, is it?" he gabbled. "This is about as useful as cover as a chocolate fireguard."

"Here," she handed him her pistol. "Try not to hit me."

"Oh, thanks for the vote of confidence."

Wash popped up over the bales and shot, an action commendable for its enthusiasm, if nothing else. There was an electrical popping sound and some fizzing.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Not sure. I think I missed."

Zoe rolled her eyes. Then she cautiously raised her head above the bale. The alliance soldier was nowhere to be seen.

When Zoe and Wash stepped back out into the centre of the workshop they stood for some moments looking about themselves. All was apparently normal.

Wash might not have been an accomplished shot, but he understood ballistics and could trace a path. This drew his attention to a spot on the far wall.

"I hit this." The wooden shoring had fallen away and electrical wiring sparked and fizzed behind it.

"I didn't notice that before," said Zoe, frowning.

Wash shrugged. "It's a long way up. Looks like a transmitter of some kind."

"That soldier was solid and those lasers were real."

"Yes, I know." Wash looked thoughtful.

River stood at the foot of the winding stair. The sounds of the party drifted up towards her from below but she'd been made to feel unwelcome. They didn't need something twisted and strange amid the paradise of birds and pretty flowers. Something out of shape and awkward turned the atmosphere like milk turning sour. It didn't need to be said, she knew. They'd said it anyway.

"Party needs to go smooth, Simon. Ruan needs to sell the house to get the money to pay us. Since I don't want to be stuck on this *hun dun* moon any longer than strictly necessary that means we need to be smooth too."

"No River?" Simon had asked.

"I like it when you understand my drift."

Besides River had been listening to the voices, sensing the gentle pull up and away. She placed her foot at the bottom of the stair and began to climb.

Part 4

Simon, Book and Kaylee were serving champagne, while Mal and Jayne lurked at the fringes of the room, managing, if anything, to look even more menacing dressed in the stark black and white of their uniforms and bereft of all but the smallest of sidearms.

In the centre of the room a small set was being danced, weaving complex patterns in and out in a way that almost entirely lost the original purpose and meaning of the form. The rest of the party progressed at the fringes of the room. Inara moved through the guests, neither one of them nor one of the servants. The elegant fiction was everywhere maintained that she was the highest of high society. From a distance she looked like nothing so much as some exotic butterfly admired by those around her but treated with careful caution. The veneer of civilisation is often thinner than it at first appears.

There was a clatter that disturbed the delicate equilibrium, the careful facade in which nothing genuine could be said or done. Kaylee's tray dropped, spilling champagne.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Have I ruined your suit? Don't worry, it's only white wine, my mother always said vinegar would remove stains. I can get it washed for you. There's a whole laundry in the servant's quarters. Fully automated, you should see it. It's an incredible piece of engineering."

"What she lacks in refinement she makes up for in good will, don't you think?" said Inara, allowing herself the luxury of a real opinion.

The guest at the receiving end of the accident smiled. His eyes were bright and he insisted it was nothing.

"Well, she certainly seems to have charmed that young man," said Simon, pausing next to Book. A slight smile, mirroring the guest's own, lingered around Simon's mouth as he watched the scene.

"Not the only young man she's charmed, I think," murmured Book.

Far above them River hesitated. The attic was empty and dusty but at the far end light shone up through the floor boards from some room below. Cautiously she moved forward muttering to herself. "Into the light. Comes the light. Into the darkness. Comes the darkness. Oak, ash and thorn, build the house. Sour the butter, frighten the mouse. In the attic I creep, small and slight. Beware Mab's kingdom. Beware the lights."

She stepped over it and through it and above it and stretched out her arms and fell into the voices.

There was a shriek from the far end of the ball room. Book's tray of champagne fell to the floor as pale forms swept down from the ceiling. Their faces were sharp and distinct. Pieces of metal jutted out from them, pulling flesh out of shape into hideous leers, twisted and strange. The bodies were hazy shadows of smoke.

"Reavers!" someone shouted.

Book pulled out his bible and held it before him. "Begone foul spirits!" he started but his voice faltered and he didn't sound convinced.

The revellers backed away in fear and the dancers scattered as the Reavers swooped to the centre of the room. One surged outwards towards the pretty lady who only the previous day had slapped Jayne for taking liberties. She cried out and ducked behind Jayne's bulky form, pushing him forwards.

"Oi!" he shouted, indignant, backing up too as the hideous man advanced. He reached for his gun and shot, but the bullet passed through the Reaver to land, with a thud in the far wall.

Jayne snickered. "Ain't got no form. Can't do no harm."

The Reaver's scythe swept forwards. Jayne ducked instinctively and then shouted, "Ow!"

His hand came away from his face where a thin trickle of blood had formed. "That ain't fair."

The scythe swept down again, only to be blocked this time by a long thin blade. Inara moved in, like a dancer and slashed. The blade passed through the body, which dissipated into a mist which swirled above their heads and then up through the ceilings. The others followed.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Kaylee into the silence.

Suddenly everyone was talking.

"Why did that work?" complained Jayne.

"It's one of the decorative swords from the wall," said Inara, but she frowned at the blade.

"Cold iron, I don't doubt," said Book thoughtfully. "River spoke of the fair folk this morning."

"That makes less sense than none," complained Jayne. "Who are the fair folk?"

"Where *is* River?" asked Simon.

River was whispering, her hands before her face, weaving words, half-remembered, half-understood. Around her the light swirled and danced.

But the night is Halloween, Captain, The morn is Hallowday; Then win ye, win ye, an ye will, For weel I wat ye may.

Just at the mirk and midnight hour The fairy folk will ride And they that wad their money win, From manor they maun ride.

"Where's River?" Simon repeated.

"She's not here?" Jayne stared accusingly at Simon.

"Ruan wouldn't have her serving, too unreliable."

"We should check her rooms," said Book.

"I'll tell Mal. Jayne, you go with them," said Inara.

"Why should I take orders from you?" Jayne started.

Book placed a hand on his shoulder. "We need to find her, son. She may be the key to this."

Jayne scowled at him and then stared pointedly at the hand. Book removed it and rocked back on his heels giving a slight cough. Then he looked at Simon. Jayne glanced angrily between the two men, sensing the silent exchange of glances.

"Please, Jayne," said Simon stiffly after a minute.

"Well, seeing as how you're asking nicely... Dunno what I'm supposed to do about your madwoman of a sister though."

"Neither do I." whispered Simon in a confused tone as Jayne started back out of the room.

"We should stay in groups," returned Book.

All was confusion and sound. Book, Simon and Jayne pulled free of the throng and headed up the stairs to the third floor. They'd been gone less than five minutes when Zoe and Wash met Mal and Kaylee at the entrance to the ballroom. Guests pushed past in both directions amid a flurry of conversation.

"What's going on?" Zoe asked.

"We had a small incident with a Reaver and cold iron. Some here feel it was in mighty poor taste," said Mal. "I told Inara to keep everyone calm."

"This is calm?" asked Zoe.

Mal shrugged.

"We were attacked!" said Wash from behind Zoe. "By a pretend phantom alliance soldier."

"Pretend phantom?"

"Some kind of projection equipment," Zoe dropped her voice and the four of them instinctively moved to one side.

"Nothing like anything I've ever seen," reported Wash. "Kaylee might be able to make head or tail of it."

Mal looked thoughtful. "Now isn't that plenty coincidental? I seem to recall Ruan saying something about his brother being a mad inventor."

"Brilliant and sensitive were the words as I heard tell," said Zoe.

"Still I'm beginning to think as how we need a gentle talk with him and we should be taking a better look at that workshop of his while we're about it."

"You think he has something to do with the Reavers?" asked Kaylee.

Wash shrugged. "Fancy custom projection equipment. You can do a lot with that."

"Only so much. 'Nara said you'd need a pretty good artist to create pictures like them Reavers we just saw," commented Kaylee, "and they ain't standard in any of the systems I know of."

"This mean we won't get paid?" asked Wash.

"Not looking good, is it, Cap'n?" Kaylee looked to Mal.

Mal scowled then pushed his way back into the ballroom.

"Everyone keep calm!" he shouted. He jumped up on a side table and towered over the crowd with a sense of authority. "Now it would seem that we have a slight hitch with the entertainment system. Would that not be right, Mr. Ruan?"

Ruan's mouth opened and shut a couple of times and then he nodded.

"So if you will all keep calm then, Kaylee, our lovely mechanic, will take a look at it." Mal gestured at this point towards Kaylee, who blushed and then bobbed an approximation to a curtsey.

"Aye, aye, Cap'n." She grinned.

Above them Simon, Book and Jayne looked around the emptiness of the room that River and Kaylee had shared.

"Well she ain't here," observed Jayne.

"The winding stair..." mused Simon.

"What?"

"The winding stair, she's been talking about the winding stair."

"Your sister talks no end of nonsense. Don't mean there's anything in it."

There was a clatter above them and all three men looked upwards to where the wooden ceiling creaked under the footsteps of someone above. Complex tapping movements as if someone danced a pattern. None of them were particularly versed in lore or legend but each instantly recognised the call of ritual and understood an urgent need to stop it.

"The attic," said Simon.

"You think she's found anything valuable up there?" asked Jayne.

Simon just looked at him.

Before long the three of them stood at the foot of the attic stair. Ahead was a wall of mist, hovering across the steps.

"Them Reavers weren't made of anything solid," said Jayne, as they hesitated.

"Still cut you," observed Book.

Jayne squared his shoulders. "Gorram ghost keeps messing with me. It's about time it got something back."

"You first then," said Simon.

Jayne scowled at him and then plunged into the mist and vanished.

Simon and Book waited.

"It seems safe enough," said Book after a moment of silence. This of course was a temptation that fate could ill ignore. There came a blood-curdling scream and Jayne tumbled backwards out of the mist into the arms of the men below.

"Jayne, you all right, son?"

"Gorram ghosts stabbed me," he shouted.

Simon pulled Jayne's hands from his chest. A long gash trailed from shoulder to hip, bleeding profusely.

"I spoke too soon," said Book and he gave the mist covered winding stair a dark look. Above them the feet continued to tap out their pattern.

"Right! That's it!" Jayne struggled to his feet and started back down the corridor.

"What is? Let me look at that wound?" Simon pattered along behind him.

"Quit fussing, will you?" grumbled Jayne. "It's only a flesh wound."

"I'm going to put a dressing on it," said Simon firmly. "I've got medical supplies in my room."

"No, you're not, we need to get up to the attic."

"We can't get up the stairs," said Book. "Might as well let him bind you up."

"We don't need to go up the stairs," said Jayne. He barged into his small room and fished under the bed, producing Vera.

"A gun isn't going to be much use against ghosts," remarked Simon.

"I ain't going to use it against the ghost," said Jayne and fired straight upwards. Dust and debris reigned down and then cleared to reveal a large whole in the ceiling. "River, are you up there?"

The repetitive pattern of feet suddenly stopped. River's face appeared at the hole.

"River, are you all right?" asked Simon.

"Yes, I'm talking to the Sidhe?"

"Who are the gorram Sidhe?" asked Jayne.

"Old Earth legend, son."

"Do you want me to come down?" asked River.

"If you could," said Book.

Gracefully, River dropped through the hole and landed lightly on the floor. A trail of dancing lights followed her, swirling in a circle around her and making her hair dance and fly.

"*Tzuh muh luh*?" asked Jayne.

"The Sidhe," said River. The lights formed into a wall and hissed. "Don't anger them."

Part 5

The sounds of gunfire had echoed through the house and Mal made sure to draw his gun as he marched along the corridor to Li's workshop, Kaylee, Wash and Zoe just behind him. As they approached he fired at the lock and kicked the door open. "*Shensheng de gaowan*," he cursed as they entered.

All around them cogs were turning and lights were flashing. Half-formed ghostly figures weaved in and out of the machinery and workbenches. Here there

was a glimpse of an alliance soldier, there a glimpse of a Reaver. A colonist in a wide-brimmed hat and heavy coat galloped past on a horse. Li was perched on top of a giant revolving cog in the centre of the room, hitting a lever with a wrench.

"What's going on?" demanded Mal.

Li looked up. "I can not switch off the machine. It's out of control."

"What's it supposed to do?" asked Kaylee.

"Hard-light projection."

"We'd worked that bit out," said Wash. "What's with the ghosts?"

"Neural linkage."

Mal glanced at Wash who shrugged.

"What's neural linkage?" asked Zoe.

Li tapped his head. "Wires in head; transmitters and receivers. Since they're there might as well make use of them."

"Transmitters and receivers...?" Wash tailed away.

"What gorram idiot puts transmitters and receivers in his own head?" demanded Mal.

Wash was looking thoughtful, "Come to think of it..."

"No," said Zoe. "It's a stupid idea."

"Hey, I didn't say anything!" Wash sounded affronted.

"You were thinking it."

They all looked back at the figure of Ruan perched on top of his machine and the same basic thoughts occurred to all of them. Mal remembered Li lunging at him with the wrench, and his enmity with the old butler. He understood you might go to many lengths to get some detested person from your home. Kaylee was imagining what you could do with projection equipment where you just had to think of the picture and then make it happen without needing any artistic skill. Wash was puzzling over the alliance soldier and wondering how Ruan had known. Zoe calculated risks and angles.

Two suited figures suddenly formed up, out of the crowd of ghosts. They were men, their faces expressionless. The effect on Li was dramatic. He froze for a moment on top of his machine and then jumped down off the wheel and began backing away. The figures reached out, blue gloves visible on their hands.

"Wait a minute," said Mal. "Wait a minute. Exactly which school did you go to?"

"No! No!" shrieked Li, still backing away from the figures. Behind him was a large bank of machinery, exposed wires trailed from it to the workshop floor and sparks of electricity arced from section to section.

"Damn it!" Mal began to run across the workshop, but it was already clear he would be too late.

The ghosts with the blue hands advanced.

With a shriek, Li fell against the exposed wiring. There was a flash of light and the distinct smell of burnt meat.

"*Aiya*!" said Mal. "He might have been useful too. Kaylee, Wash, can you switch this *hun dun* machine off."

Wash looked around the workshop doubtfully. Then he reached out cautiously and flicked a switch. Nothing happened.

"No. Kaylee?"

"I don't know," she looked at the vast machine. "It could take some time."

"What could?" asked Jayne from the doorway. His dress coat had been removed and bandages were wrapped around his chest. Behind him clustered Simon, Book and River. Small dots of light swirled around them.

"Switching off the machine," said Mal.

There was a hissing sound the lights that so clustered and danced darted at Mal, resolving into tiny figures that pinched and pricked.

"Ow!" he cried.

"Wait," said Kaylee. "Li said it was running on a neural interface. But if he's dead it should be shut down by now."

"Unless someone else has interfaced to it as well," murmured Zoe.

"Someone who went to the same gorram academy that Li did," finished Mal.

All eyes turned to fall on River.

Mal's eyes opened wide and then he marched forwards. "Everyone! Stables! Now!".

The reader may imagine the tumble and clatter as the crew of Firefly class ship Serenity descended the stairs of Yun Manor and exited out into the yard.

"Area of effect, right?" said Mal as he marched into the stables.

"We don't know anything at all about how the machine works," protested Wash.

"I can work out some," Kaylee said.

Wash turned to stare at her.

"OK, but not much... yet," she admitted.

"Area of effect seems plausible," admitted Simon doubtfully.

Mal had already grabbed a saddle. "So we take your sister out of the area and wait for the machine to close down."

"I had better go with her," muttered Simon, also grabbing saddle and bridle.

"Maybe we all should," said Book.

"No!" said Mal. "Don't want to draw too much attention. No need for Ruan to know River has anything to do with this. Might cause an issue with the payment."

"Can't argue with that!" agreed Jayne. "Up you go!" He helped hoist River up into the saddle.

Simon rode a horse over, all aristocratic style.

"The Sidhe won't like this," said River.

"Well I don't much like the Sidhe," responded Mal. "And they ain't got no business hereabouts, dredging up memories and fears and such like. Of that I'm certain."

He handed River's reins to Simon. "Just keep going a good distance."

Simon nodded and set his horse to a trot.

As they left the stables and began to move down the driveway, the air about them twisted and swirled. A localised atmospheric effect was making its presence felt. Simon risked a look back. Horses followed them. There were knights and stags and centaurs with a wild array of swords and spears and antlers.

"It's the wild hunt," said River. Her eyes were wide with excitement.

"Oh good!" said Simon weakly. Then he urged his horse to a gallop. Behind them the horns sounded and the hunt began. On the whole, he thought, he'd have preferred it if River had picked the *huli jing* rather than whatever obscure mythology this was.

We return now to Li's workshop for the solution to the problem lies there. All that's needed is for Wash and Kaylee to figure out how to shut down the machine that turns and hums in the centre of the room.

"Shouldn't you be doing something?" demanded Mal.

"I am doing something, Captain." Kaylee grinned. "I'm waiting for this power coupling to free up."

"Power coupling?"

Wash shrugged. "We can't hope to figure out how this thing works, but we can just turn of the power."

"Once we can get to it," said Kaylee.

A translucent bubble of light surrounded the heavy duty cable. It sparked like electricity.

Lights swirled above the central machine.

"It ain't gonna explode is it?" asked Jayne nervously.

"Maybe," said Kaylee.

"But probably not," said Wash hurriedly.

"*Chou ma niao*," swore Jayne.

"Perhaps non-essential personnel should evacuate?" suggested Book cautiously, backing out of the workshop.

"Go!" ordered Mal. "You too, Jayne, Zoe."

"Sir!" questioned Zoe.

"I don't really need much help," said Kaylee. "I'll be fine on my own."

"No! Wash and I will stay," insisted Mal.

"If Wash stays, I stay," said Zoe.

"Don't disobey a direct order."

"Was that a direct order?" she looked at him blankly.

Mal swore. "OK, you stay too."

The others had already gone.

Simon had always been a good rider. While he wasn't empathic in the bedside manner sense, he had a knack for reading the health and comfort of a body and that made him a good surgeon in a slightly detached way. That same knack meant he understood horses at some level, enough to know when they were tired or eager, or excited. A natural propensity to application and the constraints of high society had given him everything else that was necessary.

The horses were good and Simon was riding them as hard as he could, given that River only had half her attention on horsemanship and he didn't want to yank the creature's bridle too much.

Behind them the wild hunt roared. All he could hear was a cacophony of barks and growls, the thin sound of the hunting horns carrying above it all. Sometimes he thought they were pulling ahead, but then River would suddenly sit up straight and turn around in the saddle. Her horse would slow down, hampered by the awkward position of its rider and Simon would have to slow up too. The ghostly forms would rush towards them.

"Who are the prey?" asked River.

Simon didn't know. He hoped it wasn't them. It probably wasn't them so long as River didn't think it was them.

They rode on into the night, past the scrubby trees and over the heather laden moor. Grouse rose up at their passing, flying squawking into the night.

They had travelled a little short of five kilometres when the horns grew fainter. River turned in her saddle once more and this time Simon allowed himself the luxury of slowing up too. Behind them the faintest blue glow showed where the hunt had been and then it, too, was gone.

"We outrode the hunt," whispered River.

The blue light hissed and swirled, projection equipment straining long past even its theoretical limits. Then the energy washed backwards, back over the heather and gorse, back through the twisted shapes of stunted woodland, over the courtyard, up the stairs, along the passage and into the workshop.

"It's working! It's working!" cried Kaylee, rushing around the machine.

The light whirled and swirled in a column above the turning wheels. Faces emerged, dancing and screaming in the heart of the maelstrom. Reavers and soldiers, fair folk and foul, danced together in a brilliant whirlwind. Slowly the images were sucked down, down into the depths of the machine. More light rushed in through the doorway and down between the floorboards of the attic at every moment. Gradually, the cocoon around the power coupling withdrew. Kaylee reached for it.

Mal caught her arm. "Let's just wait a few moments longer," he said. "Make sure it's shiny."

"But, Captain?"

"He may have a point," said Zoe.

They waited. Light suddenly surged back along the cable in a flare, like electricity and then, silently vanished, plunging the room into darkness.

"Now can I unplug it?" asked Kaylee.

"If you can see it, yes."

The beam of a torch shone out. "Always have a torch to hand, Cap'n. Never know when it'll come in handy," said Kaylee's cheerful voice.

There was a muffled thump and then a whining sound as machinery slowed to a stop.

"That's that then," said Wash. "The party goes on and we get paid."

"We killed the host's brother," observed Zoe.

"He fell into his own infernal contraption," said Mal. "Can't help that."

"I doubt Ruan will see it like that, Sir."

"Then we'll have to make him."

Picture the scene as Mal descends once more to the ground hall and the public areas of the house. His crew stumble along in his wake, drawn by his energy but confused as to his intentions.

"But what are we going to do?" asked Wash.

"We put on a show."

"We don't know how to put on a show!" wailed Kaylee.

"Don't have to be a good show. Any show will do. New technology, up-to-the-minute, all mod cons."

"What?" Jayne stopped at the top of the ancient wooden stairs looking baffled.

"This here!" Mal spread his arms to encompass the dusty main hall. "Is the house of the future."

"Is this is another of your plans, sir?" asked Zoe.

"Ruan! Just the man! Let's sell this house!" Mal clapped a surprised looking Ruan on the shoulders before powering into the ballroom.

"What's going on?" asked Ruan.

"Captain has a plan," said Jayne.

"You'd best just go with it," said Book. "I doubt you can stop him now."

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Mal began. "I do apologise for the somewhat alarming nature of the previous demonstration. There was a small technical hitch which our lovely mechanic has just fixed. Kaylee? Where's Kaylee."

"Here, Captain!" Kaylee waved her wrench from the back of the crowd.

"Right now, controls! Where are the controls?" Mal looked over at his crew.

Wash looked around and then pointed to one corner. "They'll be there."

Jayne squared his shoulders, grabbed Kaylee's wrench and marched to the indicated corner of the ballroom where he whacked at the panelling with the wrench. Finely crafted panelling splintered under the assult. Jayne pulled it away. He gestured at the exposed control panel with a flourish, the refinement of which was marred, ever so slightly, by the wrench.

"Excellent!" Mal beamed at the crowd. "The controls you see are for the house's networked hard-light entertainment system. Ladies and gentlemen, this system is in every room of the house. Kaylee, would you do the honours."

"Err... OK, Captain!" Kaylee, who had been peering into the exposed control unit, looked a bit doubtful and then pressed some buttons.

"Factory settings, I think," murmured Book quietly to her.

At that moment the image of a Reaver formed at one end of the hall. The crowd gasped and shrunk back. Kaylee scowled and then took the wrench from Jayne and hit the machine with it. The Reaver shivered, vanished and was replaced by butterflies and fox spirits that danced through the air. She beamed at Book.

"Factory settings. Ain't they pretty."

The crowd flowed back and several people clapped.

"And later we will take you all on a tour of kitchen and laundry to demonstrate the customised highly automated systems that typify the workmanship throughout the house," finished Mal.

Inara packed her bags and carried them across the dusty ground between Yun Manor and Serenity. The other guests were departing in their assorted carriages and cars. Inara had tired of their chatter and since the sale was accomplished and she wasn't being paid to be present she proposed to leave.

The giant form of Serenity towered above the manor house. It was gargantuan and ugly where the house was elegant. Inara smiled and her footsteps had a lightness to them as she crossed the ground. The crew scuttled in and around the loading bay, stacking boxes.

"You got paid then," observed Inara as she approached.

"Only in truck, gorram prices are ridiculous," grumbled Jayne.

"Still, we got paid," Wash grinned. "And there weren't actually any *huli jing*."

"I never said there were," muttered Jayne.

"Oh come on! Weren't you just the teensiest bit doubtful?" asked Kaylee.

"No! I like things to be what's what and where I can see them."

Inara smiled. "Some of us prefer a slightly less concrete view of the universe."

Mal walked down the ramp as she was speaking and he paused on the threshold to survey the people gathered before him.

"Just as well I'm Captain then," said Mal. "Can't live on dreams."

That night, far from the luxury moon, the elegant manor, its secrets and its ghosts, Mal sat back in the pilot's chair and gazed at the sky.

He had lost all his dreams, and he had too many ghosts, but still he kept on flying.

Chapter 44

Connor Writes

A Primeval Short Story

So I'm going to write this all down. It's not that I'm planning a memoir or anything but I thought writing it down might make it clearer in my head. It's like when I have a theory about the anomalies or something. It gets clearer when I write it down. I usually have to edit it to get it to read properly. Looks like I'm going to have to edit out this first paragraph to start with.

You can tell I'm procrastinating here. Even thinking about it hurts. I'm afraid of putting it down on the paper I think.

I'll start at the beginning since it puts off the moment. I'm not sure where the beginning is, in fact. I could go back to that day I flagged Cutter down to talk about aliens and evolution but if I do that I'll be writing all week before I get to the... Well anyway, even I can see that's taking procrastination a bit far.

I don't know who the reader is supposed to be. I've read books on writing. Always decide on your audience. I'm writing this as therapy, I suppose. Which is a damn fool idea now I come to think of it. I don't know anything about writing as therapy. Maybe I should look it up?

On second thoughts, maybe I shouldn't. Abby is glaring at me. How did she know I wasn't getting down to it? This is sort of her suggestion. I should mention that now. She says I keep going round in circles when I talk about it.

"Damn fool"'s a good expression isn't it? I should try and use it more often. It makes me think of victorian adventurers discovering the Land that Time Forgot, which is more or less what we do, just without the pith helmets.

I guess it starts when we got a call from Jenny. We'd been away for the weekend. Abby took me to this gig which was kind of cool. I'm not sure I was really into the music but the lighting rig was interesting. A lot of work had gone into the

special effects. I was impressed. Anyway, we'd been away but when we got back Jenny rang and sent us straight to an anomaly site. Cutter had gone out there the day before and promptly gone AWOL. Jenny was sending soldiers with us so we also got strict instructions to do as we were told.

"Advisors only," I recall her saying, "no heroics."

Heroics isn't my thing. Abby always contradicts me when I say that but, really, honestly, heroics isn't my thing. In my head a lot of the time I'm Indianna Jones or failing that Ian Malcolm from Jurassic Park. I vacillate between dusty and battered and looking cool in leather. But, realistically speaking, I'm the comedy sidekick. Heroics are only my thing once I'm out of danger. At any rate it all happened by accident. That's what I keep telling myself.

It's an interesting anomaly. I've had a chance to go over the data since. It had been opening and closing quietly for a while but the signal had been masked by the comms at a local airbase. It was only a particularly sharp signal from the anomaly that triggered the ADD at all. I'm going to have to do some tweaking. I've started already and the maths... Well I guess the maths isn't really relevant to this. I didn't know any of this until later though, until I tried to sort out all the pieces that didn't make sense. At the time I didn't know there was anything more unusual about it than any other anomaly. Apart from the fact Cutter had gone missing, of course.

I was a bit excited if truth be told. Abby and I were going to be doing all the scientific stuff between us. I had visions of getting my own team, SG2, or maybe ARC2.

So we get to the anomaly. There were a small group of soldiers there already. A female lieutenant called Buxton was in charge with two privates, called Thorne and Swift. It was a new group. We'd had a rotation of military personnel. I don't like working with new soldiers, you never quite know how they will turn out. In the event Buxton was OK and I'm not just saying that because she was good looking. She was good looking, sort of Princess Leia crossed with Ripley. A little brusque perhaps. I hardly got to speak to Thorne and Swift, which seems strange now. Come to think of it we only spent about an hour in their company before we got split up and it was all business-like efficiency up until that point.

An ARC four-by-four was at the anomaly site so at least we knew Cutter had been there. The anomaly was tucked away behind some warehouses on an industrial estate. No one overlooked it or anything so we weren't too concerned about the general public and it was a Sunday so the place was all shut up and silent. Jenny was there. She was worried and said she'd wait. I think I tried to make a joke about how lone heroes always get away with things in the movies but

Abby stamped on my foot.

Our job was to go through the anomaly, find Cutter and then get out.

It turned out that Swift was some sort of tracking expert. It was why Buxton picked him for that mission. So we go through the anomaly and spend a lot of time waiting around while he scouts forward, proclaims he has mystically discovered some sign of Cutter's passage, and then we move up to follow. In retrospect I don't think Abby and I were as appreciative of his efforts as we might have been. It was a little bit too like what Stephen used to do. In fact, two months ago, it would have been Stephen leading us in after Cutter. We haven't talked about that but I think, now, it did make things worse.

It was late afternoon on the other side. I thought it was probably Jurassic (later confirmed). Lots of conifers and ferns and I thought I saw some flying pteranaodon-like shapes. We really needed to see some large wildlife up close though, for me to be sure. Buxton wanted to know why I couldn't classify the insects which made me feel a little foolish but I just don't keep that stuff in my head and trawling the database for the right features would have taken longer than she was prepared to wait. I tried to make some sort of quick come-back quip. I've forgotten what it was, but she didn't look impressed. I remember Abby elbowing me in the ribs though so the quip must have been lame, or possibly too obscure. Maybe I said I wasn't Gil Grissom.

Since it was late afternoon there, even though it was early morning back where we'd come from, Buxton wasn't keen to stay long. We'd been there about half an hour when Swift came back with cigarette stubs. Cutter doesn't smoke. He said he thought he'd got signs of trouble and several people. It was then that Buxton parked me and Abby in a cave and said the SF team were going forward for reconnaissance.

The words "no heroics" got mentioned again.

Dark was falling and Abby and I were just debating what to do. It was a bit of a conundrum. Buxton had said stay put but neither of us were keen on spending the night there, especially with the risk that the anomaly would close so we were considering leaving a note and heading back when we heard gunfire.

I don't recall us talking much about what we did next. I mean, it's obvious you go to see what is happening and see whether you can help, isn't it? When I write that down it looks like the most stupid thing in the world. After all, if three highly-trained Special Forces soldiers can't cope what would Abby and I be able to do? Anyway we set off to see what was happening and whether we could help. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Then Abby spotted something and dragged me into a bush.

We saw two men go past. They were wearing camouflage gear, you know the sort of thing, and armed with shot guns. We couldn't hear what they were saying. After that we were a bit more careful. There seemed to be a lot of men around. Eight, in all, I now know. They were searching the area, at least that's what we thought. There was a lot of shining of flashlights, tramping through bushes and shouting. Fortunately the natural forest is pretty densely overgrown and Abby and I were a lot more interested in hiding than they were in finding us. Abby also knew a few tricks, like closing your eyes whenever a light was shining your way so the reflection doesn't show up. It was properly dark, though, before they gave up and went away and we were lucky to find our way back to the cave.

A long conversation followed. It was almost an argument in places because, although we both knew there was nothing we could do in the dark, it's really, really hard to agree to do nothing for several hours. Not in a situation like that. We didn't know what had happened to Cutter or the soldiers. We basically agreed, all along, that we needed to get back to the anomaly, inform the authorities and get a really fuck off small army to come back through and deal with these people. If we'd thought we could find our way back to the anomaly in the dark we'd have done so but neither of us was confident we could.

In the event the anomaly had closed. We didn't know that at the time, but Jenny had a bad afternoon wondering if she'd ever see any of us again. It opened about eight in the evening back in the twentieth century, early morning our time. It was then that Jenny summoned a much larger team. We met them on the way out.

Abby thought the men were probably survivalists or hunters. The second guess was correct, as matters turned out, but I couldn't see how they could have got through the anomaly, armed, in such large numbers. It wasn't until I went over the details later and realised that anomaly had been there a while that it all began to make sense. We argued for a long time about what was going because, I suppose, neither of us much liked the fact that there was nothing we could do until it was light.

Then we unpacked our backpacks, ate energy bars and tried to sleep under a survival blanket.

Abby took matters into her own hands at this point. I'd go into detail but if anyone ever gets to read this it'll be Abby so I'm not sure about that. Hi there! Abby, if you're reading this I'm being considerate and sensitive.

I think the technical terms are *guh* and possibly *iz dead* though.

Neither of us slept well. Not that it wasn't *very pleasant*. So we were up as soon as there was any sign of light. Our plan was to head straight back to the

anomaly. Naturally, we headed in the other direction to see if we could locate the men's camp. We argued to ourselves that it was so we could give the "small army" we were going to summon as much information as possible. Looking back, I just think that neither of us could bear the thought of *not knowing* what had happened any longer.

I still can't decide if it was just as well. Abby says it was. Abby is very firm about that.

The camp was in a sort of clearing in the trees. I thought it was natural at the time but actually the men had put a lot of work into making it. I read that in the reports. When we got there Cutter and the soldiers were all kneeling in the clearing while one of the men strutted around them waving a pistol.

Cutter tells me they'd been through a whole interrogation style thing and the man was now working himself up to an execution. I think maybe Cutter was quite scared. He keeps describing the man, a Roger Markham, as "on a hair-trigger". Buxton has been very tight-lipped about the whole thing. We couldn't see the bruises from where we were but I saw them once the whole thing was over. It looked to me like she had born the brunt of the interrogation, even though they'd had Cutter for longer. She did go as far as to say that we arrived just in time. I don't know if Markham really would have killed them. Everyone says he would have.

I didn't have much time to think though because Abby was already out there. It was the moment when Markham placed the gun to the back of Buxton's head. I didn't really see that at the time. Buxton and Abby both agree that that was the moment so it must have been. My brain was still trying to catch up with the whole situation. It was scrabbling around trying to work out what to do. Abby isn't sure what she had in mind just that she knew she had to do something. Markham had his back to us and she crossed the ground rapidly and sort of leaped on him, pulling his gun arm upwards as she did so. He let off a shot into the sky at that moment so Buxton's almost certainly right when she says Abby saved her life. Then things got a bit confused.

They've let me see the reports. They're quite long winded but the gist of it seems to be that Markham was the dangerous one. The other men were mostly a bit bewildered by how rapidly the situation had escalated beyond a bit of odd and possibly illicit big-game hunting to some sort of execution set up. They didn't put up much resistance once the fight started but they did outnumber us. I say us, but of course I was still hiding the bushes. They were also armed.

The next thing I clearly remember is seeing that Markham had somehow thrown Abby off his back. He had lifted her off her feet and she was struggling to

kick him but he had this ugly, ugly expression on his face and his gun was pressed to her forehead. He was shouting something. There was a gun on the ground between me and them. I don't know how it got there. I must have seen it fall because I remember staring at it and then looking up to see Abby and Markham.

I still don't know what I was thinking. I guess some instinct bypassed anything I can consciously articulate. I walked out of the bush. I remember feeling totally calm. I wish I could say I didn't have a plan but I knew exactly what I was going to do even though I don't know how I came to decide upon it. I picked up the gun. I walked right up to them both, placed it against his head and blew his brains away. I even remembered to relax my arm to absorb the kick. I'd read about that somewhere. Then I just stood there.

I remember Abby talking to me, taking the gun away. I don't really remember going back to the anomaly. Cutter took us, I think, while Buxton stood guard on the remaining hunters. Then there were lots of official looking people and more soldiers and some forms I had to fill in.

Everyone keeps telling me I had no choice. But they would say that, wouldn't they?

I know I would do the same again but that doesn't make it right and I keep thinking how Abby went out there to save Buxton, who she hardly knew, and Abby managed to do that without killing anyone. Me, I was only prompted to move when Abby was threatened and I ended up with blood and brains all over my hands.

Chapter 45

Tears, Sarah Jane

A Doctor Who Story

Sarah watched in horror as the two guards dragged the Doctor's body away. Someone in the crowd tugged at her sleeve.

"Sarah? We are in great danger. We must get away from here."

"What?.. Oh! yes."

Tarron led her through the twisting back alleys of the shanty town. She stumbled along behind the woman, unaware of everything, her mind incessantly playing over the scene she'd just witnessed.

The guards had been about to lead away the young man. He was chosen as the ritual sacrifice and was to be taken to the Queen. Then the Doctor had stepped forward. "You can't do this, it is inhuman!"

And then... and then one guard had swung round and blasted a hole through the Doctor and he had crumpled up like a burst balloon.

Tarron unlatched the door to a small house in a dark street overshadowed by the looming buildings. Inside was a small dark room lit by a large open fire.

"Kate!" called Tarron, "Kate where are you?"

A Pale girl appeared out of the shadows. She had delicately carved features and light copper-coloured hair which hung loose round her shoulders. She would have been pretty but for a sort of limpid blandness which rested in her looks and bearing.

"Kate, look after Sarah. The guards have just killed a friend of hers."

The girl sighed, then she took hold of Sarah's hand and led her to a chair by the fire. Sarah now noticed a large cooking pot over it. Kate leaned over and ladled some sort of broth into a bowl which she handed to Sarah.

"It will do you good to eat."

Sarah nodded and spooned the tasteless mixture into her mouth.

"Was he a close friend?"

"Yes, he was the best friend I had."

"We will mourn together. It was my brother they took as a sacrifice."

Sarah gave her a look of horror. The girl seemed to exude a sort of sorrowful, yet complacent, smugness.

"Don't you want to do something about it? Stop this queen of yours from demanding sacrifices?"

"There is nothing we can do. We can only mourn." It was not smugness but a complacent resignation. Sarah thought it almost as bad.

"There is always something you can do, the Doctor..." Sarah chocked on the words and she felt tears welling up in her eyes. She could see him, determined and resolute, passionately defying injustice wherever he went. She heard his voice, fond and faintly mocking, "Tears, Sarah Jane?" She looked up dashing the tears from her eyes, half expecting to see him standing there. He had come back from the dead so many times.

"The Doctor never gave up hope," she whispered.

"Then he was a fool." There was something almost shrewish in the reply.

"Yes, he was a fool."

A fool in shining armour, ready to save the universe if called upon, your arch-idealist, a galactic King Arthur.

"Miss Smith! Come and meet your namesake."

She remembered Rubeish's introduction, his old-fashioned courtesy and there had stood the Doctor, tall, arrogant and flamboyant, prepared to take on anything whether it be ruthless Daleks or officious civil servants.

She looked at the pale girl. "So am I, and I will fight!"

"Well-spoken, Sarah!" Tarron had re-entered the room.

She was dressed like someone out of the middle-ages in a short tunic, breeches and knee-length boots. A small dagger was tucked in her belt, her dark hair swept up into a pony-tail.

"Cathal was my brother, too, and I mean to avenge him."

She picked up a short cloak and swung it around her shoulders.

"I will find a guard and enter the Queen's palace."

"I'm coming with you!" said Sarah, putting aside the barely touched meal. "I have someone to avenge too."

Tarron eyed her for a moment then nodded slightly and handed her another cloak.

"Come!" she said.

It wasn't hard to find a lone guard whom Tarron dispatched efficiently with her dagger.

"They don't expect resistance," she explained to the horrified Sarah. "That's why he was out on a lone patrol." She smiled. "Now we have a blaster."

Minutes later they came to the edge of the town. Before them was the awesome skeleton of the crashed spaceship.

"What's that?" Sarah stared at it in amazement.

"The Queen's Carriage. It brought her to our land many generations ago."

"It's a rocket."

"The guards have taken most of it away to the palace. There is nothing left there now. Come on."

Sarah followed her, looking back at the strange, desolate wreck outlined against the darkening sunset.

It was practically night when they reached the palace. But it was not so dark that Sarah couldn't make out its shape through the gloom. It was built with the tall sleek lines of another rocket. But an incomplete rocket, up at the top only the basic framework existed. Sarah wondered how a people apparently living in the middle-ages could have built such an edifice. With the sort of tools they possessed it would have taken years.

"Did you say the Queen came generations ago?"

"Yes. She first arrived in the time of my great great grandfather."

Sarah looked at the rocket. "That's a long time."

"The Queen is immortal," said Tarron as if it explained everything.

A quick inspection proved that there was no way of getting into the rocket. The hatch was shut and firmly secured. Sarah kicked it angrily, but it didn't even make a sound.

"Sarah, look!"

Tarron was pointing to the scaffold beside the rocket and the ladder set into it.

"We can climb up there and get into the palace through the top."

"I can't go up there. I get vertigo."

"What?"

Sarah gulped. "Never mind. Let's get going."

Without letting herself think she marched over to the ladder and began to climb up. It wouldn't be too bad, she decided, as long as she didn't look down.

The had nearly reached the unfinished section when a late patrol, or something, returned and spotted them clinging on. Suddenly blasts from his gun were exploding all round them. They scrambled upwards, shouts floating up to them from the ground.

Then Tarron gave a small gasp. Sarah stopped climbing and she heard her voice whisper.

"I've been hit. Sarah! take the gun."

She handed the blaster up to her. It had a strap attached and so she was able to sling it over her shoulder and still have two hands free to climb.

"Now! go on!"

Sarah had climbed up only a little more when she heard a cry. Instinctively she looked down. Far below Tarron lay sprawled on the ground. Sarah felt herself rocking and she clutched onto the ladder, her eyes tightly closed, as waves of nausea washed over her.

She forced herself to open her eyes and mercifully spotted a gangway leading across to the first opening just next to her. Slowly she climbed onto it and staring straight at the opening she worked her way across holding on tightly to the rails. Then with a gasp of relief she found herself within the rocket.

Sarah leaned against a wall, took deep gulping breaths and tried to stop her limbs from shaking. She realised she would have to find somewhere to hide for guards were bound to come to find her. She spotted a grille in the wall and almost laughed aloud: the air ducts. The grille hinged open and she crawled in, letting it shut behind her.

Some hours later she was crouched in an alcove outside what she judged to be the throne room. At least it was the room at the centre of the habitable parts of the rocket and it was permanently guarded. She had been watching it for some time, wondering how she would get into it.

A guard emerged from the room and addressed the two outside.

"The queen has ordered me to take you two to help in the search for the intruder."

Sarah blinked incredulously as he led them away. Then, with an inward shrug, she approached the doors. She pushed one open and peered inside. The room was high and lined with computer banks which flickered and whirred, but she could see no queen.

"Ah! Miss Smith, I have been looking forward to seeing you so much!" purred a low female voice, full of satisfaction.

Sarah glanced round but saw no one. "You're a computer!" she said in surprise.

"Yes, I'm a small part of Homeworld central computer. I was linked directly," continued the voice sadly, "but somehow the link was destroyed in the crash. I have built this rocket so I may return to Homeworld. You will make that possible."

"How?"

"It will be necessary for me to refuel on the way, given the present circumstances Earth would seem to be the best place to do so. You are known to Earth authorities and could arrange for that refueling to take place."

"And what make's you think I'll do that?"

"I do," said a voice behind her and whirling round she saw the Doctor, looking as good as new, no burn marks or anything.

Sarah gasped in shock.

The Doctor advanced towards her his hands open, welcoming. Quite unconsciously she backed away.

"How?" she asked explosively. "How?" her voice sank to a whisper.

"It was perfectly simple," said the computer. "I have the facility to absorb minds, and thoughts. I absorbed the Doctor's. I have complete conscious control and his body has remarkable powers of healing which I was able to activate. It's perfectly simple."

"Well if you can absorb minds and take over people's bodies why do you need my help?"

"I can only control people within a close radius. Once outside they fight free of my influence," explained the Doctor.

Sarah shivered and wrapped her arms tightly around herself.

"Once you have completed you task," continued the computer. "I would relinquish all control of the Doctor and set him free."

"You would set all your slaves free?"

"No, I need them to do menial tasks on the ship."

"What would you do with them when you get back to Homeworld?"

"They are not important. Why do you ask about them?"

"Just answer!"

"When I am linked to central computer once more all the minds will be added to our sum store of knowledge to make us more wise. They will join together into one united being."

"But what about the people themselves?"

"I have told you they will become part of our higher purpose."

"Why did you come here?" Sarah changed tack. She knew she didn't trust the computer and wanted to find out why exactly.

"It is my function. To gather alien minds to add to my consciousness."

Suddenly it struck Sarah. "You would gather minds from Earth! Why would you give up the Doctor's once you had refueled?... You don't need to refuel at all! You just want to collect more minds!"

"Sarah, you are getting hysterical" said the Doctor sharply.

"No, I'm not. You, you and that computer, you are... I don't know! You can't go around appropriating people's minds!"

Without any clear idea of what she intended Sarah unslung the blaster. Then with a desperate resolve she fired at the nearest computer bank. The Doctor screamed and sank to his knees clutching his head.

"Don't do that!" cried the computer. "If you destroy me the Doctor will die too because he is linked to me!"

Sarah gritted her teeth and fired again. The Doctor cried out a second time. Tears began to run down her cheeks. Suddenly an intense pain began to fill her mind.

"Oh, no, you don't," she muttered grimly.

She kept on firing though she could hardly see for the pain and the tears.

Then the pain stopped, and the screaming cut out as if someone had thrown a switch. There was complete silence. All the lights faded and went out. In the gloom Sarah collapsed in a heap and began to sob.

"Tears, Sarah Jane?"

She looked up startled.

"But the computer said..."

"I don't think the computer really knew what she was talking about." He smiled benignly. "Shall we go?"

Chapter 46

Primeval by Gaslight

A Primeval Short Story

ON THE TRANSMUTATION OF SPECIES

by Connor Temple

In this essay I seek to outline a theory about the processes that shaped the numerous species that live on our world, both in the present and in the far past as evidenced by the fossil record. The theory draws upon the myriad folk legends that may be encountered among the common sort to hypothesize the existence of beings of great power that exist among us, as yet undetected, and which have the power to influence the formation of animal species.

Mr. Temple you were set an essay on the transmutation of species. The intention, as you are no doubt well aware, was that you provide an exhaustive survey of the existing literature on the subject NOT that you put forward a theory of your own - Professor N. Cutter.

Monday 11th July, 1858

Sightings of a Mysterious Large Reptile from the Forest of Dean

Last Wednesday Richard Withings, a labourer, reported that he had witnessed a large reptile, in appearance like a dragon, on his way home in the evening. He reported this sighting to Sir John Lytton, a local landowner. Sir John gave his opinion that Mr. Withings was in his cups. Mr Withings retorted that he was no more in his cups than Sir John and that he had seen what he had seen. This dispute was witnessed by several persons taking place, as it did, outside the Church Sunday last. Mr Withings subsequently led a group of ten men into the forest and the party found a number of large footprints as well as evidence of damage to fences and agricultural buildings.

Nicholas Cutter
Merton College
Oxford

Charles Darwin
King's Hotel
Shanklin
Isle of Wight

18th July,

Dear Charles

I enclose a newspaper cutting dug up by an undergraduate student of my acquaintance. It seems likely to be nothing more than a the hyperactive imagination of one of the lower classes but I have resolved to investigate it. Mr. Temple, the undergraduate in question, observed that my wife was last sighted in the area which, I admit, also spurs me on to treat the story with, perhaps, more interest than it deserves. I mention Mr. Temple to you since he is a talented young student with a good grasp of natural history. He has a number of wild theories on the transmutation of species and I am eager to discuss your own ideas with him.

I was sorry to miss the meeting of the Linnean Society on the 1st and so am unable to send you a personal report of the event. Lyell writes that the reception of the papers by yourself and Wallace was subdued. I agree with his assessment that people needed time to reflect on these matters before pronouncing an opinion. Hopefully there will be a wider debate once the proceedings are published, which I understand is to be late next month. Lyell also tells me that you are now resolved on full publication and hope to have a book ready for next year. This is good news for, as you know, I have been anxious to see your theories in print for some time.

I was deeply sorry to hear of the death of your son. Stephen also sends his condolences to you and your wife. You have both been in our thoughts and prayers these past weeks.

Yours etc.,

Sir James Lester
Enforth House
Gloucestershire.

19th July

Dear Sir

I hope you will forgive my having the temerity to contact you like this. I live in the hundred of St. Briavels in the Forest of Dean not so far from your own estates. My son, Benjamin, has discovered a strange reptilian creature the like of which neither I, nor Mr. Sandford the schoolmaster, recognise. I am told that you have an extensive private zoological garden and therefore wondered if you would be interested in purchasing the animal. I enclose a sketch of the creature which Mr. Sandford has been so good as to supply.

Yours etc.,
Mrs Jane Trent

Miss C. Brown
The Three Tuns Guesthouse
St. Briavels

Sir James Lester
Enforth House
Gloucestershire

23rd July,

Dear Sir

I write, as requested, in order to keep you informed of the progress of your ward's efforts to procure the new reptilian creature. Miss Maitland assures me that the animal is, indeed, previously unknown and I have deferred to her more extensive knowledge of natural history. The owner, Mrs Trent, is a respectable widow. As suggested, I have made discrete inquiries to her character of the local vicar. I can see no danger in purchasing the animal from her and have given Miss Maitland permission to proceed with the transaction. Your ward has become fascinated by the question of the origin of the creature. This interest has been further inflamed by the presence in our guesthouse of three gentlemen from Oxford investigating some wild tale of large reptiles in the forest. The gentlemen in question are a Professor Cutter, a Mr Hart and a Mr Temple. Professor Cutter I understand to be an Oxford don and Mr. Temple is one of his students. Mr. Hart puzzles me somewhat but my understanding is that he is a man of independent means who has an interest in Professor Cutter's work. My impression of Professor Cutter is of a sober and responsible gentleman. My first thought was to dismiss their quest as a wild goose chase but his calm and learned demeanor lends me to give some credence to their investigations. I have some concerns about the two other gentlemen. Mr. Temple is an earnest young man and his admiration of Miss Maitland is clear for all to see. Mr. Hart is more guarded in his manner but older and more assured in his bearing. I am concerned that there may be some little danger from that quarter so await your instructions whether your ward is to be allowed to observe these investigations or whether we should procure the new creature with all expedition and return home.

Yours etc.,

24th July

Dear Diary

Such excitement! I contrived this morning to slip away from under the weather eye of Miss Brown and meet with Benjamin Trent, as agreed. Our plan was to visit the location where Ben discovered Rex, for so we have named his strange reptilian creature. Our journey into the forest started well and I observed several interesting varieties of local flora. For a young boy, Ben's conversation is remarkably informed, displaying a genuine interest in the local wildlife. We proceeded for some distance before being arrested by the sight of a cow in a tree. It was obviously dead and you will be proud of me, dear diary, when I say that I suffered not a single palpitation, nor was there any risk of fainting. I have often maintained, as you will know, that I am made of sterner stuff than many of my sex, a circumstance I attribute to my upbringing by Sir Lester and his well-meaning but unconventional view of a well-rounded education. Today I had opportunity to confirm my opinion and I passed the test with flying colours. Unfortunately my young companion was much alarmed by the sight and ran away with the avowed intention of reaching home before "the dragon" should catch him. I would have kept pace with him but my skirts somewhat impeded running and I fell behind. I was carrying Rex at this point and, dear diary, most wonderful discovery! He can fly. I had tripped over a petticoat and was, I fear, cursing in a fashion that would cause Miss Brown to deliver another of her lectures. His wings had been folded along his back and almost entirely concealed. He sits before me as I write this and I can see the faintest indication of where they are, but this was entirely obscured from me before since I suspected no such thing. Rex also set up a high-pitched sound which reminded me of the warning calls of several birds. Resolving that discretion was the better part of valour and, if I confess, anxious not to be discovered wandering alone in the forest with muddy petticoats only too visible, I concealed myself in a bush. It is as well that I did for, at this moment, the largest reptile I have ever seen appeared on the path. I do not exaggerate. I judge it to have been the size of one of the larger bears at London zoo. It walked on all fours and looked somewhat like a dog, in shape, but with a large snout and wide neck. It had the teeth of a carnivore and, as you can imagine, I was relieved to find myself well-concealed and out of sight.

Extract from Portal to Another World by Benjamin Trent

Let us pause for a moment to imagine the fear felt by young Jack as he ran through the forest. Many of you, perhaps all of you, would upbraid him for the cowardly fashion in which he had abandoned his companion, but you must recall that, at the time, he was but a young boy and had not yet grown into the heroic adventurer he was to become in later years. Indeed the knowledge of this failing was to remain ever with him and his extreme care for the gentler sex was often a cause for remark by his companions.

No matter. Jack ran through the forest and, in his fear, rapidly lost his way. His flight was halted, however, by the appearance of a strange and wondrous sight. Words can not do justice to the strange phenomenon he found before him. It was as if a star had fallen from the heavens and rested, sparkling and glittering, just hovering above the forest floor. Shards of light darted in and out of it and beyond Jack could just about discern the faint cry of animals. Overcome by his strong sense of curiousity Jack stepped forward into the light and found himself in another world entirely.

It was a world of sparse vegetation. The sands of a vast desert shifted under his feet and in the distance he could see the tall spires of volcanoes spewing forth their perilous load into the sky. Above his head strange creatures swooped and whirled, identical in appearance to the lizard, named Rex, he had rescued from the forest. It was a sight that never entirely left his imagination and, although in later years he dismissed it as a strange dream, the vision haunted his thoughts. This, dear reader, was the abode of the dragons that had come to plague the forest.

Jack returned home but his adventures of the day were not yet concluded. On his return from the forest he was forced, by reason of having lost his way, to climb a fence. Jack cut his finger on the top, a circumstance to which he paid little mind, but which was to result in a trail of fresh blood that lead from the forest to his small home. A trail such as could be followed as easily by a dragon, as by any other hunting beast.

Jack had hardly settled himself by the hearth when there was a huge commotion outside the small cottage he shared with his mother. Jack bolted the doors and retreated to the hearth where a fire burned in the grate. His mother was absent, still at Church, he judged. The door was of little use however for the creature batted

it aside with one blow of it's head. Steeling his courage, young Jack grabbed a burning brand from the fire and struck out at the creature with it. Unaccustomed to meeting such resistance, the dragon withdrew its head from the cottage and retreated into the night.

The Notebooks of Professor Cutter

22nd July

We were approached after morning service by Miss Brown. It seemed she had mislaid her charge, a circumstance I gathered was not entirely unusual. It had not been our intention to continue our investigation within the Forest today, it being a Sunday, however Miss Brown's concern was genuine and, I confess, I was not entirely sanguine about the the thought of a young girl, even one as apparently level headed as Miss Maitland, alone in the forest.

There was some little concern about Miss Brown accompanying us but she felt it necessary that she fulfil her role of chaperone once we discovered Miss Maitland. As Stephen pointed out, I <u>am</u> a married man, which should suffice for decency. Miss Brown appears a most sensible young woman. A little limited in her education and horizons, as are so many of her sex, but not a woman prone to flights of fancy nor hysterical outbursts and in our conversation she revealed a keen intelligence and an interest in the matters we were investigating.

Once again Stephen's experience in the Amazon proved invaluable. We proceeded swiftly. We found more signs that an unusually large creature had passed but they continued to prove insufficient for identification. I was still pre-disposed to assume some large animal must have escaped from a local zoo, even though there had been no report of such in the paper.

We encountered Miss Maitland just as dark was falling. She provided us with a remarkably clear account of a large reptilian beast. I confess to some concern at the time that she may have become hysterical on finding herself, as she had, abandoned and alone in the forest. However she delivered her report in a calm voice with a certainty of manner that gave no hint of hysteria. Miss Brown assured me that Miss Maitland was not prone to fantasy so I suppressed my doubts and we set about to return to St. Briavels.

It was at this point we were all witness to a beast. Miss Maitland insists that

it was different from the creature she witnessed earlier. I have set Mr. Temple to sit with her, under Miss Brown's careful eye, to try and produce accurate sketches of both creatures. Mr. Temple, I have discovered, is a talented draftsman and I suspect this skill may prove invaluable to us. The creature we saw was about eight feet in height with a bony head, like a cobbled street, and what appeared, in the half-light, to be an armoured body. The closest creature I can think of is Mantell's Hyleosaurus although there were clearly many differences. This has led me to tentatively assign the creature to the previously considered extinct Dinosauria group. I have requested Mr. Temple make several copies of his illustrations and will write to Darwin as soon as they are available.

Following our encounter, and informed by Miss Maitland's account, we returned to question Benjamin Trent. We found his house in an uproar and his mother alarmed, having returned home to find the door broken down and young Benjamin insistent he had seen a dragon. After some effort we managed to elicit an account from him that revealed the existence of some kind of a source for the creatures in the forest. We have resolved to investigate further in the morning.

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ALARMING DEVELOPMENTS STOP FORGIVE A HUMBLE WOMAN AN OPINION
COMMA BUT SUGGEST HOME OFFICE TAKES AN INTEREST STOP C B
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Urgent Report to Mr Walpole, Secretary of State for the Home Department

24th July 1858

Sir, as I outlined to you in our brief meeting, an alarming situation has arisen in the Forest of Dean over the weekend. It is my opinion that steps need to be taken as a matter of urgency to contain matters.

A rag-tag team of scientists from the University of Oxford have discovered a kind of portal within the forest from which large beasts emerge. My ward, Miss Maitland and her chaperone, Miss Brown, were witness to one such late on Sunday Night. It was at this point that Miss Brown, with great presence of mind, contrived to wire me a message and I proceeded to the forest with great

haste Monday morning. Events had proceeded apace while I travelled and on arrival my ward, backed up in places by Miss Brown, was able to relate to me how Professor Cutter of Oxford was able to locate the portal. My understanding is that, with the assistance of his companion, Mr. Hart, he tracked down the beast and then succeeded in so frightening it that the animal set off at great pace. The Professor rightly assumed that it was returning home and so the party were led to the portal. Much as I would like to report that all five persons were inebriated or feverish, as poorly as that would reflect on the conduct of my ward and Miss Brown were it true, I am unable to do so. I reluctantly conclude, therefore, that they did indeed see something resembling a large reptile.

I enclose with this report three sketches by Professor Cutter's student Mr. Temple illustrating the beasts so far witnessed. Two of these are, by all accounts, extremely large. The third is a small lizard which I currently have in my possession. The scientists, of course, are at a loss to explain both the portal and the origin of the creatures. Professor Cutter, however, likens the creatures to the many fossils that have appeared and insists that they could provide important scientific insights. I have seen the portal with my own eyes although I have not witnessed any of the creatures described.

My concerns are practical and I request that a division of Her Majesty's forces be stationed within the Forest of Dean forthwith. Outlandish as the claims sound I feel we have no option but to assume that there is indeed something unknown taking place within the forest. Until we can ascertain exactly what the phenomenon is, we need to keep the general public away from the area and prevent the appearance of inflamatory stories in the Press. There is already much local talk of dragons which needs but little encouragement to become a panic.

I have been at some pains to investigate this trio of scientists. Professor Cutter is well known in his field and academically respectable. Unfortunately there is some scandal surrounding his wife Helen Cutter who, it appears, ran off with another man some eight years past and has not been heard of since. She was, it would appear, always unconventional and had personally accompanied the Professor on his trips to remote parts of the world under conditions no lady should be expected to endure. No one appears to know who she absconded with although I gather the event was a surprise to no one apart from the Professor himself. Her morals are not held in high regard among the dreaming spires. Mr. Hart is a young man of private fortune who has funded a number of the Professor's expeditions. He is of good family and there are, I suppose, worse eccentricities into which the idle rich may fall. He generally lives in Oxford, where he shares lodgings with the good Professor. Mr. Temple is the son of a clergyman from Yorkshire. His

background is modest but respectable. He is, I understand, destined for the cloth like his father.

I have impressed upon this team the need for secrecy and, despite their eccentricities, I believe they comprehend the severity of the situation.

Nicholas Cutter
Oxford and Cambridge Club
London

Charles Darwin
King's Hotel
Shanklin
Isle of Wight

25th July,

Dear Charles,

I am writing to you with some urgency in order to commend to you the three young people who will be delivering this letter. I do not wish to trouble you at a time like this but the Home Office were greatly impressed when I mentioned your name. It would appear that Sir James Lester, to whom I am suddenly required to report, has read The Voyage of the Beagle and is impressed by your Royal Medal. It seems he is, therefore, more prepared to accept your word on the matter than my own.

I send to you Mr. Temple, about whom I have written to you before. With him you will find Sir James' ward, Miss Abigail Maitland and her chaperone Miss Claudia Brown. In Miss Abigail's possession is a strange lizard found in the Forest of Dean about whom your opinion is sought. Mr. Temple will be able to recount further details of the matter, which relate to the letter I sent you on the 18th.

Please examine the lizard and write a brief opinion on it for Sir James. I feel that further investigation is required, and urgently. Yet the man will not allow me to proceed without a second opinion from someone "respectable" which I take to be a jibe at my missing wife. My apologies, once again, for involving you in the matter at a time such as this but I feel I have no other recourse.

Yours etc.;

Connor Temple
King's Hotel
Shanklin
Isle of Wight

Clara Temple
The Vicarage
Appleton Roebuck
Yorkshire

27th July

Dear Clarrie

Sorry I have not written in so long, dear sister. I appear to have gained a mentor, of sorts, in one Professor Nicholas Cutter and he has kept me busy rushing all over the country. When I have not been on a train, or being thrown about on some coach, carriage or ferry I have been producing illustrations for him. I enclose a couple I managed to make for myself of some of the flora to be found in the Forest of Dean. I hope you like them.

I am currently on the Isle of Wight, as you will observe. Professor C. has trusted me to convey an important message to Charles Darwin, of whom you have heard me speak before. The Professor himself is busy in town and only reluctantly consented to allow me to travel in his place. Believe me that I am fully cognizant of the honour thus conveyed and took pains to assure the Professor of the seriousness with which I undertook the mission, though I fear he did not fully comprehend my references to the works of R. M. Ballantyne. The Professor has hinted to me that Mr. Darwin is due to publish shortly a ground-breaking paper, so I am greatly anticipating our meeting tomorrow and hope I will not embarrass myself by appearing too eager.

I travelled to the island in the company of Miss Abigail Maitland, the ward of Sir James Lester. She is the owner of a specimen lizard that the Professor wishes Mr. Darwin to examine. Oh Clarrie! how can I describe her! She is very neat about her person with a delicate frame and very pale skin. Her hair is a pale blond in colour and she wears it charmingly. I have never really grasped the details of women's fashions but her taste in clothes looks well enough to me. I understand that her mother was Sir James' sister and that her parents both died in India when she was just a small child, leaving her in the care of her uncle. He has provided her with the best education from a succession of private tutors. Professor Cutter

seems to be of the opinion that he both neglected and over-indulged her somewhat and I have heard him use the phrase "run wild like a savage". In this I feel he is too harsh. She has a pleasingly forthright disposition but there is nothing that is vulgar or rude in her speech and I admire her adventurous spirit.

Your loving brother
C. Temple

P.S. Tell father I am managing very well and Professor Cutter is covering all the expenses, so not to worry.

P.P.S. I enclose an essay I wrote for Professor Cutter on the Transmutation of Species. He did not like it very much but I am sure it will interest you. Write back and tell me what you think of it. I am considering showing it to Miss Maitland.

P.P.P.S I am hoping, while on the Island, that we may be able to go hunting for fossils. Wouldn't that be grand! To have one of our very own!

Reptiles appearing in the Forest of Dean

28th July

Summary

I have today had reason to examine a small gliding reptile, of unknown species, and view a number of sketches of other creatures supplied by Professor Cutter. I can confirm his view that these creatures are not natives of the British Isles, nor is it plausible that should have remained here, undetected, for any length of time.

I agree with Professor Cutter's opinion that the creatures bear most similarity to the Dinosauria group identified by Owen. This makes their existence a strange anomaly but one which is likely to have a significant impact on the field of paleontology and the question of the transmutation of species. They are, in short, living fossils.

Charles Darwin

Nicholas Cutter
The Three Tuns Guesthouse
St. Briavels

Charles Darwin
King's Hotel
Shanklin
Isle of Wight

30th July,

Dear Charles,

Sir James Lester has kindly agreed that I may keep you informed of events here in the Forest of Dean as they progress. We gained permission to investigate Benjamin's portal on Thursday thanks, in no small part, to your support for my theories. We proceeded as fast as we could to the forest, not even stopping in Oxford for a change of clothing. Last night found us back at the welcoming guesthouse in St. Briavels.

We were somewhat surprised to find Miss Maitland and Miss Brown awaiting us. I understand they have been here several days, having travelled directly from the Isle of Wight because Miss Maitland enjoys the countryside. I suppose this to be a ruse of some kind, an opinion deepened by their decorative presence at the portal site this morning. Sir Lester brushed off my concerns with a casual remark about broadening his ward's education and I suppose he knows best. Miss Maitland bade Rex a tearful farewell as I entered the anomaly (for such is the preferred Home Office terminology, they appear unwilling to admit even that it might be a portal to somewhere, let alone the distant past). Much as I am anxious to study Rex further, my conscience tells me we should take care to disturb matters on the far side of these portals as little as possible. I mentioned this concern to Sir James who agreed that all caution should be adopted until more was known of the situation and he approved the return of Rex, despite the not inconsiderable sum he paid to acquire him.

I entered the anomaly accompanied by a Captain Ryan who was charged to watch over my safety. The Captain is a taciturn man and I have never had much liking for the military mindset which seems, to me, to be all too inclined to shoot first and ask questions later. Miss Brown recommended him to me, however, and I suspect she may be a sounder judge of character than I am, as you know only too well. Sir James made it clear that I enter the anomaly with a guard or not at

all so I had little choice in the matter.

I am sure it will come as no surprise to you if I reveal that I have suspected, ever since I spoke to master Trent of his experiences, that the portal may have existed for some time and that it could provide some clue to Helen's fate. I know it is widely believed that she left me for another man but I never saw any evidence of attachment to anyone but myself. We frequently disagreed over our interpretation of the fossil record and over your own theories. Since her last known location was a hotel close to St. Briavels it does not seem unreasonable to me to suppose that she may have located and explored this portal. The presence of Captain Ryan was, therefore, something of a blow to my plans to seek evidence of her on the other side.

The landscape beyond the portal coincided with the description supplied by young Trent. I am of the opinion that his description is reminiscent of Murchison's Permian era, and I understand from Mr. Temple that you also tentatively agree with this hypothesis. I am more convinced than ever that this is correct. Sir James Lester remains skeptical but even he can not provide a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon and some sort of gateway through time remains the reluctantly preferred explanation, although it is impossible to rule out the possibly that the anomaly merely leads to some part of the Earth as yet unexplored by naturalists. I brought back some samples of the flora and enclose sketches of these from the skilful hand of Mr. Temple.

Captain Ryan and I explored for some distance, giving me the opportunity to make many observations which I will write up in full and convey to you with my next letter. We also discovered the remains of a human body and, by it, a daguerrotype. I am certain that the body is that of a man, which was some relief at least, although it therefore provides no clue to Helen's location. The daguerrotype is currently in the hands of the Home Office who entertain an, I suspect forlorn, hope that they may be able to develop the plate. I will confess that I behaved rather foolishly at this point, so convinced was I that if one person had found their way to this side of the portal then so too might another. I determined to remain and seek out my wife but Captain Ryan, none too gently, convinced me otherwise. On calm reflection I have to agree that this is an investigation to be pursued with great care. In particular, it appears that these portals may open and close at random and it would not do to become trapped on the far side of one. I will write to you further tomorrow when I have had the opportunity to put my notes in better order.

Yours etc.

Stephen Hart
Merton College
Oxford

George Hart
Abbey House
Kent

6th August

Dear Sir

Thank you for your letter of the 2nd August. It was with surprise and pleasure that I learn Sir James Lester has spoken so highly of my actions in his correspondence with you. As you are aware I am promised to secrecy and I will confess to a little uncertainty about how much I am permitted to discuss with you. Suffice it to say that I discovered a large beast had got lose in a school building. Fortunately, given the lateness of the hour, there was no one in the building apart from the schoolmaster and a young boy. I had tracked the animal there and had some notion of what I was dealing with. When I arrived the schoolmaster had, with great presence of mind, barricaded himself and his young charge into a classroom. I therefore distracted the creature and set off, at a run, in the direction of Sir James Lester and her Majesty's forces, who I knew to be nearby. There is, to be honest, little else to tell. I do not believe that many men would have acted any differently and I was armed which no doubt gave me some small measure of courage. There was a nasty moment when the creature managed to bring one of the doors to the schoolhouse down on my head, causing momentary confusion. Fortunately the creature failed to observe me in those moments and continued its progress on into the forest.

Sir James is correct in saying that he has employed both Professor Cutter and myself as advisors to the Home Office. I will certainly bear your advice in mind and see if the position can be made a permanent one.

Your loving son,

Stephen Hart.

Report to Mr Walpole, Secretary of State for the Home Department

31st July 1858

I have now had time to debrief Captain Ryan following the events of yesterday. As you know, I had given permission for Professor Cutter to essay a trip through the anomaly in the Forest of Dean.

All proceeded smoothly until they discovered a body and a daguerrotype. At this point Professor Cutter began raving about his wife and appeared determined to remain on the far side of the portal to search for her. Captain Ryan, I understand, found himself forced to use violence against the Professor in order to bring him back. Fortunately the Professor is no fighter and was easily subdued. I understand that, in the end, they reached an accommodation. They observed that the anomaly appeared to be on the point of closing, a circumstance which came of some surprise to us all. The good Captain made it clear that he intended to remain with the Professor to protect him should the anomaly indeed vanish. The Professor thus came to his senses and, unwilling to risk the Captain's life in some damn fool quest, consented to return to our time.

After their return I also observed that the Professor became engaged in a long conversation with Miss Brown. She has given me to understand that he believes his missing wife to have entered an anomaly and seeks to find her. Miss Brown is under the impression that she has convinced him that hasty action could leave him as lost in time as his wife may be and that he has agreed to a disciplined and careful investigation. I hope she is correct but I fear she may underestimate the effect of her own charms. Much as it offends me to use a woman in such a way, I fear Miss Brown's influence may prove invaluable in future in keeping the Professor in line.

As you will realise, despite the many reservations I have about Professor Cutter, I feel I have no option but to recommend that he be retained by the Home Office, together with his two associates, in order to investigate these matters. It seems to me to be of utmost importance that as few people learn of these events as possible. The Professor would appear to be qualified to look into them and the only other academic who is aware of the situation, Mr. Darwin, suffers from ill-health and has expressed a disinclination to become involved in any fieldwork

related to the matter. Moreover I doubt we can successfully keep Professor Cutter away from this anomaly and any others that may appear. The documents you had delivered to me were most informative and I agree that it appears we may be facing a previously unrecognised, but nevertheless not uncommon, phenomenon. I have no doubt that, in due course, the good Professor will locate these other examples and we may as well make use of his energy, while at the same time ensuring we remain fully informed of his activities.

Dear Diary.

We are once again back in the Forest of Dean. It took the combined efforts of myself and Miss Brown to persuade Sir James that we should be allowed to accompany the team of scientists and soldiers, but he is an honourable man and had to acknowledge that, were it not for my interest in reptiles, the phenomenon would never have been identified. He also acknowledged that I deserved the opportunity to make a final farewell to Rex who Professor Cutter had resolved to return to his original place by way of precaution.

Professor Cutter was present at the site together with a number of soldiers. Mr. Hart was sadly absent. Apparently Professor Cutter had sent him to scour the forest for more of the creatures despite the assurances of the soldiers that none had exited the anomaly during their guard.

It was all, I must confess, extremely dull for much of the afternoon and I sat around mourning Rex's departure and the absence of Mr. Hart. Then, towards evening, we noticed some strange behaviour from the anomaly. Mr. Temple who had made a careful study of the portal, including the discovery that it had magnetic properties, gave his opinion that it was, in fact, about to close. We all observed, with considerable anxiety, aware that two men were missing on the far side. At the last moment Professor Cutter returned with his escort, Captain Ryan, and the air of a man whose plans have been frustrated. As they jumped through the ball of light, it closed behind them plunging us into the darkness of the late evening, for such it was.

It was then that the creature I originally witnessed in the forest made its appearance, pursued by Mr. Hart who had discovered it near the school house. He later retold how he had decoyed it into the forest and away from the children at no small risk to himself.

Several of the soldiers opened fire at once but their efforts appeared to have little effect on the gargantuan beast which blundered towards us at a great pace.

The Professor grabbed Miss Brown and pulled her from its path. I confess I hitched up my skirts with no great dignity and fled. It was just as I thought I was done for that Mr. Hart emerged from the bushes, also armed with a rifle and opened fire on the beast in turn. I do not know what effect the bullets had but they were sufficient to turn the animal from its path so that it passed us by. Moments later, under a second barrage of fire from the soldiers, it collapsed to the ground.

What none but I observed in the fracas, was Rex, hiding behind a tree. I feel sure he has returned to us by the hand of divine providence and that his presence will prove of value in future as we investigate more of these anomalies as I am sure we will. I currently have him concealed in a cage in my luggage, awaiting transportation home.

The Notebooks of Professor Cutter

1st August 1858

I have just returned from the Home Office where I was able to view an extremely pale daguerrotype image which nevertheless showed my wife Helen, in shockingly unsuitable attire, against the Permian landscape. I fear that I have lost further ground in the eyes of the respectable Sir James Lester, now he has seen this image of my lost wife. I am convinced that the skeleton we found was that of a man, a fact that does not improve Sir James' opinion of my wife's morals but that leaves me with some hope and the nagging question "Where is Helen?"

I returned to my rooms this evening, in a contemplative mood to discover an ammonite on my desk. Of itself this is not a matter of note. Such fossils are easy enough to discover if you know where to look, however this one appeared to me, as I entered, to be in remarkably good condition. To my surprise, when I examined it further, I realised it was in fact, alive. A genuine example of another living fossil.

46.1 Missing Scene: Examination by Lamp Light

Letter, Capt. T. Ryan to Lt. J. Lyle

My Friend,-

I've found myself caught up in a bit of an adventure back here in Blighty. I've been seconded to a group under the aegis of Sir James Lester, from the Home Office. He isn't a military man but, so far, he has impressed me with his good sense. I think you would like him. I'm afraid I am not at liberty to give many details but I am no longer as sorry as I was to be unable to accompany you to India.

The job involves working with an Oxford don called Professor Nicholas Cutter. I will tell you of a conversation we had, since I think it will amuse you and provide a character sketch of the man which you might find of interest.

I will describe his looks first. He is past the first flush of youth but still, I think, very young to be a professor. He has blond hair which he wears to just below his ears, as is the fashion. His chin is clean-shaven but he does have a creditable moustache. He does not, I think, exercise a great deal although he is by no means fat and he has certainly never studied the pugilistic arts which brings me to the start of my brief scene.

The Professor and I had just returned from a dangerous expedition. During the course of this, we had engaged in a disagreement which unfortunately came to blows. Unsurprisingly, the Professor had come off the worse and, in fact, I had had cause to knock him out with the butt of my Enfield.

This event gave me some concern, as you can imagine. A knock-out blow is never a good thing and the effects can take a while to show. You and I know this, but I was less sure of the Professor's acquaintance with such facts.

When I had resolved to take the matter up with him he was talking to his colleague, a young man by the name of Stephen Hart, and a Miss Claudia Brown, an employee of Sir James'. His face was pleasantly animated and it was clear that he appreciated the company.

I walked up to the little group and broke into their conversation with an: "Excuse me, Professor, can I have a word, please?"

"What about, Captain?" he asked. His tone was challenging. He had not, I think, forgiven the blow.

I wished to give him an opportunity to keep our little tussle private. I had had clear orders from Sir James, so had no fear of repercussions, but I did not wish to damage his dignity before his young colleague and the lady. I did feel the need to examine his injuries, however, and wished to discuss the matter before it could fester.

"I need to check your neck, Professor. We need to talk," says I, a trifle stiffly, I imagine.

Professor Cutter nodded and smiled and, to my surprise, he said: "Oh, aye,

because you knocked me out cold? Worried you might have cracked my skull, yes?"

You will gather, from this, that the Professor originates from north of the border. An Edinburgh man, I think, though I am no expert on the Scottish accent.

The others looked shocked at this revelation but I declare his smile was genuine. I've always admired a man who can take a deserved beating with good humour. I think I began to like him then and there. While we had disagreed previously, his reasons were understandable and, all things taken together, he had handled himself well.

"Maybe," I said and then: "Will you come with me so I can take a look?"

"Yes, of course, Captain Ryan, lead the way."

So I begin to explain to him the sorts of things a soldier watches out for in such a circumstance. But he cuts me short.

"Yes, all right, Captain, no need for the lecture. I teach anatomy."

Nevertheless, he did let me examine him. The troops had set up several tents and we repaired to one where we would have a little privacy. It was growing dark but there were Davy lamps. I lit one and set it by the Professor, letting it cast its light on his head and neck. I had hit the base of the neck. It had not yet started to bruise enough for me to discern in the lamplight, but, by feeling the vertebrae and muscles, I located the place by the sound of the Professor's breath.

"Looks like you found the right b— spot," he said.

So I apologised and sat down. "I think you'll live," I said and followed it up with: "I did my job perfectly." I wanted him to understand that I know what I'm doing when I put a man down.

He was rubbing at his neck where my blow had landed. "Good for you, Captain," I heard him mutter. His brow furrowed and I could tell he was thinking about the matter further. Then he stares at me and says: "So that's why you didn't hit me again..."

"Once was more than enough," I said. "I don't think Miss Brown would have been too pleased if I'd killed you." I referred here to Sir James' pretty employee. I feel sure she admires the Professor but I was curious to see if he admired her in turn. "I had to use other tactics," I then said, for my blow to his head had not been the final end of our argument.

"Aye," he says. "Playing on my d—-d emotions!"

I suspect this is a true flavour of his conversation when there are no ladies present. Some day we should invite him to the mess to meet Major Preston.

I did not comment on his language. It is refreshing at any rate to think I do not need to be overly careful with mine in his presence. So I said:-

"I thought it was the idea of being stuck with me that clinched it." I could see, by the look in his eye, that this was not the case and, I confess, the thought that he liked me as much as I liked him, pleased me greatly. "And I avoided breaking your face, too," I said, though I held his chin to check, for he had fallen on the ground.

He then apologised to me once more and made reference to his wife who, I understand, deserted him some years ago. I have not pressed on that matter, though it is clear there is some scandal there which must be hard for a man in his respectable position. I have always been glad that I have managed to keep my own affairs free of scandal and I am sure that you feel the same. Still, I find it hard to entirely blame a man for the behaviour of his wife and I felt a great deal of sympathy for him which I hope I managed to convey with a companionable look and touch.

I told him that I understood his position. Then he asked after my own family and confessed that he had worried that he might trap me away from them, in pursuit of his own quest. I was touched by his concern and shook my head:-

"I have no ties," I told him and smiled to let him know that, in future, he need not hesitate on that score. Of course I know I have many friends, such as your good self, but we see each other so little, therefore I do not think the circumstances he referred to would affect us greatly.

Then he smiles back at me with mischief in his eyes: "Oh. Well then. Next time we can just stay."

It looks likely that his wife's behaviour may have some bearing on this strange business of Sir James'. The Professor strikes me as both honest and hot-headed. If the lady is another such we shall have some trouble with her but, I suspect, it will not be so serious. However Sir James has taken to pursing his lips and frowning when she is mentioned. I fear that this is not simply in regard to the scandal of her disappearance but that he has more concrete information. In which case, I think there may be real trouble ahead.

As we left the tent he calls out to me one more time. "Who should I contact?" says he: "if I get blurred vision?"

I was well aware that he would have no trouble in such a circumstance. This was a joke at my mother hen attitude. However, I gave him my address and told him to wire me if he needed assistance.

I see this has become a very long letter and I have yet to tell you of Sir James Lester. It will, I think, have to wait until another day. Write soon and give me your opinion on the Professor.

¡p align=left¿ Yours Always Captain Thomas Ryan. ¡/p¿

Chapter 47

Be Yourself

A Doctor Who Short Story

Be Yourself; everyone else is already taken

Oscar Wilde

It was cold, even for Valentine's Day. Flakes of snow drifted down from an overcast sky. There would be a snow storm later Oscar Wilde thought glumly and hoped it would hold off until the curtain rose.

As he approached the theatre he made out the form of a man standing in front of the doors. In spite of the cold the man appeared to be wearing a velvet frock coat and his hair hung in untidy curls to his shoulders.

"Doctor!"

The man looked up in surprise. "Sorry?"

"Doctor!"

Wilde clasped him by the shoulders and stared intently into his face. "Doctor?"

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

The brown eyes that stared back were familiar but the expression of loss and confusion was different. "Doctor?" he repeated, again, uncertainly.

The man continued to look at him blankly for a moment and then said. "I'm afraid I would appear to have lost my memory."

"There are many I know who would consider that a blessing. How did you get here?" asked Wilde.

The man frowned and then shook his head. "I'm not sure."

"You had better come with me," Wilde decided. "I'm sure you are in the middle of a scrape. I do hope it is not a vulgar one. That would be terribly tiresome."

"Is it likely that I'm in a vulgar scrape?"

"Extremely, I'm afraid. I am given to understand you live a life of high excitement and need the tedium of scrapes, adventures and other contrivances to slow the pace."

The man smiled, a little nervously.

"Really Doctor," said Wilde. "I can not leave you in this state, you appear positively dull. I am opening a play tonight in this very theatre and I am needed. Society arrives in order to see each other and for some obscure reason they feel they need to see me too. You had best join me in my box. You will be a great mystery and there will be much talk to amuse the readers of the better sort of newspaper tomorrow."

The Doctor stood at the back of the foyer of St. James' Theatre. The walls were covered in embossed green and gold wallpaper while the floor was covered with rich looking rugs out of which rose an ornate marble stair case. Everywhere was luxurious and tactile. He felt a little overwhelmed. Wilde was being frustratingly elusive. He had insisted he call himself the Doctor and continued to hint at strange adventures and mysterious talents but every time the Doctor thought he might pin him down to something specific the man was called upon by some society matron or harassed member of the theatre staff and the moment was lost.

"It's the Marquess!" said Wilde, suddenly, in a low voice.

"Who?"

"The Marquess of Queensberry." A look of amusement crossed Wilde's face. "I'll explain later."

The Doctor watched with curiousity as a heavy-set man was politely, but firmly, intercepted by some of the theatre staff. Oscar Wilde hovered in the background next to a tall dark haired man who the Doctor vaguely recalled as a manager.

The Marquess, it appeared, had support in the form of several equally burly men but, at a gesture from the manager, a number of policemen appeared from where they had been stationed outside the theatre. In disgust the Marquess threw a large bouquet, which appeared to consist primarily of fruit and vegetables to the floor, before he was escorted from the theatre.

The thought crossed the Doctor's mind that the whole fracas was rather shocking for the time and place, and that he should find this a little amusing.

As he thought this, a flicker of movement among the bouquet caught the Doctor's attention. He had the impression of a swift movement that ran up the balustrade of the staircase and through into the crush room beyond. Intrigued, the Doctor took a step towards the stair case and then, with sudden eagerness he tripped lightly up the marble stairs. He found himself in a confection of tapestry and glass, full of excited theatre goers.

Over the buzz of conversation the Doctor could hear a kind of echo as if the words were bouncing back. He frowned and gazed upwards. The gas lamps cast a warm soft light and long shadows. He had the distinct impression that the strange echo emanated from one part of the ceiling and he stared intently at the spot, watching how the shadows seemed to distort and curl. Then with a flicker he saw movement again heading through one of the curtained doorways and into the Dress Circle.

The Doctor followed.

The Dress Circle was low and the Doctor weaved his way down the aisles to the front, gazing upwards towards the ceiling the whole time. His ears rang with that faint echo as the people swirled around him. As his gaze roamed out over the auditorium he saw the smallest flicker of movement at the Proscenium arch.

There was a hand on his arm. It was Wilde.

"We are finally ready to start," he said. "A mere ten minutes late but George is acting as if any further delay will be a catastrophe worse than dining with vegetarians."

"I thought I saw something," said the Doctor.

"You may well have done, my friend. Your eyes are sharp. I hope you do not also feel any foreboding."

"I can't say that I do. Should I?"

"Let us say that I sincerely hope not. Come the play is almost begun."

"You know," said the Doctor thoughtfully in the interval. "I have the strangest feeling I have seen this play before somewhere."

Wilde laughed. "It would not greatly surprise me Doctor, for you are full of paradoxes, but I hope you will not let on to Society or my reputation will be ruined."

"Oscar!" They both turned. George Alexander had entered the box, his face was plastered with the heavy stage make-up he needed to play Jack.

"Goodness, George, you appear positively flustered."

"It's Miss Leclercq. She's lost her voice!"

At that moment the words, "A Handbag!" rang out clearly from behind the curtain.

"She would have appeared to have recovered it," observed Wilde

"That's just it. She hasn't! She's entirely lost her voice and someone is imitating her."

"Well, Doctor!" said Wilde. "Shall we investigate. It must be said I suspected events of this kind as soon as I saw your face. I do hope it will prove more diverting than entertaining over-eager young heiresses."

The Doctor looked alarmed. "Do you think I am in some way responsible?"

"Of course not, dear Doctor. But I nevertheless confidently expect you to resolve the matter. Lead the way, George!"

The Doctor stared bemused at the woman in front of him. She had long, greying brown hair, worked into an elaborate style. She smiled cautiously at him as he entered.

"An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise," intoned a voice, sounding just like Rose Leclercq's but clearly not issuing from her mouth. "Pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be."

"Fascinating!" said Wilde. "Doctor! Your opinion?"

Cautiously, the Doctor approached the woman.

"There was this lizard-like creature," said a maid, from behind her. "It sort of darted across Miss Leclercq's face and after that she couldn't speak."

"Your uncle will have to dine upstairs," came the voice. "Fortunately he is accustomed to that."

"Could you open your mouth, please?" asked the Doctor.

Obediently, Rose Leclercq opened her mouth.

He raised a paraffin lamp from the table and peered vaguely down her throat in the half-light. "Well there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the back of the mouth?" he said, surprising even himself with his certainty. "Could you try saying something?"

Her lips moved. The Doctor saw the faintest sign of a movement in the air, as if his gaze zoomed in on strange particles and then out again to the room. He looked around, startled.

"Again please." This time he concentrated on the effect. It was as if he saw the air molecules minutely compressed by the sound and then a counter-wave came against it, cancelling it out. He frowned.

"Mr Alexander, would you be so kind as to slam the door of this room as Miss Leclercq is speaking."

George Alexander looked surprised.

"Do as he says," demanded Wilde.

"Miss Leclercq, again please," said the Doctor.

Miss Leclercq began to speak. As she did so George Alexander slammed the door. "Hello? Hello?"

Miss Leclercq's voice sounded briefly and then faded away.

"Amazing!" The Doctor was enchanted. "Something is dampening out the sound. But when we over-ride it with a louder sound then the damping effect is defeated."

"That's all very well, Doctor," muttered Wilde. "But we can hardly perform Act 3 accompanied by the sound of banging doors."

"Speaking of which," said Alexander, "Act 2 is about to begin and you have yet to meet his Highness."

"I'm sure the Prince can wait until the second interval," said Wilde. He patted the Doctor on the shoulder. "Fortunately Lady Bracknell does not appear in Act 2. I must return to my box, Doctor, but I have every confidence that you can resolve this conundrum for me in time for her dramatic entrance in the final act."

"Miss Leclercq, would you be so kind as to turn the other way and attempt to speak."

Obediently Miss Leclercq turned away. There was no sound. The Doctor's felt a sense of disappointment.

"Of course!" he said. "It can still perceive the movement of the air once it is beyond the shadow of her head. Young lady!" he waved at the maid. "Could you place your ear close Miss Leclercq's mouth and she will whisper to you."

Obediently the maid knelt down beside Miss Leclercq, who bent her head to whisper in her ear. The maid gasped. "I heard her voice!"

The Doctor found his mind was racing. He lifted his lamp up close to the ceiling, recalling the strange glimpses of movement he had seen earlier in the foyer and the strange echo of conversation he had associated with it.

"Whatever is causing this must be able to perceive the movement of the air caused by the vibrations as Miss Leclercq speaks. Ergo, it is still in this room somewhere. Miss Leclercq, could you perhaps remove to another room. I will stand guard at the door."

The Doctor carefully placed himself at the doorway, while Miss Leclercq exited the room. A patch of ceiling flickered and he briefly saw a form that did, indeed, appear something like a small lizard. It was exactly the colour of the ceiling, he realised, but as it moved its colour changed, but not quite in time with the lizard itself. It caused a slight ripple effect as if the outline of the lizard glided over the surface of the plaster.

It darted towards the door and the Doctor made a grab for it with his hands. He felt a silky smoothness and then it slipped through his fingers. He darted out into the corridor, lamp held high.

"Which way did it go?"

The others looked at him blankly.

"I still can't speak," said a surprisingly Irish voice.

They all turned to gaze at Miss Leclercq. "Well, that's a mercy anyhow," she added, looking surprised.

The Doctor sought out George Alexander, waiting nervously in the wings. "You have some kind of creature loose in your theatre, Mr. Alexander. That, it would appear, both mimics and steals voices."

"There was a problem with someone chattering in the wings during the last act," murmured back Alexander quietly. "Could that have been it?"

"Possibly, possibly," the Doctor bounced lightly on his feet. "If you don't mind, I'll have a quick poke around."

The wings were shrouded in darkness compared to the bright lights on the stage. The Doctor doubted he would be able to spot the small, camouflaged creature. Instead he closed his eyes to the bustle and listened for sound of chattering.

Gradually, at the periphery of his hearing he began to detect the murmur of voices and then, very clearly, "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy."

Two actors walked off the stage, just as two more entered from the far side. There was a flicker of movement. The girl gave a small gasp and clutched her face.

"Into the corridor," whispered the Doctor.

Once properly back stage, the Doctor looked curiously at the woman who was opening and closing her mouth rapidly and silently.

"What the devil has happened?" demanded the man.

"Doctor," said Alexander. "This is Mr Aynesworth and Miss Millard. This is the Doctor. We have a small problem he's helping with."

"Hmmm.... Everyone keep calm. We'll have you sorted out in no time, Miss Millard." He held up his lamp once more. "It must be around here somewhere."

"The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."

"What a minute!" said the Doctor. He glared at the actress. "That wasn't one of your lines, was it?"

Miss Millard shook her head.

"It's one of Miss Prism's," said Alexander. "She is on stage at the moment. I will check."

He returned moments later and shook his head. "She can be heard fine, Doctor."

The Doctor nodded. "So it clearly can mimic anything it hears. I wonder why it only suppresses some voices?"

He continued searching the ceiling. "Miss Millard, let me suggest you proceed to your dressing room. We may lure the creature into following us and catch it that way. Mr Aynesworth, could you hold the lamp?"

Carefully they moved back down the corridor, Mr. Aynesworth holding the lamp high to the ceiling while the Doctor watched closely.

"There it is!" he called and leaped up towards the small shape which once again darted away down the corridor.

"Don't lose it!" called the Doctor, running along.

The glimmer of movement and the sound of chattering vanished through a dark doorway.

"Where does this lead?" asked the Doctor, plunging through and heading down the stairs.

"Prop storage and its the route through to the other side of the stage."

"Jolly good!"

The Doctor paused in the prop store, listening carefully for the faint sound of chittering. His eyes fell on a butterfly net, resting against one of the walls.

"Aha! Just the thing!"

He grasped the net and then stalked through to the far side of the stage.

Once again there was a faint sound of chittering in the wings, but it was difficult to track it down to a single location. The Doctor was muttering in frustration as the act came to an end.

"How goes it, Doctor?" called Wilde.

"Frustratingly, to be honest. It's some kind of creature with extraordinary powers of mimicry."

"The lizard that Miss Leclercq's maid claimed to have seen?" said a new voice.

The Doctor's gaze slid beyond Wilde to see a large man with an impressive beard and moustache. "Your Highness!" he exclaimed in surprise, frantically wonderinh how he had known this was the correct form of address.

"Do not fear, Doctor," the man said, "I bear none of my mother's antipathy towards you."

"That's a relief, sir," said the Doctor, hiding his confusion.

"But, why? Doctor. Why is it stealing voices?" asked Wilde.

"That's an extraordinarily good question." The Doctor paused to consider. "Of course elaborate calls are an entirely standard mechanism for attracting a mate. I wonder?"

"This creature attracts the opposite sex by reciting the words of my play? I may be an egotist Doctor, but even I find that far fetched."

"Not just words, Oscar, don't you see it's sounds. It mimics sounds. It must gather unusual sounds which is what it is doing here!"

"And the silences? Can you account for them?" asked the Prince of Wales.

"Silencing a rival perhaps? If you can mimic your rival's collection of sounds and silence them, then you can steal their mate! So it steals sounds and then silences the creature that makes them."

"So the creature is merely acting according to its nature?" said Wilde. "I confess to being somewhat relieved, though it makes it no less troublesome."

"But that means we can attract it, with sounds. Would this theatre happen to have a gramophone?"

On the far side of the stage curtain, the Doctor could hear the murmur of the audience. Around him stage hands struggled to transform Jack Worthing's garden into his living room. Meanwhile, in the centre of the stage George Alexander had set up a gramophone and they were busy playing the national anthem. The Doctor was uncomfortably aware of both the Prince of Wales and Oscar Wilde standing at his shoulders.

"Again," said the Doctor as the cylinder came to it's end.

Alexander rewound the gramophone and set the stylus back to the beginning. Once again the mixture of sounds echoed across the stage. The Doctor thought he heard the faintest of chittering noises.

"Again," whispered the Doctor.

The chittering noise drew closer. The Doctor allowed himself to zone out a little. He felt as if he was consciously pulling out and away from the irrelevant details and focusing on searching for that tell-tale flicker of movement. As his attention pulled out he saw it: the form of a lizard moving across the stage. He whipped out with the net.

"I'm glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different." The voice sounded distinctly angry.

"It can obviously pick up hints from tone as well," murmured the Doctor, holding on to the lizard. "Fascinating."

"Right," said the Prince of Wales. "Mr Alexander, do you have a good club? Have someone take the thing outside and get rid of it."

"No!" said the Doctor, outraged.

"I may not share my mother's dislike of you, Doctor. But this creature has come dangerously close to ruining a night's entertainment."

"Ruining a night's entertainment!" the Doctor bridled. "You would kill it for that!"

"Can you control it, Doctor?" intervened Wilde.

The Doctor looked down at the creature in his arms. It was still hard to see since it had blended with the velvet of his coat but he knew where it was and stroked its head. It trembled in his hands. "It's not a danger to anyone," he said. "Especially if it can't see the air in front of people. If you have a box or a basket I could carry it in?"

"There's one in the props room," said Alexander.

The Prince of Wales glowered. "Very well, but if the damn thing escapes I shall hold you responsible."

The Doctor sat through the final act with the basket on his knee. Occasionally lines from the play emanated quietly from within.

"I wonder if the Marquess knew he was carrying it?" mused Wilde.

"Oh, I'm sure he did. I'm more curious to know how he came by it."

"Some explorer I should think. He's not a pleasant man, but he has contacts. Someone might have approached him. I must see about him somehow. Bosie keeps urging me to sue him."

The Doctor frowned, a vague premonition troubling his mind.

"How about you, Doctor?" asked Wilde. "What you will do now?"

"I'm not sure," admitted the Doctor. "I still remember nothing at all before yesterday."

"I shall find you some good lodgings for a few weeks or so," said Wilde. "That should keep you going."

"Do you think you could find something for our lizard friend as well?" asked the Doctor.

"I'm sure I can. I confess to a sense of relief, Doctor. You seem more yourself than you appeared this morning. I was almost tempted to be serious."

The Doctor smiled. "I may not have much memory, Mr. Wilde, but I do at least know one thing."

"And what is that?"

"The vital importance of Being the Doctor."

Chapter 48

Accidents and Meetings

Nick remembered the house from that first evening in this new world, when he'd gone blundering in to tell Jenny about Claudia only to be faced with the fiance. He felt his face go hot at the thought. He pulled up and looked across at her.

"Here we are."

She began gathering up her bag and coat. "Thanks for the lift."

"Any time."

She paused a moment. "Look," she said, suddenly, "why don't you pop in for a minute. I can find that plumber's phone number I was promising you."

It couldn't do any harm and he did need to do something about his bathroom soon. "OK."

He paused in Jenny's hallway, mentally comparing it to Claudia's flat. The print on the wall was the same, one of Van Gogh's sunflowers, but Claudia had had coat hooks by the door giving her hallway an air of informality. Jenny's was pristine with bare floorboards and a small table under the print. Claudia had matched the print with walls painted the yellow of the sunflowers, Jenny had matched it with walls painted the pale blue of the background.

"It's in here somewhere." Jenny's voice floated in from a side door.

Nick wandered through to find himself in a home office. Jenny clearly had a repressed disorganised side. Papers were piled on the desk and the shelves above it in teetering piles. Jenny was perched on the desk in her high heels, giving Nick a stunning view of a pair of very shapely ankles. Nick couldn't remember ever paying much attention to Claudia's ankles, but then Claudia had favoured trousers. He resisted the temptation to run a hand over them. Jenny handed him down a large box file. It had "HOUSE" printed on the spine in felt tip. Two more followed it and then she climbed off the desk.

"Everything to do with decoration is in those," she said.

She opened the first and a pile of catalogues, swatches and scraps of paper burst out. Nick opened the second with some trepidation.

"What am I looking for?" he asked.

"Business Card. Walsh something... or maybe West."

Nick began picking through the contents.

The doorbell rang. Jenny swore in a fashion that surprised him. Underneath the surface, he suspected, Jenny was a very different person.

"Back in a minute," she said.

Nick continued carefully leafing through the file but he couldn't help hearing a woman's voice floating through from the hall.

"...of course we could just have gone back to the hotel but since we were close we thought we'd drop in to see you instead. I phoned ahead but all I got was the answerphone."

"Did you try my mobile?"

"I think the number I have must be out of date."

"Hello!" A white-haired man appeared at the doorway to the study. He was tall and thin with a bushy moustache and equally bushy eye-brows.

"Hello," said Nick, uncertainly.

The man held out his hand. "I'm Jim, Jenny's father."

"Nick," said Nick grasping the hand. "I work with Jenny."

"Do you now?" said the man. "All that hush hush stuff."

"Errr... yes," agreed Nick.

A shortish woman appeared in the doorway with neatly permed white haired and disconcertingly blue eyes which eyed Nick with frank appraisal. He found himself dusting down his jacket anxiously. Jenny trailed in her wake looking a little helpless.

"Mum, Dad, this is Professor Cutter from work. He gave me a lift home."

"Oh?" asked her mother.

"Jenny's car got," Nick searched for a word, "damaged."

"Damaged?" asked Jim, "How?"

Nick and Jenny exchanged a glance over her mother's head. "It got stepped on," was not going to be a good answer.

"Hush hush, Dad," said Jenny.

"Really!" his bushy eyebrows shot up.

"I hope you get it paid for, dear," said Jenny's mother.

"Don't worry," said Nick, recalling with a smile Lester's face as Jenny had vented her ire on him. "She's already sorted that one out."

"Has she now," Jim's eyes twinkled. "Some poor Civil Servant been cowed into submission has he?"

Nick nodded, grinning.

"Good oh! Been terrified of her myself since she was about five." Jim confessed, conspiratorially.

"Dad!" said Jenny. "Nick, this is my father Jim and my mother Lynette."

"Pleased to meet you," Nick shook hands with her mother.

"We've brought wine," said Lynette, holding up a Tesco's wine carrier full of bottles. "You'll stay for a drink won't you?"

"Well, I," began Nick.

"I wouldn't argue, if I was you," said Jim. "It isn't worth it. Jenny takes after her."

Nick found himself swept into a living room decorated in the muted shades Claudia had favoured but enlivened with artwork, cushions and throws in bright primary colours. Wine glasses were produced and before he knew it he was sat on a sofa trying to explain evolutionary biology to Jenny's mother.

"What I don't understand," said Lynette after a while, "is why this terribly secret project Jenny's working on needs an evolutionary biologist. It all sounds terribly interesting but I don't see the connection to national security."

Nick floundered for an answer.

"Geology!" put in Jim suddenly, "Oil, natural resources, that sort of thing."

"Well..." Nick found himself unwilling to actually lie to these people.

"Dad!" said Jenny, "Stop fishing. I've had to warn you before."

"I always wanted to be a spy, darling," he said, apologetically. "You can't blame me for wanting to live vicariously through you."

Nick looked at his wine glass. It appeared to have refilled itself.

"I'm not a spy," said Jenny with some dignity. "I'm a PR specialist working on a sensitive project."

"Whatever you say, dear." Nick found Jim was waggling his eyebrows at him again and he couldn't help grinning back. It wasn't often he got to see Jenny being teased, or at least, not often he saw her being teased good-naturedly. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd often seen her relaxed. Her cheeks were a little flushed and the smile surprisingly unguarded. It suited her.

"Do you have any food, dear?" asked Lynette. "We thought we might treat you to a take-out. The Professor too, if he'll stay."

"Call me Nick."

"That's all settled then."

Nick blinked. He didn't recall actually agreeing to dinner.

Jenny disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a selection of menus. After some discussion they settled on Chinese. While Jenny phoned, Nick found himself, sipping his wine which seemed to have refilled itself again and justifying the existence of paleontology to Lynette, who conceded it made good TV but wasn't clear what it's benefit to mankind was.

"We need more physicists, you know," she said.

Nick thought of their almost total lack of comprehension of the anomalies and silently agreed, though he was damned if he would say so out loud.

After phoning, Jenny went into the kitchen to set out plates and cutlery. A minute or two later her father followed her to help.

"I'm afraid Lynette is giving your boyfriend the inquisition," he said. "I think she's lumped him in with Media Studies."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Really?" her father said in mock surprise. "Pity," he added.

"You two are incorrigible. The poor man only stepped inside to get the phone number for a plumber."

"He seems like a decent enough chap though and he's coping with your mother admirably."

"She's not started on the social iniquity of the education system, has she?"

"I think she's saving it for another day."

Jenny returned to the living room and paused in the doorway to watch Nick as he described some fossil to her mother. He had the animated look in his eye he always got when on the trail of some pre-historic creature. He looked as dishevelled as he always did but that made him look comfortable and at home where her erstwhile fiance had always appeared awkward and anxious around her parents. She was aware, in her mildly inebriated state, of an immense fondness for him and a pleasure that he was coping with the situation so well. He looked up, catching her eye where she stood, and smiled at her. The doorbell rang and she had to leave the scene to collect the food.

Three hours later, they were still in the kitchen surrounded by empty food cartons and wine bottles. Somewhere along the way her father had dug out the bottle of single malt he'd given her last Christmas and that had lead to an involved discussion of whisky and a rather heated disagreement over the comparative merits

of Speyside and Islay. Nick, Jenny gathered, favoured a good flavour of peat in his whisky. Lynette glanced at her watch.

"We really must be getting back to the hotel," she said. "Do you have the number for a taxi?"

Jenny headed into the hallway, staggering slightly as the alcohol hit her. Lynette followed to rummage in her handbag for a mobile phone.

"I do like your Professor," she said. "Is everyone at work like that?"

"Not exactly."

"Bet he's difficult to keep in line though. I can't imagine him kow-towing to bureaucracy."

"No," Jenny agreed with a smile. "None of them do," she added, mentally reviewing the scientific team.

"I hope you look after them. I wouldn't like to see him all Civil Servantised."

"I do, Mum. Don't worry."

"We should offer him a lift, I suppose," Lynette said doubtfully. "He can't drive home now."

"I'll ask him," said Jenny and returned to the kitchen.

"Do you want to share Mum and Dad's taxi?" she asked.

Nick shook his head. "There's a late bus," he said. "I'll be fine."

The departure took a while with the four of them crammed into Jenny's hallway exchanging pleasantries. But eventually she shooed her parents out of the house. Her mother's eyes were dancing and she distinctly had the impression Lynette was considering a comment along the lines of "don't do anything I wouldn't". Given her mother's legendary exploits in swinging London that had become something of a family euphemism for "Go for it." Mercifully, Lynette clearly thought the better of it. Jenny and Nick stood next to each other in the doorway, waving as her parents climbed into their taxi. Then Jenny shut the door while a sigh and leaned back against the wall.

"Sorry for hijacking your evening," she said.

"It was a pleasure," said Nick. She was suddenly aware of how terribly close he was standing just across the hallway from her, with his hair all fluffy and standing on end. She was, she reflected, really quite drunk. She took a deep breath.

"I should go," he said. Even in her drunken state Jenny could tell that his eyes had become fixed on her cleavage.

She shook her head. "There's a spare room. The late bus will be miserable." She stood up firmly, though regretted it when she realised it brought her that much closer to Nick's lips.

"I don't know," he began.

"You're staying and that's final," she said, firmly, placing one hand against the wall which brought her in even closer.

A smile ghosted around Nick's lips, "If you say so."

Jenny leaned in and kissed him, lightly at first but Nick's arms slipped around her waist and pulled her in, deepening the kiss. Unable to resist, she ran one hand through his hair.

"Though," she said a little breathlessly, coming up for air, "the spare room isn't compulsory."

Chapter 49

The Potter's Field

Claudia Brown had no idea why she was here.

The building in front of her was squat and ugly. Wooden slats had been used instead of brick on the upper floor. A mock-quaint pitched roof failed to hide the fact that the place had been mass-produced sometime in the 60s. It stood alone in the centre of a field of scrubby grass with a forlorn looking playground on one side and a lone football goal set up on the other. Square concrete stepping stones led from the pavement to the front door of the structure.

Claudia Brown stared at the building. A tired pub sign, reading 'Potter's Bar', swung forlornly. It was probably some weak attempt at a pun. The pavement was in the middle of Potter's Field housing estate, somewhere on the borders of Liverpool. The scrappy grass around the pub was probably all that was left of the field itself.

The sky was grey and overcast, and the estate seemed empty of all life. She glanced at her watch. It was early afternoon. Claudia turned in a slow circle taking in her surroundings: more concrete; more cheap housing; nothing more than 60 years old. There was nothing here that obviously required intervention.

Claudia shrugged and headed for the pub door. At least she could get herself something to drink.

Early afternoon midweek and Potter's Bar was largely empty. Claudia couldn't help wrinkling her nose slightly at the smell in the place. No doubt once upon a time, the delightful aroma of stale smoke had concealed the faint hint of vomit and urine, but no more. Two men sat in one corner, talking in low voices. There were a further three people huddled at the bar, a woman and two men in mismatched tracksuits. The men were clutching pints and laughing loudly at some joke or other. The woman had a stemmed glass, the liquid the pale amber of a lager.

Oh well! Nothing ventured. Claudia marched up to the bar.

"What can I do for you, love?" The barman's voice was pure Liverpudlian, but at least it was moderately easy to comprehend. She ran her eyes over the bar and the cabinet behind. The bar had several taps, but no pumps. Fading and battered coasters littered its surface and a large jar of pennies and tuppences stood ostentatiously at one end. Behind the bar she could see alcopops and bottled beer. There were even a couple of bottles of wine, but given there didn't seem to be any beer on draft, it was probably best not to risk the hoc.

"I'll have a Becks please," she said, opting for the bottled beer as her safest bet.

To her surprise the man fished around on a high shelf for a stemmed glass and poured the Becks into it for her.

"You meeting someone?" the barman asked as he pushed the glass towards her.

"Yes." She wasn't, or at least she thought she wasn't, but it would arouse fewer questions. What else would a woman, dressed like her, be doing on her own in a bar like this?

"He late?"

Claudia made a show of looking at her watch. "No, I'm early." She smiled at the barman and then gazed around the pub interior once more. "Worked here long?" she asked.

"Nah! Only started last week. The regular girl's gone and had a baby."

"Oh!" That probably meant he was a dead end. Whatever was going on around here would be as much news to him as to her.

"What do you do?" he asked.

What did she do? Describing herself as an investigator, while strictly true, was unlikely to help in this kind of locality. Telling him that there were predators moving around outside time, waiting to break in and her job was to stop them would be even worse. The thought of trying to explain that she used to work for the Home Office, had got co-opted into a project that involved hunting dinosaurs breaking through cracks in time and had then been erased from existence by a timeline shift that had substituted a woman called Jenny Lewis in her place... well, that would probably have had him discreetly reaching for his mobile in order to contact the local psychiatric unit.

"I'm a historian of sorts," she hazarded.

"Not from round here then? Where are you from?"

"London." Telling him she came from outside time was another item on her mental list of true, but counter-productive, facts.

"What's your interest up here?"

"I'm working on a local history project, of the area, you know." Claudia made it up on the spot but it would probably excuse her asking the sorts of questions she needed to.

"What sort of project?"

"Oh, you know, the history of the estate and notable buildings and such like. For instance, was this pub here before the estate was built?"

"Don't know. Don't think so. This was all just fields before then." The barman frowned around the faded interior of the pub. "It don't look that old really. Not old, old, you know."

"No, it doesn't." Claudia had to agree, which put her back at square one. If the building was new then the trigger had to be something in the building.

"Are there any antiques or things inside though? That might tell a story?" she asked brightly, eyeing the dartboard dubiously. "Things that might come from before the pub was built?"

The barman shook his head. "What you see is what there is. We've a bit of a kitchen out back, and beer and stuff in the cellar..." he shrugged.

"Upstairs?"

"Big function room, but it's just empty. Nothing to be seen at all."

"Eh! Why don't you just leave me alone?" The shout came from somewhere behind her.

Claudia turned in her seat to see a thin wiry man standing up. He was one of the two that had been huddled at a table when she came in.

"Hey! Eric! Bit early in the day, mate!" called the barman.

"You can keep out of it an' all. Bleeding social security cheapskates."

"Eric, I'm not lending you anything and that's it. That doesn't mean I'm not a pal!" said the seated man.

"Yous none of yous cares at all. None of you!" The wiry man exited the pub, letting the doors bang shut behind him.

"Trouble?" asked Claudia.

"Nothing special. He always leaves in a huff. But he's a shouter rather than a fighter, so he's never been banned."

Suddenly a scream echoed from outside.

"What was that?" asked Claudia.

"Daft bugger probably tripped over his own laces," said a voice.

The tracksuit group laughed.

Claudia looked around the pub as the few patrons returned to their drinks. She wasn't keen on intervening; on the other hand a scream was a scream. She put her

beer down on the bar. "I'll just pop my head out the door and check he's OK."

"He's not worth it," said the barman.

"It'll sooth my conscience." Claudia smiled and headed for the entrance.

Outside a light drizzle was falling. Claudia peered through the gloom looking for the thin wiry man. The pub stood alone and incongruous in its small piece of waste ground. Claudia walked around it, hoping to see Eric, but he was gone. As she walked back towards the entrance her feet sank into newly-turned earth. She looked down. A small area was crumbly and free from grass or weeds, as if it had been freshly dug. Claudia crouched and let the earth fall through her fingers.

She stood up once more and took a good look around. For half a moment she thought she saw someone standing a short way off near the road. A woman about her height. The effect was a bit like looking at a mirror image. Claudia took a step closer and the woman seemed to vanish. Claudia shivered and then walked back towards the pub.

"Afraid he'd been taken by the Potter?" asked the tracksuit woman as she walked back inside. The woman had mouse-brown hair pulled up into a scraggly pony tail. Her tracksuit was pink with a 'Race for Life' logo on the back.

"The Potter?"

"Yeah, local legend. The Potter will get you if you are a bad child or out alone at night, or something."

"Did the Potter used to live in Potter's field?"

"Who knows? I guess. I just remember me Mam scaring me with tales that the Potter would get me if I was bad. She used to say he'd get me and pull me into the earth until I was all made of clay and he could turn me into something else."

Claudia shivered. Outside the rain came down harder.

She composed herself and sat back down on the bar stool in order to gaze into her barely touched drink. Just as she reached her hand out for it there was a sudden thump against the window. She turned her head to see a clump of earth sliding down the glass.

"Bloody kids!" said the barman.

Claudia frowned and stared out of the window. Nothing was moving in the muddy field beyond. Streaks of clay ran down the glass as the rain washed away the soil.

She sipped on her drink and wondered which of the pub clientele to quiz first.

The man who had been talking to Eric was called Sid. Sid was a retired dock worker and Eric was the son of a friend. Claudia suspected he couldn't help her much but the realisation came halfway through a long and involved tale of how Sid's granny had lost her dog during the blitz (but it was miraculously found the next day). He had assured her this bore some relation to the legend of the Potter, but 15 minutes and several lengthy digressions into the story, the connection was yet to become clear. His calloused hands curled protectively around his pint of Tetley's as if drawing warmth from it. She'd sat with him nearly half an hour and he'd only drunk a third of it, making it last on his meagre pension. She half-wanted to offer to buy him another and half-feared that would tie her to this table for the whole afternoon. She was relieved when the pub door banged open again.

Possibly it was a mark of how long she seemed to have been stuck in the place, that her first reaction to the silvery grey suit and bouffant hairstyle was a trickle of suspicion.

"Dear me," said a voice in, if anything, even more cultured tones than her own. "It is terrible weather outside."

The tracksuit trio at the bar watched the man dubiously. He was holding a pair of designer trainers in one hand with a slight air of distaste, probably both at the trainers and at the mud that caked them.

"I found these outside," he said brightly. "Do they belong to anyone here?"

"Those are Mike Barratt's," said one of the men. "He got'em cheap in the market but reckons they're genuine."

"Oh, they're genuine all right," said the stranger. "A little water-logged but genuine."

He smiled benignly at the throng. "Ah Claudia! There you are."

"Made her wait long enough, you have," said the barman. "She's been here nearly an hour."

"Ah well!" said Silver. "I shall demonstrate my contrition by buying a drink. A glass of dry white, my dear?"

Claudia looked anxiously at the bar and those ominous bottles of cheap-looking white. The barman caught her eye. "Another Becks for the lady?" he asked.

Silver glanced her way and bowed slightly.

"Perfect," he said gracefully.

Claudia moved up to the bar and sat next to Silver. "What brings a handsome man like you to a disreputable place like this?" she asked with a smile.

Silver's eyebrows rose archly. "Why the prospect of your delightful company of course."

They shared a smile. They both knew why he was here. Clearly whatever the threat was, it had escalated. They thought she needed a technician.

"Well, no complaints from me," said Claudia. A technician would speed things up a lot and, hopefully, spare her any more lengthy and anecdote-laden conversations.

"That makes a pleasant change. Steel always resents my presence."

"That's because you are an incorrigible flirt and Sapphire encourages you," Claudia pointed out.

Silver looked mildly surprised, an expression Claudia suspected he was faking. "Really? You think so?"

Claudia rolled her eyes to let him know she wasn't fooled, then she picked up the water-logged shoes doubtfully.

"Do you think these are relevant?" she asked.

"Oh I think so, don't you? People don't leave shoes like those lying around."

"So you think the owner's dead?"

Silver tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Well, technically speaking he has five years left to live."

"But?" asked Claudia.

"But, right now, he's not alive. Terribly odd, don't you think?" Silver smiled quizzically at her.

Claudia frowned at the shoes. Clumps of damp, clay-filled mud dripped to the floor of the pub.

There was a sudden flash of light. Outside the rain beat down on a churned and muddy wasteland. Moments later the sound of thunder rolled through the room.

In the aftermath of the thunder there was a rat-tat-tat at the window.

"Who's that?" asked the barman.

Claudia thought she saw a form at the window. It was big and heavy-set, looking slightly like a bald man with a beard but the features were half-formed and unfinished in some way. As she watched the figure seemed to collapse in the rain, like mud sliding into a puddle.

"Time for me to be getting home," said one of the tracksuited men. He was big and heavily-built with a bald head and a beard. Claudia thought she could see traces of a tattoo at the end of his sleeves.

In spite of herself Claudia glanced back at the window, expecting to see the form there once more, as if his imperfect mirror-image called to this man from Potter's Field.

"Give it 15 minutes John. You'll get soaked if you go out in this," said pink tracksuit woman.

"I gave it 15 minutes half an hour ago, Debs. The missus'll be going mental. She'll think I've sprained me ankle on your training run, not got stuck down the pub. Don't worry about me, I won't dissolve."

"Well, thanks for coming anyway John," said Debs. "Means a lot that you'll be on the run as well."

John picked a leather jacket off a bar stool and shrugged it on. "Have to do something," he muttered. "Jimmy were a good mate and cancer's a rotten way to go."

He marched across the room and pulled open the door of the pub. There was a gasp of surprise from Debs as earth poured silently into the room.

"Fascinating," muttered Silver quietly into Claudia's ear.

Claudia stood up and walked towards the door, feeling Silver close by her shoulder. There was nothing to be seen except the earth, blocking the exit.

"I guess I'll have to climb out the window," said John uncertainly.

"I wouldn't," said Claudia and flashed him her best former-Home Office smile. "I don't know how that earth got there but I wouldn't risk going out."

"Something did happen to the owner of those shoes." Silver beamed affably around the pub.

"But what's happening?" asked Debs. "That ain't natural. Arthur, call the fire brigade or something." She looked over at the barman.

"You'd better stop them," Silver muttered to Claudia. "I think they're about to get excited and I'm not good with humans."

"Right!" said Claudia firmly. "There's no need for panic."

"What d'you mean there's no need for panic," shouted Debs. "What's going on?"

"Well, I don't like to be precipitous," said Silver and he bent down to run his hands through the clods of earth on the floor of the pub. "But I think we are being buried in Potter's Field."

Mouths dropped open. Claudia rolled her eyes. So much for keeping things calm.

"Silver," said Claudia firmly, hoping that she could side-track the conversation and keep Debs and Arthur from phoning anyone. "What do you know about Potter's Field?"

Silver stood up rubbing the earth between his fingers. "Clay-based soil. It's been here a long time, as have the humans who use it. It's been dug and worked for centuries."

"Could the soil be the trigger?"

He shrugged. "Well anything is possible but, in that case, why now?"

"Trigger? What trigger?" asked Debs.

The last of the tracksuit trio suddenly spoke up for the first time. "It's the curse of the Potter come back to haunt us."

"Now that," said Silver, "sounds frightfully relevant."

He gestured with his hand letting Claudia precede him back to the bar.

She sat down on a bar stool next to the three of them and felt Silver stand at her shoulder.

Claudia looked at the third man. "Tell us about the curse of the Potter."

"It's an old story. The Potter was an evil magician, he used to make models out of clay and used those models to steal people's futures."

"I knew that, Charlie" said Debs. "My Dad said he was Jewish, 'cos of golems and stuff."

"Why didn't you mention this before?" asked Claudia, frowning at her.

Debs shrugged. "I forgot, didn't I? Only remembered just this minute."

"Best not to talk too much about the Potter," said Charlie. "No good ever comes of it. You should know that, Debs."

"Go on," said Claudia. "It's necessary to talk about the Potter now."

Charlie shrugged. "Well that's it, more or less. He made models of people and stole their future. He pulled them under the Earth and sucked their lives into the clay model and then he remade it into something else. Something he wanted. My Mam never said anything about Jews though."

"What does 'stole their future' mean?" asked John.

"Well, it could mean any number of things," Silver began. Claudia kicked him discreetly. This was not the time or place to get into theoretical temporal physics.

Silver's eyebrows shot up but he smiled at her and then raised his finger to his lips.

"What happened to the Potter?" asked Claudia.

"What happened?" asked Charlie.

"Yes, you said there was a curse."

"Oh, he wasn't cursed. When the people rose up against him they buried him in the clay of Potter's field with silver coins over his eyes to pay his way to the underworld. But he cursed them. He said he wouldn't pay but would save the money and if ever the coins were stolen he would be free once more."

"Well, that's daft that is," said Debs. "The whole field was dug up before the estate was built. I remember my Mam telling me about it. They were looking for a prehistoric settlement or summat."

"Did they find it?" asked Silver.

She shrugged. "How should I know?"

"Don't reckon they did," said Arthur, the barman. "Otherwise there would be a visitor centre or a display or something, like on Time Team."

"Not necessarily," said Claudia. "Not if it was all back in the 50s or 60s."

"Still doesn't explain why now," muttered Silver, leaning close so only Claudia could hear.

"Oral tradition," said Claudia quietly, turning to him. "The details may be wrong."

"You've lost me," said Silver.

She grinned at him. "Let's just assume the coins are significant."

Silver's eyebrows shot up and then he headed towards the bar.

"Oi! What are you doing?" asked the barman as he walked around it.

"I just want to check in the till."

"I can't let you do that!" The barman rather ostentatiously pulled a small key out of the cash till and placed it firmly in his pocket.

Silver ignored him. He touched the till which sprang open.

"Hey!" said the barman in surprise.

Claudia leaned over the bar. "Anything?"

Silver's hand drifted across the drawer and he shook his head. "Two 10 cent pieces and one washer. Everything else is new pence."

Claudia allowed her gaze to drift along the bar to the charity pot of coins placed at the end. Silver followed where she was looking.

"Oh yes, indeed!" he said with a smile.

Claudia reached for the pot and upended it. Copper pennies and tuppences rolled and bounced along the mock wood bar top and, in the middle of them all, a flash of grey-white.

Silver's finger stabbed down, trapping the coin under its tip.

"One silver coin, returned to Potter's field," whispered Claudia.

Silver picked it up and examined it. "I think we've found our trigger."

There was a renewed thud from the window. More lumps of clay piled themselves up against it. Half-formed fingers pawed at the glass.

"You may have found what you're looking for, but that doesn't seem to have stopped the Potter," said Sid.

Claudia turned around in surprise. She'd forgotten about Sid, sitting alone at his table nursing a pint.

"Wait a minute," said John slowly. "Are you trying to tell me it's the Potter out there? Burying the pub?"

"Makes sense, I suppose," said Debs, but she sounded doubtful.

"But that's nonsense!"

"Do you have a better explanation?" asked Silver.

"I'm not a scientist, but I bet its something to do with the rain and the soil, or something..." John trailed away uncertainly.

"So how are you two fancy types going to stop the Potter?" asked Sid, gazing hard at Claudia.

Claudia took the coin from Silver and held it at eye level curiously. "The Potter steals people's futures, all that possibility, and molds it into something else."

"So the legend goes," said Silver, gazing thoughtfully at her.

"The coin hasn't quite returned to the field. It's in here, not out there in the soil."

"Close enough to make the Potter stir," murmured Silver, coming close to peer at the coin. "But not close enough for him to break free."

"And if the coin leaves the field altogether, will he rest again?" asked Claudia.

"It's a hypothesis, but it won't be easy to test. Someone will need to carry the coin out of here and away from the field."

"But anyone who tries will be taken by the Potter!" said Debs.

"That depends," mused Claudia, "on whether you have any possibility or future left for him to steal."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Debs.

"Nothing," said Claudia, turning her back on the bar.

Silver stopped her on the way to the door. "You have no way of knowing this will work."

"No," she agreed.

"Let me..." his voice tailed away.

She smiled at him. "I'm the operative and you're the technician. I think you've already told me all you can."

He looked rueful, then he leaned forwards and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Good luck, old girl."

"Thanks!"

She pulled open the door. Before her the mud fell away leaving behind lumpen, human-like shapes. Claudia took a step forward the heads of the figures resolved into faces she knew. Nick and Abby, Connor, friends from a life she'd never had, screamed out at her as the figures lurched forwards, arms outstretched, stubby fingers reaching to clasp her.

Her feet slid in a puddle and she fell to her knees, the coin still clutched in one hand. Mud ran over it, sucking and pressing but she pulled it free and struggled

upright once more.

She ran towards the boundary of the field. Muddy hands grasped at her but she pulled free, the slippery half-formed fingers unable to catch hold. The wind and rain lashed at her, fighting her back physically, pushing her to the ground. The earth heaved and tossed like a stormy sea. Again and again, she pulled her feet out of the clinging soil, feeling the mud's inability to get a proper grip and its frustration as she broke free time and again.

The pavement was maybe three yards away when her feet slipped once more and she fell on her face. Mud ran over her head, filling her mouth and eyes. She struggled upwards, her hand gripped tightly about the coin. Even as she surfaced she felt the clay pulling her back. She raised her hand and threw the coin, watching it turn and sparkle as it flew through the air.

The rain pattered to a halt. Claudia found herself on her hands and knees in the mud, spluttering damp hair out of her mouth and eyes. Her gaze turned to the pavement where elegantly pressed grey trousers stepped neatly up to the silver penny. As she staggered to her feet Silver picked up the coin.

"One silver penny removed from Potter's Field."

He reached out a hand, helping her to her feet and pulled her onto the pavement.

Together they stared down at the tiny coin. It was just a thin circle of silver, really, no markings to speak of. It felt unutterably old.

"I think I had better take this somewhere safe," said Silver. "Will you be all right?"

Claudia nodded.

"Jolly good. Toodle pip." He turned and was gone.

Claudia spared once glance back over her shoulder at the pub where lights blazed out into the late afternoon. Then she, too, turned her back on it and left.

Chapter 50

The Feast of St. Crispin Crispianus

A Doctor Who Short Story

It was a winter night when the fell to Earth. The enforcer was hot on the heels of the fugitive. He was driven by a determination to catch his quarry that had led him out on a limb far beyond the reaches on any backup he might once have been able to call upon. The chase had taken him years, sifting through a hundred strange cultures to find his prey and now, finally, the villain was in his sights. His mind was filled with his obsession; the violent one would not escape him. The two of them raced through the galaxies far beyond the centres of civilisation out into a spiral arm and there the quarry, the last of the fuel enabling his flight burned out, turned at bay on the one planet with life.

The fugitive fell to Earth in London near the developing Palace of Whitehall and headed within with justice on his heels. In a narrow and deserted corridor hi finally turned. His journey through the civilisations and cultures of the spiral arm had not been without benefits. He had amassed knowledge and skills undreamed of by his compatriots. It had not all be planned with intricate precision but nevertheless it had been planned. The fugitive had foreseen the possibility of this circumstance and he had planned for it. As the enforcer rounded the corner at the top of the staircase the fugitive unleashed a burst of energy, a massive spike of electricity. His pursuer screamed in the energy burst as it overloaded his internal matrix. His problem was solved. The fugitive halted. He heard voices coming up the passage. The stolen details of this world he had purchased far away allowed him to translate:

"This English King, will he come to France?"

"I would imagine that is certain now."

As the two men rounded the far corner the fugitive surged forward towards the

first of them.

"Ah!"

"What is is, Mountjoy? Are you hurt?"

"No. No, I'm fine. I felt a tingling sensation, like you sometimes get when you pick up weapon or armour. Only stronger."

"I know the feeling, but there is no metal here. These English are not practicing some witchcraft are they? I hear the King is well learned."

"I doubt it. This King is a devout Christian. Well, whatever sorcery it was, it has passed now."

The men moved on.

Sometime later the King and his entourage followed down the same dimly lit corridor. Their footsteps echoed round the walls of the castle and down the corridors. The sound announced that the King had left the deliberations of the council chamber. Everyone in the palace knew they had been debating whether to go to war with France. The decision had presumably been taken.

"We sail for France in the spring," said the King as he walked over the point where the enforcer had last stood. "S'blood!" he exclaimed.

"What is it sire?" his brother Bedford was at his side in seconds.

"I don't know, I felt as if... I don't know. We are King. It was nothing." He straightened his shoulders and they continued on.

Autumn was coming on apace. The men who crouched round the campfires near the walls of the besieged town knew this. There was a chill in the air. The siege could not continue for much longer, not if the army was to be in safe territory behind secure supply lines when winter set in. It was going badly. The siege had taken too long and the soldiers hoped that the King would not continue it into a wet autumn or even try to push further into unwelcoming France before the cold set in.

A small and select gathering had collected around one fire. The men hunched uneasily and presented a cold, unwelcoming face to any strangers who approached them. They were all foot soldiers or archers. Their clothing and armour was

unadorned and minimal compared to that of the nobility. They spoke little except to grumble about the lateness of the year and the length of the siege.

"It's that Sir Lawrence," said one man, spitting after the name. "My Lord Gloucester tells me that the King prefers his council to all the grey beards of England and that Sir Lawrence is for continuing the siege."

There was a murmur of assent around the fire. They were Gloucester's men at heart and while they might privately doubt the veracity of his words it was clear that Gloucester was for turning back and that he wanted Lawrence out of the way. They cared nothing for the fortunes of Sir Lawrence but looked forward to Calais and the possibility of return to England.

"I'm looking for Jack Miller," said a voice. It was softly spoken but an edge of steel lurked beneath the tone.

"Who's asking?"

A tall man stepped into the firelight. He had striking features that could have been crudely carved from rock. In the firelight his hair looked a washed out, light grey. It was probably brown in colour and was cut short, though longer than was the fashion. He had an air of calm. "My name is Lytton," he said.

The men looked to their spokesman, "Aye, my lord Gloucester has mentioned you," he said. "He told me you have no love of Sir Lawrence."

Somewhere in the floors deep below him he heard the sound of an explosion. He looked up feeling servos cranking in his neck, straightening his artificial and apparently undamaged spine. The TARDIS had gone. In minutes the fires from the explosion would reach the control room.

"I have an old score to settle," said Lytton. "He once left me to die."

"I'm Jack Miller," said the man, "and you're welcome here."

Lytton stepped into the ring, men making their way for him. He sat down with his back against a log and sank into the relaxed pose of an old soldier who knows this is as comfortable as he's going to get for a while.

Jack Miller looked round the ring of faces, "I think we're all here and there's no one here who shouldn't be. Let's be straight about this. We're here because of Sir Lawrence. We're here because a jumped up squire of no family has got above himself and got so far into the King's affections that he can set the course of the war and that war is going ill for us."

"Not to mention the 30 marks you promised us to help get rid of him," said a wiry man with a scar above his eye who was seated across from Jack.

Several of the men laughed. "You'll get paid well enough, Nym," said Jack. "I just wanted it clear what this is about."

"I don't know Jack," said an older man in his forties. "I've served Gloucester many years and my father before me but murder is a grave matter. It won't go well with God, I'm thinking."

"Don't you worry about God," said Jack. "They all say the King loves Sir Lawrence like a brother. Some say more than a brother. Weigh the treatment of Sir Lawrence and of Gloucester. Those closest to the King say Sir Lawrence has led him from God's law. You take a good look, next time you chance to see the two of them about the camp, and you tell me whether you think Sir Lawrence looks at the King right or not."

"But Jack you're not saying the King is a sodomite, are you?" asked a large blonde man.

"I'm not saying anything against the King, but if you look at that Sir Lawrence with his smooth skin and his talk of gentleness and mercy. Take a good look at him and then come and tell me he's not a danger to the King's soul that God would thank us to remove.

"Gloucester says this? That it's God's will?" asked the older man, pushing for confirmation.

"Aye, he says so. You can ask him yourself if you like."

"No Jack. You and Gloucester have always been straight with me and mine. If it's his orders that Sir Lawrence be killed and it's his opinion that he poses a threat to the King's soul then I'm satisfied that God will judge me by my obedience and Gloucester by the truth of his saying."

"Good man, John. What say you Lytton? You've been quiet through all this."

"I've not much to say. I do this for my own reasons. I care not for the money and I'm not worried about my soul. I only care that this thing is done and done well."

"Then we are agreed. Sir Lawrence has gone on an errand to Rouen and is expected back some time tomorrow. Apparently he refused all companions and is travelling alone. Like as not he's spying for the French. We all know their court is holed up in Rouen. If he doesn't make it back then all our problems are solved. We will wait for him on the road."

Thery was one of the foremost alchemists of France. Which is not to say that he was any closer to turning lead into gold than the rest of his trade, but he had skills in the working of metal and the use of chemicals possessed by few others. His

reputation for occult knowledge had earned him respect and fame so he was not altogether surprised to have a visit from an English nobleman.

Thery kept his shop in what later centuries would call a picturesque state. He kept the shutters closed letting in as little light as possible and instead wasted wood and candle on lighting the interior. He kept a small forge in one corner with a selection of strange implements scattered around it. He had crammed his shelves with clay pots and curios, desiccated and stuffed creatures, cured pieces of body and trinkets from far lands.

The nobleman was little more than a boy. He had a slight, delicate frame and fine features. Black hair, close-cropped to the length of a monk's tonsure as was the fashion, revealed an elfin face but he moved and spoke with the confidence of someone accustomed to being treated as an equal and to having his orders obeyed.

"A glass jar, silvered within and without?" queried Thery, checking he had the details correct.

"That's right. With an iron bar extending from the inside above the rim and a top that can close off the lot." This Sir Lawrence leaned on one hand on the counter, his fingers tapping the diagram he had placed on the wooden surface. "I hear you're skilled at such things so I came here rather than attempting it myself over a forge."

"Of course, Sir! May I ask what it's for?"

"I need a Leyden jar to contain an electric field, if you must know."

"Really sir? I.. err.." The young man frowned impatiently at him and Thery decided not to push the point any further and risk losing the business. The man was right; anyone could probably do the same with a blacksmith's forge though it was an unusual skill for a nobleman to practice. "It'll take a few hours," said Thery.

"I'll wait," said Sir Lawrence.

There were five of them in all when they reached the place picked for the ambush. It was well chosen. The road took a sudden dip into a shallow valley and for five hundred yards or so it was completely concealed from anyone who might be ahead or behind the traveller. Lytton was there alongside Jack Miller, John, Nym and the blonde man who was called Matthew.

Lytton had waited this long before acting for precisely the same reasons the men had chosen the spot. He took out Jack Miller first. That was easy; a simple

chop was enough to break his neck. The others were still too shocked to move when he grabbed Matthew and snapped his neck as well. But they didn't pause beyond that. Nym attacked him with the blunt slab of metal that served him as a sword. Lytton twisted as he come in so the point hit one of the heavily armoured sections. He then grabbed the blade in his hands and snapped it, feeling the servos grind in his arm. Nym's mouth dropped open. Lytton rammed the broken point of the sword through into his brain.

John had done nothing. He was holding his sword, but staring at Lytton dumbfounded.

"Why are you protecting Sir Lawrence?" he asked finally as Lytton held his head ready to snap the spine.

Lytton's memories were hazy from the time after the TARDIS left. He remembered the sound of its return, staggering towards its solidifying form and tumbling in before the final explosions tore apart the base. He remembered someone gasping and hands dragging him into the interior, the sensations that come from heavy doses of pain-killers and then the final struggle into consciousness. There was a brisk form examining the monitors by his bed.

"Who are you?" he asked, staring at the strange sight of tail coat and skin-tight leggings in knee length boots.

"I'm the Doctor. I've regenerated a couple of times since you last met me."

"But..."

"Just don't say it! OK!"

"Because I owe her a favour."

Lytton was waiting in the road when the Doctor came past.

"Lytton! What on Earth are you doing here?"

The day was drawing into dusk and it cast long shadows across the way. It made her indistinct as she approached. In silhouette as she came over the ridge she was much like any other knight. Lytton could only be sure it was her as she approached, thought the slightness of her body made him suspect her identity. She'd made a convincing squire but a less convincing knight. She'd cropped her

normal pageboy cut even shorter and her movements, unsurprisingly, had the brisk ease and certainty of someone who'd never been constrained by skirts or trains. But her features were pretty and her skin smooth so that try as she might she couldn't manage to appear more than adolescent.

"Gloucester is moving against you."

"Well it's to be expected. The man cares more for glory than the lives of his men. He gets in the way."

"You are getting too close to the King," said Lytton. His face was carefully expressionless.

"I'm over 900 years old, Lytton. If you think I'm going to do something stupid you can think again."

"Nevertheless..."

"Nevertheless nothing. I have to be close to the King. You know that as well as I do," she frowned. "You didn't come out here just to berate me about the King though. What's going on?"

"Gloucester has been plotting in your absence. There may be trouble once you reach camp."

"Really?" she said suspiciously. "You've not been trying to 'protect' me again, have you?"

"You take risks too easily."

"And you take lives too easily," she snapped. "When I said no more deaths I meant it."

"You should trust me, you know."

"And you should trust me." Without another word she spurred her horse and galloped towards the camp.

Lytton was left to bury the dead. He did not much care whether she had approved of his actions. He had always regarded the Doctor as an improviser. A man, and now woman, who succeeded more by luck than judgment. He had studied the Doctor when he first took employment with the Daleks in the sure knowledge that their paths would cross. He had never predicted the manner in which their meeting would end but though he owed the Doctor his life he had no intention of falling in with the Doctor's slap-dash methods.

The army marched north to Calais through the driving autumn rains. It was a grim autumn. Already the cold was sharp in the air between the storms. The paths were

knee deep in mud. Wet and cold combined to ensure that, once wet, cloth never dried. The soldiers shivered and cursed, caught the ague and died.

The King rode in the column with the Doctor beside him while Gloucester lurked sulkily in their wake. He was aware of the condition of the army, as was she. As, they both knew, were the French. In the King's mind it was a matter of reaching Calais in time or else finding the right patch of ground on which to meet the French.

"Will Exeter hold the bridge?" asked the King.

"You shouldn't ask me things like that, you know."

"Men may die, Doctor."

"Men are going to die whatever," said the Doctor grimly.

A faint crackle of electricity flickered around the King, interpretable only by the Doctor.

"Yes, Holmes, you will have your chance against the French," she said wearily.

"I wish he wouldn't do that," complained the King. "I look forward to being rid of my unwanted companion."

"You're lucky he hasn't sought to control you," said the Doctor. "He's more than capable of it by now. He'll be strong enough to jump bodies before long."

"While it please me to know that my war is for the benefit of the world and not just my rightful claims, I still find this presence within me irksome."

The Doctor made no comment just stared ahead into the rain. It dripped down into her eyes so she had to blink to clear them. The King observed her minutely. He knew by now that what she did not say was often more important than what she did.

"You know Doctor, I have discussed literature and theology and finance with you for hours. But whenever I bring up the war or the planned crusade you fall silent. I take it you do not approve. This is a just war. You know that."

"No war is just. Least of all one for territorial and dynastic ambition," said the Doctor bitterly. "If I had my way I wold not be a part of this, but I can not leave a Morasian loose upon your world and so perforce I must be involved in this grubby little war of ours."

"Have a care, Doctor," growled the King dangerously. "Regaining my French inheritance is my foremost project."

"I know," said the Doctor softly.

The King watched her through the rain, her hair plastered flat and her face set in an expression that was old for her years. He reached out and took her hand bringing it to his lips.

"Well, for all your disapproval, I have been glad of your companionship these past months."

"I do confess my fault, and do submit me to your Highness' mercy."

And in the sudden violence that had followed he had seen the kick from Scroop that should have felled the squire, Lawrence Skrimshaw, but didn't. As the squire punched the man away, the King's eyes had met hers. His face must have betrayed his astonishment and sudden realisation for she smiled cheekily and winked.

Afterwards he summoned her to his presence in the throne room. He had contrived to be alone in the echoing chamber. It had daunted ambassadors and courtiers but Lawrence Skrimshaw could have been standing in a crowded tavern for all the effect it had on her. She'd stood formally with the appropriate respect but she'd had an easy smile on her face.

"You did good service today, whoever you may be. But I am not taking a lady to France."

"What makes you think I'm a lady?" She was still smiling though he had thought there was a flicker behind her eyes which suggested she was thinking fast.

"You are no common whore and that is enough for me. You remain behind. Who are your family?"

She paused. "You're a Morasian aren't you? An energy creature, which normally lives in symbiosis with the Darons."

He was startled by her strange words but before he could respond the blue fire, which he had half seen a hundred times that Spring, suddenly crackled around him. She looked him in the eye.

"That is why I must come to France with you. That thin should not be here and it should be watched."

He did not, for a moment, doubt the truth of her words. In a minute she had transformed from a cheeky squire to a commander of men. "This is magic," he said as the blue fire crackled again.

"Don't be silly," she said and the squire was back.

He looked down at the hand he was still holding and then up to her. She reacted as she always did to familiarities, which was to say not at all. He could never make up his mind whether she was simply unaware of his attentions or studiously ignoring them. When he touched her, took her hand or touched her face there was no yielding as with most women nor any sign of drawing back as there was with a few. Once or twice she had caught his eye and smiled but she had always then dropped the hand or removed the touch. He believed in her companionship but her reactions at a deeper level than than both mystified and fascinated him. Once more the air around him sparked in the rain.

"What's he saying now?" asked the King irritably.

"He says he can manage the apprehension of his Moriarty just fine without my help," the Doctor smiled slightly.

"Is he right?"

The Doctor squeezed his hand. "Maybe, but I'm not prepared to take the chance."

Behind them Gloucester coughed. The King dropped her hand with a smile. Gloucester's jealously and his dread suspicion amused him. One day he would tell Gloucester the secret but for now he preferred to have him in the dark.

Mountjoy the herald came to the King just before the bridge and stood beneath the hanged man. The herald was older than the King. He looked like he had an expressive face though he kept it well under control as he delivered his message. It was difficult to read his expressionless features, but Lytton suspected that he respected the King and sympathised with the plight of his soldiers. Lytton worked his way through the press until he stood just behind the Doctor. Mountjoy delivered his ransom demand and Lytton observed the faint crackle of electricity around him and the answering spark from the King.

"My ransom is this frail and worthless trunk," the King was saying. He ignored the faint fizzle in the damp air. Lytton marvelled anew at his youth. The man was not yet 30 and yet he led his army with extreme confidence. He had classically handsome features; his hair brown and cut in the seemingly ubiquitous monk-like style. He was softly spoken but he had an unmistakable strength and regality in both tone and bearing. In a crowd the eye would be drawn to him.

The King and Mountjoy were a score of yards from each other. Either could cross the distance in moments. Lytton reached for eh sword at his belt but he felt the Doctor's restraining hand on his arm.

"He will make no move in this company. There are too many of us."

"Don't count on it," murmured Lytton.

The Doctor's grip on his arm tightened, "Killing the host serves no purpose and you can not damage the creature with a sword."

Lytton carefully relaxed and felt the Doctor's grip relax at the same time but she didn't let go.

"Violence will solve nothing in this situation," she said in a low voice.

"Massive and sudden trauma to the body will dissipate it. You said so yourself," he said.

"The rules of war forbid you from attacking a Herald. You'd be dead before you could administer your massive and sudden trauma. Only if the Herald attacks first could you hope to succeed. Besides I want to apprehend this criminal of Holmes' without the killing of any hosts."

"Very well," he said. She knew more of the period than did he. He took his hand off the pommel of his sword. Only then did the light touch lift from his arm.

"They outnumber us five to one you now," the King watched the Doctor carefully in the firelight. She was gazing into the flames which sent an orange glow across her face. In the half light he couldn't see her eyes properly which gave her a strange distant look, even more so than usual. In his fancies he half thought she was one of the fey for she was in so many ways so very strange. He was feeling his way through this conversation for he did not wish to arouse her ire.

"I know," she said.

He took a deep breath and then risked his wish, "Doctor, I would that you were not on the battlefield tomorrow." She looked up then but said nothing. He pushed on, "I will be the happier for knowing you are safe and you have a revulsion for fighting. Don't deny it Doctor. I have seen you use both sword and shield as competently as any Knight in the training yard but I have never seen you use them in anger. You even managed to 'forget' them when you entered the breach at Harfleur."

"I find I survive better without weaponry."

"What you did at Harfleur was remarkable but the fact remains; the battlefield is not your place."

She sighed in the darkness, "You are right. I do not belong there not even remotely. I can spend my time more usefully hunting Moriarty. I suspect it will try something during the battle."

"There is no shame, Doctor, in sitting out the fight. You are a woman. No man will think the worse of you if you are not there."

"Do not worry about my pride, my liege. I do what must be done not what makes me look good."

"Hunting for Moriarty will bring you dangerously close to the field I should think and you will forget your sword again I warrant."

She smiled ruefully at him across the firelight.

"I begin to think you know me too well."

"Stay among the baggage train with the boys, Doctor. You will be safe there."

To his surprise she laughed. A hard and bitter laugh it was. Then she sighed again. "No sire. I think I will hunt Moriarty but I will promise you that I will do nothing of exceptional danger."

The careful way she had chosen the words told him that her idea of exceptional danger did not match with his.

"I forbid you to make this attempt, Doctor. No," he said as she opened her mouth, "do not argue with me. You want to negotiate with the creature."

"I will make it an offer, yes," she interrupted, "but I'm not relying on it accepting."

"E'en so. You are going to take a risk. It would be simpler to kill the thing than to set elaborate traps."

She looked angrier than he'd ever seen her then, "Oh!" she said, "and this battle you will fight tomorrow is not an elaborate trap."

"I would not fight this battle tomorrow had I a choice."

"I believe you, but you would not give up France to obtain a peace. Your choices are limited by your ambition."

"Right now I would be pleased to reach Calais unmolested, Doctor. It is not easily I risk the lives of these men."

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. "Let's not argue. Do not prevent my quest tomorrow, lord. I will not stop your fighting your battle, do not you stop me seeking this creature."

The King watching her suddenly had not doubt that, should she choose, there would be no battle tomorrow and he feared that would be the worse for the English. He did not know ho but there was a hidden force behind the Doctor's actions

as if the human form concealed something far more powerful. He suddenly found he was afraid to oppose that force in its full fury.

"Come!" he stood up and offered her his hand. "We should hear mass and last rites. There will be no time tomorrow."

She took it and hauled herself upright. Her head reached no higher than his shoulder. She glanced across at the French camp with a strange look on her face almost as though she could not decide upon something.

"Few of them are hearing the mass," she said at last and then, faintly, under her breath he heard her say, "the poor fools."

Later, alone, the King sat beside a deserted campfire. Most of his men had finally gone to what rest they could manage though sentries still patrolled the boundaries. Over the other side of the field he could still hear the noise and shouting from the French camp. He drew his borrowed cloak about him and shivered. He hoped that he had not led his army to disaster as the French seemed to believe and as many of his followers also believed but that his planning for this eventuality would pay off. He had had no success in extracting a promise from the Doctor to stay in the safety of the baggage train and had had to content himself with her promise to steer clear of the battle if at all possible. Gradually he realised his right hand was tapping in the dirt. He looked down and it jerked into life of its own accord and began to scratch in the dirt. Three words.

HUNT ALONE MORNING

He spoke quietly, "you think we should seek Moriarty before the battle, without the Doctor."

The hand scrawled again.

NO TALK KILL

Holmes' thought was clear enough. The Doctor wished to negotiate in some way with the creature. She talked of capturing it but the King could not see how you could capture and hold the blue fire of these things. Holmes disagreed and it would be easiest to do this alone without the Doctor to get in the way and attempt to save Moriarty. If the Doctor were bypassed tomorrow morning and the thing bought to its end there would be nothing left to do. She could remain safe among the luggage.

Early in the morning, only a short while after dawn, the King went to survey the enemy battle lines. They stood far enough from the French for the King himself to be unrecognisable. He didn't want to draw any attention except that of the Herald. Holmes sparked in the morning air. The King presumed he was signalling in some way to gain Mountjoy's attention.

But, "My Lord!" the Doctor was marching towards them, her man Lytton only a few steps behind. They both had looks of grim purpose. The Kind n oted that while she was armoured she had once more neglected to bring a weapon.

Her man was unarmed too. Lytton, as always, wore only a studded leather jerkin over his clothes.

"What are you doing?" she asked, as if she did not know.

"We know which body Moriarty inhabits," replied the King. "Now is the time to strike before he changes. Before he moves on to someone more powerful and begins his reign of terror."

"Those are Holmes' words," she said.

"I agree with his assessment," said Lytton suddenly. "It would be better to have this thing over and done with quickly and cleanly. The creature is too much of threat to this world. Incarceration is too risky."

The King agreed, "As a woman I can that you might not have the stomach for this."

"Poppycock!" said the Doctor. "Any attempt to kill the host will be as messy and uncertain as other means. You are jut too much the soldier to realise it."

"I'm so glad someone feels that way," said a voice suddenly. A form emerged from a pile of leaves by the Doctor's feet. A scruffy, wiry man with a grubby face and the air of a footpad grabbed her neck and held a dagger to her throat. The air crackled. "Now let's everyone be calm, or the pretty lady gets it."

The Doctor rolled her eyes with impatience, "Now I know how my companions feel," she grumbled.

"Let her go," said the King.

"I don't think so. Not until I can get a good shot at you. So if the soldier here will just move away slowly. That's good," he said as Lytton backed off like a cat. "And if you, my Lord, could just step closer."

"I think not," said the Doctor. She reached up and grabbed her assailant's arm and then bent forward throwing him easily over her shoulder. She held onto the arm and twisted the dagger out of his grip. The man cried out. The King judged that his arm had probably been broken by the manoeuvre.

"I'm not saying," she said as she stepped back, "that violence should never be used. Just that it should be a last recourse. Lytton! No!"

But Lytton was already thundering past her towards the prone man. He leapt upon the body and began throttling it. The man reached up and grabbed Lytton's head. Suddenly blue sparks started to flame and crackle round Lytton's body and to the ground. The Doctor had explained that these sparks could be deadly. Almost without thought the King leapt in, trying to drag Lytton clear. He felt a sudden jolt through his body as his hands closed on Lytton's shoulders. Then everything went black.

Lytton felt the hands on his shoulders and cursed. There was little he could do. Some of the insulation in his arms had burnt through and his muscles had spasmed making it impossible to release his grip on the man's neck. Most of his internals were still adequately protected but the insulation could not last forever. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Doctor taking a run up and then she jumped at the King, feet first. Her momentum knocked the King aside out of the flow of the current. Lytton hoped she'd have the sense not to try the same with him. With his arms locked solid there was no hope of her body weight dislodging him.

"...not concern," he heard the King's voice say in a stilted tone behind him, "Have heart, lungs work. Will survive."

He felt something inside him fizzle. The insulation was giving way. A sword suddenly appeared; the King's. The Doctor must have thrown it so it landed with its tip embedded in the ground. Its pommel wavered close to his head and the electricity from the man's hands arced to the sword and into the Earth. Free of the current, Lytton managed to force his hands open and staggered off the body. He lay on the ground a moment while the Cybermen's system pumped drugs around his body and healed the burns. He looked back and saw a streak of electricity run from the tip of the sword along the ground and away.

When he sat up the Doctor was kneeling over the cutthroat's body pumping his chest, trying to start his heart after the shock. "Lytton! See to the King," she said.

He walked over to the King's body. His eyes flickered open. "I can keep body alive," he rasped slowly, "but will die if leave it. I think is unconscious perhaps."

He helped the man up. The Doctor remained over the other body. Lytton helped the King sit and they watched sceptically while the Doctor worked.

"He'd already jumped," said Lytton.

"Yes," agreed the creature in the King, "and escaped again. Left before the body died. In woods somewhere."

It was fifteen minutes before the Doctor gave up.

The creature in the King's body fretted as they returned to camp.

"Doctor, no time for this. Should be hunting."

"If you leave this body it will die. It suffered too much trauma in the blast."

"What is King to me?"

"The battle begins soon and without him it is already lost. You only have to remain until his natural healing ability takes over. You have the muscles spasming and the nervous system under control. Once he wakes up he'll be right as rain... probably."

"Moriarty. Getting away."

"I don't think so. Expending so much energy trying to kill Lytton will have weakened him. He be looked for another body. You may be able to survive long periods outside of them, but you are naturally symbiots. He'll be looking for a partner."

"More reason why should be looking. Able to siphon off enough current when King attempted to aid companion. Healed fully. Best him now."

"No. He may die if you leave the body now, as will his men. If you do this you are no better than Moriarty. You will effectively have killed him because he was in the way. You say that there is a difference between the two of you. Prove it to me! There will be time to hunt your criminal after the battle."

"Very well Doctor, trust you. But can not speak. What say to troops?" This was true, Holmes had rapidly lost the rasping tone and his words had started to come faster. But he was clearly struggling with the language.

"I have thought of that," said the Doctor. "You are going to have to give a speech," she thrust a paper of hurriedly scrawled notes into his hands. "You start her 'If we are mark'd to die, we are enow to do our country loss; and if to live, the fewer men, the greater share of honour...'. You had better practice it."

Lytton caught up with the Doctor as she was struggling into a suit of chainmail. He was surprised; she had worn nothing tougher than leather all campaign. She complained she couldn't move fast enough in chain or plate.

"You are going to fight in the battle?" he asked in surprise.

She gave him a sour look, "I'm going to have to hold Holmes' hand until the King awakes. I can't risk him being found out."

"I'll come with you."

"No, I need you to do something else. The history books can occasionally be wrong. I want you to be with the baggage train. Get the boys into the woods and get them hidden."

Lytton nodded carefully. He had no intention of staying to help the boys. The Doctor was a consummate liar but Lytton had studied the Doctor with interest in the past. She was going to seize the opportunity presented by the battle to hunt the fugitive on her own terms. Like Holmes he was deeply sceptical of the Doctor's plans to negotiate with Moriarty. But he knew there was no persuading her that the soldier's way was best. He resolved to follow.

The sounds of the battle drifted up from the field below. The Doctor winced in distaste; glad not to be a party to the slaughter history told her was happening on the field of Agincourt. She walked through one of the woods that flanked the English position. The woods that protected the archers from flanking by the French cavalry. Somewhere in here was the creature, Moriarty. Behind her, silent, crept Lytton. As always, he was watching her back.

"Come on Moriarty!" shouted the Doctor, "I know you're here somewhere!"

There can a crackling in the undergrowth. Very few people could have picked out the language and form within that noise.

"I'm not built to communicate in your fashion though I understand your speech. Moriarty seemed as good a name as any, given you plans."

Once again there was a crackling sound. Blue fire appeared round the edge of a tree, sparking up into the branches and around the roots.

"I can make a good guess. I imagine petty warlord would suite you. You can keep a human body alive much longer than its natural span. You can help

it survive disease and violence. You could become very powerful with the right host."

Once more blue lightening writhed and crackled. Lytton, observing from the bushes, marvelled a the Doctor's ability to get even a spark of electricity to gloat.

"Well they haven't evolved in symbiosis with you so its hardly surprising that they have no defences against your total control is it?"

The creature moved from the tree and began to circle round the Doctor. It spread itself thin but the Doctor was ringed with pale fire.

"I propose a trade. This world is too young to cope with you but also too primitive to satisfy you. I'm offering you a lift out."

It flared a challenge at her.

"A King of backward planet in a galatic backwater? Hardly making an impact I should say. I'm a Time Lord. Think on that Moriarty. I can take you to any time and place you choose. Somewhere in the future if you dislike the present."

The creature pulled itself back into itself. It became a towering flame of charge. The menace was palpable. To Lytton it was clear she had misjudged the situation. It was not going to accept her offer.

A look of concern crossed the Doctor's face, "Do not try to take me over. I am not so easily controlled as humans." She began to back away from the haze of electrical energy.

The blue fire surged forward towards the Doctor. Lytton charged from the undergrowth.

"Lytton! get back!" she shouted but he had already interposed himself between her and the electrical being. His body convulsed as he fought the control. Sparks began to coruscate over his surface as muscle and servo fought to resist the currents Moriarty sparked through them. He could almost feel the creature exploring the new body, experimenting with the systems, firing the muscles to see what they did. He started locking down what he could. He was determined not to become the Doctor's executioner but even as he did so he realised this was only a temporary measure. He was using electrical signals to set the locks. Sooner or later Moriarty would work out the signal to unlock them again. As he stood with his muscles twitching he saw the Doctor hauling the Leyden jar towards him. She grabbed a hold of the front of his tunic, holding the jar in her other hand. He saw the muscles contract so the fist closed tight, holding the front of his jerkin. But the charge did not earth itself or transfer to a new host. Moriarty had doubtless realised the advantages of this augmented body the Cybermen had cursed him with.

"The chainmail will act as a conductor," the Doctor shouted. "Lytton shut

down as much as you can, force it to me."

Lytton began the internal hibernation process. He shut down circuits and controls, the mechanics that ran his heart and lungs. The world began to fade as the lack of oxygen affected his brain. Before it all went black he saw a sudden spark and heard the Doctor cry out as if from far away. Then he passed out.

When he came to she was knelt across his chest. His front panel was open and she was twisting wires together.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I jump started you," she said, "I'm not sure you're going to be able to switch yourself off again. Just as well probably. Since all the mechanics in your brain have been disconnected, there was no way your body could keep it alive once the heart and lungs were shut down."

"I owe you my life again."

"I know," she said dryly. "It's a burden for both of us."

When they returned to camp a sight of carnage met their eyes. The boys in the baggage train had all been slaughtered. One last, desperate, act of revenge by the French had seen a small cavalry unit enter the undefended camp. The bodies of the young men lay scattered through the camp amid the burning remains of tents and broken carts. There was a suppressed air of anger among the muddy soldiery. Life went on though. Already the first numbness of the shock had worn off and men were starting to gather together the dead and lay them out.

"History said this would happen," said Lytton.

"History can be wrong," she said. "I've seen it often enough. I would have saved these children." There was anger in her voice, "I told you to save them."

"You lied to me about your intentions."

"Not well enough clearly. I knew you did not trust me with Moriarty and would not let me go alone. I was right."

Ahead of them they saw the King. He was covered in the mud and blood of the battlefield and he looked both full of rage and full of weariness. When he saw them approach he stopped frighteningly still as if he was storing up energy against

their meeting. “I was not angry,” he said once they stood before him, “since I came to France until this instant.”

The Doctor bit her lip, “You’re back to yourself again then.”

“I regained my senses on the battlefield. ’Twas as well though this creature fared none too badly as a general,” he brushed this aside. “Doctor, did you know this would happen?”

“I would have prevented it if I could.”

“But you were bound by history,” his voice was bitter.

The Doctor looked away and would not meet his eye.

“I thought you were soft and gentle, Doctor, but now I see that you are ruthless. You condemn me for waging a war against grown men and yet you let these innocents die.”

The Doctor placed the Leyden jar she was carrying on the ground. “I have Moriarty,” she said. She stood up and then held out a hand. “Goodbye my liege, I shall be on my way now.”

His mouth set into a hard line, but he took her hand. There was a crackle and blue fire sparked between them.

“Goodbye Doctor,” he said. Their hands parted. She picked up the bottle and walked away, Lytton at her side.

Behind them the King’s voice suddenly carried on the air, “God guide you and keep you Doctor.” Her lips twitched into a smile as they carried on.

“You could have told him it was my fault,” said Lytton.

She shook her head, “What would have been the point? He is a man of war Lytton. We got on well enough while we avoided that point but it is fundamental to his nature and, that being the case, we could never have been more than fleeting friends. It is better this way.”

“But I thought...”

“I never thought I would have a companion who thought too much. But it seems I should have been more careful what I wished for.”

“I am also a man of war,” said Lytton.

She nodded, not meeting his eye, “I realise that,” she said carefully.

“Any yet, you let me stay with you.”

“Did I have a choice?”

Lytton smiled, “Not much.”

“Besides you are a soldier not a man of war. It is an important distinction.”

Lytton surveyed the death around him and beyond in the mud-clogged battlefield. “This killing of the boys was not well done,” he conceded finally. “I should have been here.”

She looked up at him and smiled slightly, “You have to learn to trust me if you wish to be my companion.”

“I know,” he said. “I apologise.”

“Apology accepted,” she said.

Together they left the battlefield.

Chapter 51

A Wander in Winterland

A Primeval Short Story

51.1 Primeval 100 Challenge 83 (Winter Wonderland): One of our Santas is Missing

"There he is," shouted Ryan.

The missing Santa was sat in a snow drift opposite some sort of caveman.

They pelted towards him, the soldiers' guns at the ready. The caveman eyed them warily and then backed off, stuffing bits of fur and stone into a leather bag.

"Come on, mate," said Ryan. "Time to get you home."

Dumbly, the Santa allowed them to drag him towards the anomaly.

"Where's his hat?" asked Connor when they got there.

Ryan looked back over the ice field. The caveman was disappearing into the distance, a splash of red perched jauntily on head.

51.2 A Wander in Winterland

The trader paused at the top of the ridge. It was nearing sunset and there was a cold wind but he wanted to consider the lie of the land while he had a good view. As a young man he'd never really appreciated how old age would slow him down, how his hefty spear would seem less and less reassuring as protection but would, nevertheless, serve well as a walking stick. In his youth he would have reached this valley long before dark, with time to spare if the settlement were no longer

there. He could see a curl of smoke from the trees that lined the valley floor, so today he was in luck; he would not be camping out alone. He started down the rough mountain side, quickly coming across a hunting trail that he followed with relief. Sooner or later it would take him to shelter and warmth.

In the fold of bear skin he had slung over his shoulder, he had a mixture of oddments. Decorative shells from the shore-side settlements, some coal, a couple of well made blades from a flint-knapper who was particularly skilled in his craft. In his youth he would have carried more, but back then, he had been stronger. These days he earned his food with stories and tales more often than he did by barter and exchange.

He was lucky, one of the older men remembered him from the last time he had passed this way. That meant he got food before a story was demanded, which always made the telling easier. He leaned back against a rock in the light of the cooking fire and gazed at the expectant faces around him.

"I shall tell you the story of the strange tribe I met in the cold lands. Now many won't believe me, which hurts my pride because a trader lives by his reputation for honesty, but this story is as true as the day is long. It takes place many years ago when I was young, or at least younger than I am now. In those days I traded in furs, and there were settlements of people, out on the ice sheets, who caught the great bears and had remarkable skills in working their skins. This skin, right here, that I use to carry my wares was made by them. It is getting old now but you can see how supple it is and it has lasted a long time. In those days, I walked out into the cold lands in the winter months. It was hard and dangerous, but the smooth surface of the snow made it possible to drag a heavy weight behind you, so I could collect many skins on my trip and then drag them back. There was a small settlement by the great river and I brought my furs to it in the spring. Then I loaded them into hollowed out logs, which I got from the river folk, and traded them up and down the river. You could drag the logs along, you see, by floating them on the water and then walking along the bank. Again, it meant you could move more goods than you could transport on your own. There, I just gave away a trader's trick, that's how honest I am.

I generally exchanged furs for coal which some of the tribes along the river could collect from the ground and which was highly valued by the ice dwellers. But I also picked up well-knapped flint and other things where I could. Anything that would be of value to the ice-dwellers really. That's the real skill of being a trader, spotting that something which is common place in one valley, will be sought after in another, be that the work of a skilled craftsman or some rock, like coal, that only appears in a few places. It may sound like a bit of a mug's game,

all that heavy dragging and then the dangers of the ice and the river, but let me tell you, by the end of spring, I would have so much coal and flint and goodness knows what stashed away that I could sit around all summer eating honey-cakes on the proceeds, as we trader's say. I'd help out a bit harvesting fruit in the autumn, I didn't need to, but I like to be neighbourly, and then set out again when the first snows fell. That was the life, let me tell you, I made what's known as a tidy profit in the furs and coal trade.

"It was on just such a trip that I met a man from a new tribe. You can usually make a guess at a man's tribe from the way he dresses. You, for instance, keep your hair short, while the river folk wear it long and tied back with sinew. A bit fancy, the river-folk are, and I don't mind saying so, a little hoity-toity and precious. Yes, I thought that would make you laugh, but it's true. As I've said, I'm an honest man. Anyway, this man I met wore furs the like of which I had never seen. At first, I thought he must have trapped a beast with white fur and red skin, but skin that was incredibly thin. It had been shaped to his body with great skill, by means I could not detect. I have recently heard tell of a tribe who mix rabbit hair with water and make a new sort of fur by that means, which is softer and more flexible than animal skins. Maybe he did something similar.

"No matter, he was alone on the ice and had the bearing of a man who has lost his way. Now I could see what traders, like myself, refer to as a "business opportunity". However, these sorts of "first contact" situations are always a bit tricky. They don't know who you are. You don't know who they are. You're probably not going to speak the same language. Tricky! like I said. On the plus side, he didn't carry a spear and he didn't look aggressive. Some tribes will assume, automatically, that you are a threat which is always tiresome, not to mention dangerous. Anyway, I held out my hands, like this, and I sat down real slow. It's always a good thing to do, first time you meet someone new. It makes it clear you're harmless. If you sit down, they know you can't do anything sudden like, which reassures them and you're smaller than them, like a child, which makes you less threatening. I learned all this from my father. It's traders' lore.

"I tried talking to him, of course. I knew the tongues of most of the tribes in those parts, but without success. I hadn't really hoped for much, his style of dress was so different, I was sure he had come a long way and had not met any of the tribes I had.

"However, this was not the first time nor, let me tell you, was it the last, that I had to conduct a trade without words. So, putting my best foot forward and all that, I opened out my pack. That day, I carried flint knives and a few other trinkets. There was a young lass, not far from here, used to make beads you could string

on a bit of sinew and tie round your neck, or in your hair. They were very pretty and you could carry a vast number. I had left behind the big pack that I usually dragged behind me on the snow, because I was scouting out a new area and didn't want to be slowed down. So, I showed the man my wares and I pointed to his hat. I'd have taken every fur on him, if he'd have parted with them, but I've noticed people get a bit funny about trading away everything they're wearing, so I didn't push it.

"Anyway he seemed a bit slow to understand and even more nervous than people normally are, but he worked it out eventually and we traded the hat for a knife - though I had to show him what it was for and how to use it. I can't believe he'd never seen a knife though, unheard of that would be, so I sometimes wonder if he were a bit simple. He was quite elderly and sometimes the elderly aren't as razor sharp as they were in their youth.

"It was about this point that a whole load more of them showed up and these men were a different proposition altogether. Now, you know how someone looks when they're hunting something? They have a look of concentration in their eyes. You get good at recognising that look. Well, these men looked like that. There were four of them and three were obviously hunters. The fourth was a young lad, looked a bit inexperienced and excitable to me, he kept gabbling on and the others would roll their eyes. They all wore the same strange type of skins as the old man, though their skins were black not red. They weren't carrying spears, which was a relief, but they were carrying something else, short black sticks, and I didn't need to be a wise man to tell that they thought that the sticks were weapons.

"I was a bit nervous at this point. They had all the marks of a tribe that had been completely isolated somewhere; no language in common; little understanding of trade; ignorant and primitive basically. They also seemed to think I might be something of a threat from the way they brandished these sticks of theirs. It's not often you meet tribes like that. This was the only time, in fact, I've met a tribe that have never encountered a trader, but you hear the stories. The important thing is not to frighten them too much. Learning there are other humans in the world comes as a bit of a shock. They don't quite know how to react. You have to take things slowly and let them get accustomed to the idea. So I sat there quietly and didn't make any sudden moves nor do anything to alarm them.

"They grabbed the old man and there was a lot of shouting and then they set off back the way they came, watching me all the time. Once they were a safe distance away I got up, nice and slow, and then turned to go the other way. It's always a good idea not to be too pushy in these situations. I planned to go back the next day to see if I could find them, maybe show myself from a distance, let

them get used to the idea of me being around.

"But I never saw any member of that tribe again, and I looked many times. I wonder sometimes if they had travelled far out of their normal hunting grounds, for some reason, and were just passing through.

"Anyway, here is the hat. I've kept it with me ever since. It wasn't very hard wearing, as you can see, so I've not worn it for several years now. It is beautiful though, and you can feel the softness of the hide that it's made from and it makes a good tale in return for a place by the fire and a warm meal in my belly."

The old trader sighed and closed his eyes, thinking for a moment of the vast snow fields. He'd moved away from the snow and the ice as his bones had got older and the wind had seemed more biting. In his memory, it was as beautiful and uncompromising and full of the strange and the unexpected like the undiscovered tribe with their fancy clothes and their ignorant ways.

Chapter 52

The Saracen's Daughter

Robin of Sherwood short story

Part 1

"Go back!"

"I'm on an errand for your father."

"I know what your errand is and I'm telling you to go back!"

"I obey only your father."

"Very well, but I will not let you pass."

The boy looked down at the cloaked figure standing on the road before him. He had a determined expression on his face, as you would expect from a young man, eager to do right but untried and untested by peril. He did not know what the cloak concealed. The creature took care never to show itself. It moved swiftly and silently about his father's castle, shrouded in shadow. It hid in corners and would appear out of dark alcoves when people least expected it. It was his father's creature and all, save his father, feared it.

"I must go this way. I have not the time to go round. Get out of my way, boy!" it said. Its voice was low and quiet but the anger in it was clear, nonetheless.

The boy remained where he was. "If you harm me, my father will be angry."

"Your father? What is he to me? He lost control of me and has now paid. You think I liked being his spy and servant?"

The boy turned white. "You've killed him!"

"Froze him where he sat and now I must get your girl and *you* are blocking my way."

The boy hesitated while his mount fidgeted beneath him. "I don't believe you."

The creature extended an arm and muttered a word. The boy dropped from the horse.

The creature bent over him and was satisfied. In its judgement the boy was still alive and might yet be useful. It heaved the body across the horse, although the animal shied from its touch. Then, catching the bridle, it led the unwilling beast along the path. The creature sensed its prey was well away by now. Never mind, it thought, it would have plenty of time to catch her.

In Sherwood it was a fine July. The sun had shone unabated for days and the outlaws lounged about and soaked it up. Nasir sat in the shade of a tall oak and watched Will and Much, who were half-heartedly arguing about something; Tuck lay fast asleep; and Marion was making herself a garland of wild flowers. The sunlight filtered through the forest, bathing her in cool green light, the odd ray slipping in between the leaves, making her red hair flame gold. She had been their queen of the May that year. She had been their queen of the May every year and had stood laughing gaily in the cool English sunlight. In Palestine, there had been no queens of the May. The sun had been too fiercely hot and uncompromising and the girls had been dark with deep brown eyes and long full raven hair. She had still laughed in the sunlight as she went about, sparks flashing from her dark eyes and darker hair. He shied away from the thought. He had chosen to belong in England with its dappled sunlight and its fair women, who had pale eyes and hair that was red in its depths but blonde where the sun had caught it. He could have gone back but he had stayed.

Marion caught Nasir watching her with his strange, intent gaze. A gaze that seemed to see right through things. She wondered if he was thinking of deep blue skies and warm dust-laden winds. Her father had described an alien landscape to her in that bleak, cold year they'd spent together after the death of the first Hooded Man. She smiled at Nasir across the glade because it was warm and the sun shone and she wished him to share her sense of happiness and well-being. He smiled briefly and bent his head once more over the sword he had been sharpening.

"Riders!" came the sound of John's voice. He and Robin had been watching the road.

Silently, the outlaws gathered up their weapons and slipped into position. It looked unpromising, however. There was nothing but a lone rider, albeit one

on a fine horse. A tall slender girl wearing a light cloak that hid her features. Nevertheless, it was a fine cloak. On Robin's signal, the outlaws broke cover to surround the horse. Tuck caught the bridle and held it still.

"Well, well, what have we here?" murmured Will quietly.

"Who are you?" asked the girl apprehensively, "What do you want?"

"I'm known as Robin Hood. We're outlaws. Who are you?"

"My name is Joanna. I am the ward of Sir Hugh Morely of Dalston. I carry nothing that can be of value to you. I know about you. You won't hinder me."

The name "Sir Hugh Morely" meant little to the outlaws, save Nasir, who watched the girl darkly, for Sir Hugh had never been to Nottingham. Little John frowned, however, at a dim memory.

"I've heard that name before, somewhere," said John, shaking his head as if to clear it of a fog.

"Sir Hugh Morely," said Nasir, not without venom, "was a close ally of the Baron de Belleme."

"Belleme lives near here?" said the girl, eagerness in her voice.

"What's it to you if he does?" said Scarlet angrily. "Friend of his too, are you?" he asked and he reached up and tugged viciously at the cloak. The clasp that held it was torn out and it fell away. The outlaws stared in astonishment at the girl revealed. Her skin was olive-coloured and she had the dark hair and eyes of Nasir's people. A broad pronounced forehead and a sharpish chin were framed by her hair which hung loose upon her shoulders.

"You're no Norman!" said Robin.

"No, I'm a Saracen," she said bitterly. "Go on. Say it. I'm an infidel and ought to be burned!"

"We've nothing against you because you're a Saracen," said Marion gently. "Nasir's a Saracen."

The girl appeared to notice Nasir for the first time and her eyes widened slightly in surprise at the stocky dark man standing by her ankle.

"What are you doing here?" asked Robin.

"Belleme gave Sir Hugh a magic creature to take care of his wants, but he *wants* to use it to stop Harry and me getting married. So I'm going to destroy it."

"How?"

"I don't know, but I will, somehow, with this." She hauled a heavy ornate gold cross out of a saddle-bag and handed it down to him. Scarlet whistled quietly through his teeth.

"This is very valuable," pointed out Robin.

"But you won't take it," she said confidently.

"No," he said, handing it back to her, "but you had better come with us. The Baron's not a good man to cross. You're going to need some help."

She regarded them thoughtfully for a moment and chewed at her bottom lip. Then she slipped gracefully off her horse and went with them into the forest.

From a short way off, the creature watched her go and pondered what to do. It did not know the outlaws but it did not like the feel of them. It would have to move carefully.

Robin examined the cross in the evening twilight. His brow furrowed in thought as he turned the heavy object over in his hands. "You've tried destroying it?"

Joanna sat opposite, leaning forward with interest. "Can't be done. So I came here to see if there was any clue to what it was or where it came from."

"We'll start looking tomorrow." He handed her back the cross.

Scarlet sniffed before speaking. "So how does a Saracen come to be the ward of a Norman knight?"

"Sir Hugh took me from my home when I was five years old. He and Belleme raided a farm and captured me. Sir Hugh would probably have killed me but Belleme said, "Leave her. She'll be the saviour of your family." And, of course, when the Baron says something like that, it's as well to take notice. So I was brought up with Sir Hugh's son, Harry."

Anyone watching closely at that point would have noticed the expression intensify in Nasir's thoughtful eyes. But no one was watching and the look went unobserved.

"And you fell in love?" asked Marion, smiling.

"Yes. Only Sir Hugh said it was one thing fostering a Saracen brat but quite another to have her as a daughter-in-law. Then Isabella, that's my nurse, overheard him give the creature orders to get rid of me, Baron or no Baron."

"So you took the cross and escaped."

"Yes."

Suddenly, Will got up swiftly, drawing his sword. The other outlaws followed his gaze to the tree line and a movement deep within it.

Out of the bushes stalked a skeleton carrying a long glowing sword. Little John, who was nearest, threw himself upon it, only to fly back across the glade and crash into a tree. Much grabbed a quarterstaff and swung it at the creature. The sword came down to block the blow. Much yelped with pain and the staff shattered into fragments. The skeleton stalked on determinedly towards Joanna, who clutched the cross and screamed, backing away. Will rushed at the creature, only to find his weapon disintegrating in his hands as the quarterstaff had done.

"Kill it, please!" gasped Joanna.

Nasir, standing beside her, said, "We can't."

Part Two

Nasir placed his hands firmly on Joanna's shoulders and pushed her behind him. The skeleton continued towards them.

Marion had picked up a sword and was advancing upon the skeleton, but Robin held up his hand. "Let's see what Albion can do," he said, and drew his own sword.

He stepped forward and swung it at the apparition, under its guard and straight through its body. The skeleton stopped, split in half and collapsed into a pile of bones, which, in turn, disintegrated into dust.

"Was that the creature?" asked Will, marching towards Joanna.

"No, I don't think it was," said Joanna. "The creature always wears a black cloak. Sir Hugh says it's made of smoke."

"Well, it certainly vanished into thin air," said Tuck.

Joanna shook her head doubtfully. "I'm fairly certain it wasn't the creature."

Night drew on and the forest lay shrouded in darkness. In the village of Baldon, the villagers hid in their huts and prayed for the demon to leave. In the central barn, watched darkly by Harry Morely, the creature was working up another illusion, aided by a lock of Harry's blonde hair. One of the barn stalls had been converted into a makeshift cage. It was only wood, but still strong enough to keep Harry in. He banged at the bars in frustration.

In the hollow where they'd made their camp, the outlaws slept. Much, on watch, sat before the fire, peering into the gloom, trying to make out if any of the shadows cast by the flames concealed a smoke creature wearing a dark cloak.

Nasir was also awake and gazing at the sky with unseeing eyes. In his mind, he heard the sounds of horses moving among the orange trees and he saw smoke rising up from the orchards. A dim memory came to him from the time when he had been the Baron de Belleme's slave. He got up and began to strap on his swords.

"What are you doing?" asked Much from where he sat.

"I'll be back."

"You oughtn't go out alone. Anything might happen!"

Nasir looked at the boy. "I go alone."

Apparently recognising the finality of that statement, Much gave up. "But I don't like it," Nasir heard him mutter under his breath.

Robin had a dream. He dreamed of a stone altar with the mark of a cross hewn into it, a wind that blew autumn leaves across the stone flags, and a voice, half-recognised, saying, "A double-edged weapon - I'll give it to Sir Hugh and he will destroy himself!" Then he saw a man of forty or so years sitting upright in an ornate wooden chair, staring with dead eyes, as if at some unimaginable horror.

Herne came to him and before Herne stood a young man in a scarlet cape with bright golden hair. The man's features swam and reformed into a skull. Robin knew it was a warning. Lastly, he saw a village: a few huts, a barn and a forge with a large broad-shouldered smith. The smith's hair was red and a scar ran down one cheek.

Towards dawn, Joanna awoke to see a movement and a flash of scarlet between the trees.

"Harry?" she called quietly.

He appeared then, some distance away, and beckoned her over. She began to pick her way towards him.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said a voice behind her. Looking back, she saw Will Scarlet leaning against a tree, watching her.

"Wouldn't what?"

Will nodded towards Harry. "I've been on watch the past couple of hours and he's been flitting around for some time. I reckon he's up to no good."

"That's Harry."

"So what if it is?"

Joanna pulled herself up to her full height and looked down upon the wolfshead. Then, turning, she headed on towards the figure in the scarlet cape. Suddenly Will was beside her, holding on to her arm. "I said don't."

"Get your hands off me!" she said imperiously.

He didn't move but turned his head and called, "Robin!"

She watched the Hooded Man start awake, shaking his head as if to clear the dreams. He got up and crossed over to them, blonde hair blowing in the wind.

"It's Harry," said Joanna. "He wants us to follow him." And indeed, the figure lifted its arm and seemed to beckon them urgently to come on.

"It's not Harry," Robin said bluntly. He picked up a bow and quiver.

"But..." began Joanna.

"Watch," he said and, fitting an arrow to the bow, he loosed it at the figure.

Joanna screamed and fought against Scarlet, who held her fast. The arrow sped towards Harry and then hit some invisible wall inches in front him. The arrow shattered into fragments, but the apparition remained where it was, beckoning them on.

"It's an illusion."

Joanna felt weak and leaned against Scarlet for support. "But what about Harry?"

"I don't know."

"How did you know that wasn't Harry?"

"I had a dream."

She stared at Robin, perplexed. "What else did you dream?"

"Of the church where the cross came from, a dead lord, and a village with a red-haired blacksmith."

She followed him across the glade as he walked back to the rest of the band. "The church must be near the village!"

"Possibly."

"There are lots of red-haired blacksmiths," said Little John suddenly, rising up on his elbows and blinking in the half-light.

"This one had a scar down one cheek."

"Alfred at Baldon has a scar," said Much.

"Then we must go to Baldon," said Joanna.

Robin worried that, in his mind, he hadn't connected the church and the village of his dream. To him, they still didn't seem to be related. He could tell that, in all likelihood, unless he came up with something different, Joanna would go to Baldon, alone if need be. But he had a vague foreboding about the scheme.

He was even more when he discovered that Nasir had disappeared.

"There wasn't anything I could do about it," said Much anxiously.

"No."

"Naz can look after himself," said Will reassuringly.

"One of us should stay to tell him where we've gone, though," said Marion.

Robin nodded. He moved to the edge of the trees, in the direction Nasir had departed. "He hasn't tried to cover his trail," he said. "Someone could follow him."

"I'll go!" volunteered Tuck.

"Very well. Take care of yourself."

Tuck nodded and slipped into the trees. The others picked up their gear and set off in the opposite direction, towards Baldon.

The village, when they reached it, was strangely quiet. No one came out to greet them.

They walked into the centre of a group of huts, where a stoney-faced wall of people, brandishing clubs and staves, rose up around them, cutting off their

escape.

"Giles?" questioned Robin, singling out the head man.

"I'm sorry, Robin, but we ain't got no choice."

"Well, we have," murmured Scarlet, drawing his sword.

Robin held out a hand. "No, Will, not the villagers!"

"We can't just let ourselves be taken!"

The villagers hung back, nervous, aware that the outlaws would be a match for them.

"No, Will, Robin's right," said John, resigned. He knocked aside Will's sword with his staff and then threw the thick piece of wood to the ground. One by one, the outlaws laid down their weapons. Last of all, Robin placed Albion on the top of the small pile. Then the creature appeared, the villagers parting to let it through. Cautiously, it bent down and picked up Wayland's sword to examine it. It shook its head over the writing on the blade but, nevertheless, made a pleased low hissing pleased and hugged the weapon to its chest.

"When you avoided my trap," it said in an icy voice, turning towards Robin, "I hardly thought you'd come of your own accord and walk straight into my arms." It laughed out loud then, wildly and harshly. "Take them away and put them with the boy!"

As they were marched past, the creature grabbed Joanna's bag from her hand and laughed even louder.

Part Three

In a wooded valley, nestling at the foot of a crag, Nasir found a tiny ruined church. Only half was still standing. The altar was open to the elements, rising out of the moss that had invaded the chancel over the tumbled ruins. Ivy hung down the remaining walls. Last autumn's dead leaves littered the floor. A narrow window in one wall let in a beam of light, which fell across a deep shape of the cross shape hewn into the altar beneath a rough Latin inscription: *Gratia Dei Bellua Superata Est*. Nasir brushed his fingers over the words, but could not make them out. He was sure the answer was here somewhere, but he didn't know what it was.

He searched the place and was arrested by carvings, visible through a broken flag on the floor. Carefully, he began to prize up the heavy lumps of stone.

"Harry, thank God you're safe!"

"Joanna! What are you doing here?"

"The creature caught us."

"Us?" The boy looked beyond her to the outlaws.

"This is Robin Hood and his men."

"Robin Hood? The outlaw?" Righteous Norman indignation bristled from every noble inch of him.

"Robin Hood, the outlaw," she confirmed.

He scowled at the outlaws angrily. "Where's the cross?" he demanded.

"The creature took it."

"And they let it?"

"We couldn't harm the villagers." Robin said, speaking up for the first time.

"The villagers!" Harry was aghast. His face flushed red a moment and then he shut his mouth. He was clearly resolved not to comment further.

"Bright lad," murmured Scarlet, almost inaudibly.

"So this is the church the cross came from. Why did you come here alone?" asked Tuck.

"I was not certain it was the place," answered Nasir.

"It is that, all right," said Tuck thoughtfully, surveying the desolation.

"The answer's here."

"Aye, but where?" Tuck bent to examine the words on the altar. "By the grace of God, the demon is overcome. Not a typical inscription for an altar. Not very helpful either."

"Here!" Nasir gestured to the elaborate carvings he had uncovered beneath the stone flags of the floor.

"I can't remember much about Palestine," said Joanna. "I can remember trees, an orchard of them, I think, and being carried on someone's shoulders down a dusty path. I remember the night I was taken as well because my mother came to me

and she had a knife. Someone grabbed her. I think she attacked them. Then there was a lot of blood and the knife was in her heart."

"You remember all that?" Harry asked.

"As though it happened yesterday. It's not the sort of thing that's easy to forget."

Harry took her and held her. "You've never said anything about it before."

"Meeting another Saracen has set me thinking."

Harry held her tight.

"Robin!" Little John called quietly.

"What?"

"The ground here is soft enough to dig."

As casually as possible, Robin moved across to John. The stall had been solidly built against the back wall of the barn and converted to a cage by raising the walls with hastily constructed wooden bars with a makeshift roof across the top. But, at the back of the stall, the ground sloped away and was soft and crumbly at the surface.

"If we dug here," said John, "we could make a small gap, big enough for someone slim to get through to find Nasir and Tuck."

"Like me?" asked Joanna eagerly.

"Aye, or Marion."

Joanna's chin jutted out stubbornly. "I'm smaller than Marion is, and it would be safer with two of us!"

Robin and John exchanged glances. Robin shrugged. It would take a long time to argue her out of it. Time he doubted they had. Besides, she would be safer out of the way. He nodded.

"John, you dig. The rest of us must try to cover up what he's doing. Keep to the front of the cage and watch out for the creature."

"So that's why Albion destroyed it!"

"Yes."

"Any weapon made by Wayland can overcome it?"

Nasir shrugged. The carvings were open to interpretation "There are no other weapons left," he said.

"We don't know that. Wayland was the only person strong enough to defeat it and he trapped it in the cross and then imprisoned it in the altar."

"Yes."

"And presumably the Baron de Belleme found out about it and released it."

"Not from the cross."

Tuck nodded, thinking of the heavy ornate cross that Joanna carried. "Whoever has the cross can control it, if they know how," he guessed.

Nasir looked up. "Can it break free from the cross?"

Tuck glanced around him, thinking hard. The story was stirring up vague memories of something he had read.

"What is the name of this church?"

Nasir shook his head. He didn't know. Tuck picked his way down the aisle across the lumps of fallen masonry and the traces of the encroaching forest until he came to the wooden porch. Across the top, carved into a heavy oaken beam, were the words THE * CHURCH * OF * ST * BRENDAN * THE * NAVIGATOR. He thanked God for the diligence of his old monastery in its constant secluded copying and re-copying of manuscripts. Nasir had followed him and stood leaning in the doorway, eyeing him curiously.

"When I was at the monastery," Tuck said, "I copied out the story of this church, only it was a Christian bishop, not Wayland the Smith, who imprisoned the demon in the altar. The only way the demon could free himself from the cross, assuming he had already escaped the altar, was to kill an innocent before the altar when the cross was in place. I remember thinking at the time it wasn't a very Christian way to go about things, but Wayland might well have done that."

"An innocent?"

"A child or a maid."

"We must get back."

Tuck was suddenly reminded why he had come. "But," he said, puzzling, "the church is here, so what is at Baldon?" He caught his breath. "The demon! It will get the cross!"

In the same instant Nasir was upright, his whole body alert and tense.

"What is it?" asked Tuck.

"Joanna!"

Joanna stared defiantly at the Creature. “What are you going to do with us?”

The villagers had come and nervously removed her from the cage. She was sat on a horse, her hands tied to the saddle. She glared down at the creature.

“Well?”

She resisted the temptation to look back towards the hut where the outlaws were still digging.

“The others I will deal with later. Shortly, when my scouts get back, you and I are going to make a small journey to a church.”

Part Four

In the cage, the hole was now large enough for Marion to squeeze through.

“I don’t like to think of you going on your own,” said Robin.

“I’ll be all right. Don’t worry.”

Marion slipped cautiously out of the hut, which was at the edge of the village, and into the shelter of the forest.

Tuck and Nasir were just leaving the camp when Marion got back. Tuck sat calmly on a rock as Marion related the events at Baldon. Nasir paced up and down with a kind of intense bottled energy.

“Joanna is safe?” he asked.

“The creature had taken her outside and tied her to a horse, but she seemed to be all right,” said Marion.

Nasir and Tuck exchanged glances.

“I was right,” said Nasir.

“What about?” asked Marion.

“Nasir thinks the demon will use Joanna as a sacrifice. In fact, in my opinion, he’s more worried about her than the rest of them put together.”

Marion looked at Nasir curiously. It was unusual for Nasir to express any emotion, least of all worry.

“Are you?” she asked.

Nasir turned and moved towards the edge of the hollow. For one panicked moment, she thought he was just going to walk away and leave them, but then he sat down and remained still, staring at the ground. Eventually, he looked up.

“Once,” he said, “before I became the Baron’s slave, I had a farm in the hills between Jaffa and Jerusalem. It was an old farm with small white buildings and

orange groves. I grew up there. It belonged to my family."

"And you loved it very much," said Marion, hearing the longing in his voice. He glanced her way but made no sign of agreement.

"One night the Baron and Sir Hugh made a raid on it. It was very sudden. We had no warning and they burned the orange trees and killed all the people."

"Except you."

"I... was taken alive, to become the Baron's slave. I also had a wife..." His voice choked and cut out. He took a deep breath, then continued. "I never knew what happened to her." He paused, looking at them thoughtfully. "I also had a baby daughter. She would be about seventeen now."

"Joanna?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

Marion wondered at what she had heard: the burden and the dishonour of being taken alive, the lost wife and child who had not been protected. Never once had Nasir given any indication of his past. It was his failure and his grief, none of theirs. She wished she could say something to console him but words evaded her.

Nasir got up. "It was a long time ago."

"And we must worry about the present problem," said Tuck, also getting up, "which is how are we going to rescue Robin and the others?"

It was then Herne came to them. They felt rather than heard him come and, when they turned to look, he stood, some way from them, stock still, and his very stillness implied urgency. He wanted them to follow.

"You two go," said Tuck. "I'll stay here. He is on the other side, as it were!"

As Marion and Nasir started towards him, the large cloaked figure turned and moved into the forest. He led them on until they reached a small stream running in a rocky gorge it had cut for itself. They reached a ledge overhanging the brook, caught one more glimpse of the stag's antlers among the trees, and then he was gone.

Marion who, all the way, had been a step ahead of Nasir, stopped, puzzled, and looked around her. Nasir stopped beside her then pointed. A narrow path led alongside the brook, just below them. Cautiously, Marion clambered down, over the mossy stone, until she stood on the small pathway. But which way should they go? Up or down stream. Suddenly there was the clatter of loose stones. Nasir, climbing down behind Marion, had dislodged a seemingly well-embedded rock, revealing a small hollow in the bank. Curious, Nasir peered into the hole. Then he put his hand in and brought out a decaying leather bundle. Carefully, he unfolded the cloth to reveal a small dagger, shining brightly silver, with an inscription along the blade.

"What does it say?" Marion asked.

Nasir grinned, something he rarely did. "Wayland made me."

In Baldon, time was running out. The creature had produced a virtual army of followers from somewhere and they were hanging around on horseback, clearly impatient, waiting. Joanna sat among them, rigidly upright, head erect, but spoiling the effect by thoughtfully gnawing at her lip while watching the group with doubtful brown eyes.

Nasir, watching her, felt her fear. He weighed the dagger absently in his hand. It was a beautiful weapon, perfectly balanced so it would slice through the air. He was waiting for the creature, hidden behind some sacks where he could see everything clearly. He watched Tuck and Marion slip out of the forest and enter the hut unnoticed. There was no guard. The demon was arrogant.

Inside the hut, Tuck and Marion were greeted with relief. Little John took the axe Marion had brought and, with a few swift, skilled strokes, he cut through the makeshift wooden bars attached to the upper half of the front of the stall and clambered out.

He picked up his quarterstaff from where it had been placed at the side of the hut, followed closely by Robin. The demon had taken Albion, but Marion had brought another sword. Robin took it from her and paused, looking out of the doorway.

Tuck began to explain about the church, but Robin held up a hand to silence him. He scanned the men outside. "I've got to get Albion back," he muttered and slipped out.

"But that sword will be... no use," Tuck trailed off. Robin was out of earshot already, darting from cover to cover.

"Why not?" hissed Scarlet behind him.

"Only weapons forged by Wayland can harm it."

"Oh, that's wonderful, isn't it¿" said Scarlet. "He's gone out there with a weapon that's absolutely useless! He'll be hacked into little pieces."

"Nasir's out there," said Marion, but she had gone pale.

"Yes, well..." Will calmed down slightly. He had to admit that Nasir balanced the odds slightly. He wouldn't let Robin get hacked to pieces easily. "I'll try to warn him," Will said, peering out the door. He thought he could see a wisp of fair hair near some barrels up ahead. Considerably faster, and less cautiously than Robin had moved, Will followed. However, as he ran, one of the rough men waiting by Joanna saw the flicker of movement and called out an alarm. Within seconds, a large number of men, eager at the thought of action, had turned their horses and were heading towards him

The rest of the outlaws issued out from the hut. They were badly outnumbered and on foot, while their enemies were mounted. The leading horseman yelled out a prolonged battle cry.

The sound brought the demon out of a hut, followed by a tall ash-blonde man with the carriage of a nobleman. Seeing his chance, Nasir raised the dagger, took careful aim and sent it spinning through the air. But, at that moment, Robin stepped out of hiding, brandishing his sword. The creature turned sharply to face him, and the dagger skimmed past to embed itself in the wall of the hut. Robin scarcely seemed to notice. He raised his sword and attacked. The creature didn't move. The sword came swinging down and shattered to pieces within inches of the creature's neck.

The creature allowed itself a small chuckle and swung Albion. Robin jumped out of the way. The demon took a step forward, trying to back Robin into a corner, and lunged again. The hut wall was at Robin's back. Nasir raced across the space towards him, but he had covered barely half the distance. The creature raised his sword to make the final stroke and moved in for the kill.

Part Five

Robin smiled. He stood tall and calm, a look of challenge in his eyes. The demon tried to bring the sword down and found its arm wouldn't move. Then, in its hand, Albion grew warm, gradually becoming hotter and hotter until it was impossible to hold. With a wailing scream it dropped the sword. It turned and ran across the ground to a waiting horse.

The blonde knight tried to follow, but was stopped by Nasir, sword in hand. Robin picked up Albion and ran his fingers over the inscription "Herne's son is my master. I can not slay him." This was the second time it had saved his life.

The other outlaws and Harry Morely were hard pressed. None of them, as yet, had been seriously wounded but they were slowly being forced into the centre of a ring of their mounted attackers. Suddenly, one of the men dropped from his saddle. From the melee, it was possible to see Robin and Nasir standing shoulder-to-shoulder, firing arrows. A second attacker fell. Then a third went down.

"Leave them!" cried the demon, "follow me!" It looked round for Joanna but she had taken the first opportunity to urge her horse into the forest and was nowhere to be seen. The demon swung its horse and led the troops at a gallop out of the village. As it was passing the last few huts, it grabbed hold of a village girl, who had been foolishly watching events. Screaming, she was hauled across the front of the creature's saddle. Then the cavalcade disappeared into the depths of the forest amidst a thunder of hoofbeats.

A sudden stillness descended on the village. Robin and Nasir walked towards the others, bringing the knight with them. Nasir paused on the way to retrieve Wayland's dagger.

"Who's this?" Will was asking as Nasir approached. He was clearly prepared to object, whoever it was.

"I am Sir Mark of Steventon," said the knight.

"And what are you doing here, Sir Mark?" asked Robin.

"I wouldn't be here if I had the choice."

"Yes, but why *are* you here?"

"That... creature has taken over my manor. It came last night, killed two or three guards and made it fairly clear that the rest of us could expect the same if we didn't do what it wanted."

"What did it want?"

"I don't know. That was what I was doing here: trying to find out. It's taken most of my armed men, but it won't let on what it wants them for. I think, though, that it means to attack Nottingham."

"Nottingham!"

"Well, it's only a thought." Sir Mark regarded them suspiciously. "Who are you?"

"Outlaws."

The knight scowled. "I thought so."

Nasir saw Joanna emerge from the forest, hands still tied to the high pommel of the horse's saddle. He went over, leaving Tuck to relate their discoveries to the others. He released Joanna and lifted her down. Her wrists were grazed where the rope had been, but they would mend, he thought, examining them.

Robin was peering in the direction the demon had gone. "He'll be aiming for the church."

"Are you all right?" Harry had come up behind Joanna and Nasir. There was a note of challenge in his voice.

"Yes," Joanna said quietly.

"Good!" He took her from Nasir to lead her back to the others. Nasir heard a chuckle behind him and turned to see Tuck.

"You've got him well and truly jealous," Tuck said, apparently amused.

Nasir just smiled.

"Tuck! Nasir!" Robin called to them. "How far is it to the church?"

Tuck's brow furrowed in concentration. "About twice the distance back to the camp."

"Less than an hour's ride," estimated Robin.

"Can you be sure the demon's heading for the church?"

"It took the miller's daughter, Judith. I should think that it intends for her to take Joanna's place."

"What will you do?" asked Sir Mark.

"We need horses or we'll never catch it in time!" Robin fumed. "Where can we get horses?"

"The demon brought all the horses from my castle it could get," said Sir Mark. "You'll find them in that hut over there."

Not much later, ten riders departed from the village, Nasir and Tuck in the front, leading the way. They had lost precious time at the village and, privately, each doubted they would get there on time. Their only hope was that the demon would stage some sort of ceremony, allowing them time in which to catch it up.

They were not far from the church, and a vague throbbing chant hung on the air, when a woman stumbled out of the trees. At first sight, she looked like a dark crow, swathed in flapping black cloth, but when she looked up at them she suddenly appeared to be a young girl. She stood tall and the hood of her cloak fell

back. A round face, with a strong jaw, stared at them, scared but undaunted. Her hair was jet black and hung, glossy and thick, on her shoulders. Her eyes were deepest dark brown. Nasir drew in his breath sharply.

"Aleya!" The word, no more than a whisper, rang out like a bell over the sudden quiet that had fallen on the outlaws.

Almost before the echoes were taken by the wind, Nasir was dismounting.

"No! She's dead!" It was Joanna.

"Dead?" Nasir glared at her.

"Yes. She's my mother. I saw it happen."

He turned to the woman. "Dead," he said bitterly.

Slowly, he took Wayland's dagger from its sheath. He walked purposefully towards the waiting figure. He paused just short of her and tilted his head, as if studying her. Then the watchers saw Nasir reach out and grip the girl's shoulder. At his touch, the girl underwent a sudden transformation. She bared her teeth and her arms reached out from under the cloak, long and grasping. They reached for Nasir's throat. Somehow, Nasir avoided the deadly embrace and moved in still closer. Everyone saw Nasir's arm move and the hands stopped grasping and began to flail. The girl seemed to wither, and grow old before them, and then crumbled away into dust. Nasir was left holding empty air. For a moment, stillness hung on them, only the dull throbbing chant echoing in the air. Joanna moved forward on her horse to where Nasir still stood, stock still. Then a piercing shriek broke in upon the stillness, breaking away into a sobbing moan and falling back into silence. Robin's head went up like a hound that had caught the scent.

"Judith!" he said and spurred towards the sound.

The others did likewise, Nasir running back and swinging himself up into the saddle, barely glancing at Joanna, who was the one person remaining still, remaining where she had been when the scream came, chewing her lip, a sure sign of doubtful thought. Harry paused, looking at her.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

Joanna nodded and flashed him a brief smile.

"Curious?" he asked.

"Yes, how did he know her?"

Harry shrugged. "You'll have to ask him later. If you ever get the chance," he added grimly.

The outlaws had reached the church. The chanting, much louder now, seemed to set the whole place vibrating. It wasn't a tuneful chant, more a low monotonous throb. Entering the church, they were greeted with the sight of the once empty silence filled with the assorted ranks of Sir Mark's guard, standing at the front, in the collapsed part of the building where the long vanished pews had stood. A clear aisle led the eye to where the demon stood behind the altar, the cross in its place before it. Bound and gagged, the girl, Judith, was held securely at one side, her eyes wide with terror. Calmly, in time to the chant, the demon was sharpening its knife. It turned to stare down the church at them as they stood amid the standing pillars, beneath the roof, such as it was.

The demon raised the knife high in the air. The chanting changed pitch and became a single long drawn out ringing note. It tore through the church, seeming the shake the very foundations. The vibration in the walls became almost visible, and the outlaws could feel the floor tremble at their feet. As they hesitated, terrified, dust, and then chips of stone, began to fall around them. One pillar, already weakened by time, collapsed, and more dust came down, followed by beams from what was left of the roof.

"Stop it!" Sir Mark shouted above the note. He moved forward into the body of the church. More rubble began to fall. The rest of the outlaws retreated towards the porch as another pillar gave way. More beams fell, followed by large blocks of masonry. Around them, the very walls of the church collapsed.

Part Six

From some distance away, Harry and Joanna witnessed the demolition of the church. Without a word, they hastened their horses towards it. The mound of fallen masonry obscured the demon and his followers from view, but the chanting had returned, and the low throb hung on the air like a portent of doom. There was no sign of the outlaws. Dust gradually settled on a motionless mound of rubble. They dismounted.

"Robin! Marion!" called Harry anxiously.

"Nasir!" added Joanna.

They picked their way over the first boulders into what had once been the body of the church. Looking about him, Harry pessimistically, but not unjustifiably, surmised that the outlaws were under the main body of the rubble. He spotted a

scrap of scarlet among the wreckage. Moving over, he saw it was a scrap of cloth. He cleared away the smaller rocks and uncovered the man's face. Joanna came over.

"What is it?"

"Sir Mark, dead. The others must be buried under the heaviest part."

"What are we going to do?" Joanna's eyes, brimming with tears, were wide and luminous.

"We'd better get away from here!"

"What about the demon?"

"We can't do anything about the demon. We haven't got any weapons that can harm it."

She bit her lip. "We can't just leave it to do whatever it wants!"

"We have no option."

He had taken hold of her hand and was leading her back to the horses, when they both distinctly heard the sound of loose stones falling. Looking back, they saw one of the boulders that had fallen across the porch move slightly. As they watched, it was slowly rolled away and Little John climbed out.

"You're alive!" cried Joanna, running towards him

"Aye, lass, we all are - took shelter in the porch."

The porch had remained intact. It was made of smaller stone formed into an arch. When they discussed it later, the outlaws were unsure whether it was the material or the shape that had kept it standing, but it had survived. One by one they emerged. Scarlet was limping slightly and Marion's forehead was badly cut, but they were otherwise unscathed.

"That was quite an effect!" mused Tuck, surveying the wreckage.

"How was it done?" asked Robin.

"I don't know but a couple more displays of power like that and people will be falling over themselves to obey the creature's every whim."

Robin hefted Albion. "We've got to stop it," he said. "We can skirt round the edge of the ruin and come up behind it."

"We haven't got a chance against that lot!" objected Scarlet.

"You got any better ideas?"

Will glowered, but said nothing.

"Come on then."

The outlaws began to edge around the rubble, Joanna and Harry in tow. The open part of the church came into view. Judith was already dead. The altar had fallen. The demon stood in its place, arms raised to the sky. Screened by the

undergrowth, the group watched the demon make a swift cutting gesture with one hand and the chanting stopped, leaving a deathly silence.

"I'm free!" cried the creature, "free!"

The wind snatched his voice and the cry seemed to float among the trees and hang about the crags.

"Free!"

Robin signalled to the others to follow him and broke cover, running directly to the demon. One of Sir Mark's men stepped into his path, drawing a sword. Robin barely paused. Giving the man no time to use the weapon, Robin slashed up and across, freeing Albion with a jerk, and ran on. The demon drew a sword and the two of them faced each other across the remains of the altar.

Around them the fight grew. Although outnumbered, the outlaws were skilled fighters, while several of the demon's followers were untrained servants or villagers. All were badly shaken by the demon's display of power. A few turned and fled, but most were held by fear of the demon. Among them were trained warriors and men-at-arms who rallied quickly and fought with grim determination.

Joanna, watching from the trees, surmised thus much. She had stayed behind, having no training with a sword, aware she would be more of a hindrance than a help in the fight to come. She singled out her friends one by one.

Will Scarlet, fighting with fierce energy, swiftly cut down a number of the untrained before coming face to face with a small dark man, whose looks betrayed his Celtic origin and who proved a skilled and deadly opponent. They circled, attacked and parried, evenly matched.

Much had paused on the edge of the melée to let off a couple of slingshots before grabbing up his quarterstaff and laying about him with a skill that belied his innocent looks.

Little John, with more strength, and no less skill, left a trail of broken heads in his wake.

Tuck and Marion, using swords, were soon engaged in a series of small private fights and Nasir, with two swords, fought with the cool deliberation of the professional killer: precise, efficient and deadly.

Harry was fighting a heavy-boned Saxon with skill, but without the desperate energy the others put into it. He had never fought a man before who seriously meant to kill him nor had he, himself, ever killed a man. Joanna watched anxiously, aware that for all his training this put Harry at a disadvantage.

In the centre, undisturbed by the fighting going on around them, Robin and the demon circled cautiously like cats, wary and unsure. The demon attacked. Robin parried. They parted and continued to circle. Robin attacked. The demon stepped

back and slipped on a loose stone. It rolled swiftly to one side as Robin's sword came down, inches away, on the stone flags, and then the demon was up again. The gladiators continued to circle.

Suddenly Joanna's attention was diverted back to Harry. The saxon, changing tactics, had brought his sword down low and cut across Harry's ankle. Harry collapsed to his knees groaning. With a cry, Joanna broke cover and ran towards him.

The cry rung clear across the melée and caused Robin to look up briefly and pause, fatally. The demon sword came down, connected with his and, with a small twist, Albion went flying across the ground. Once again, Robin stood at its mercy, weaponless. It was then that Nasir broke through the wall of followers and, with single-minded determination, grabbed hold of the demon from behind, one short dark arm encircling its throat while the other reached for Wayland's dagger. Nasir plunged the dagger through the cloak, at the base of the demon's spine, then ripped savagely upwards. The demon writhed, heaved and then sagged heavily against him. Nasir let go and the demon collapsed in a small crumpled heap on the ground. Nasir's arm and dagger, and most of his front, were smeared with the demon's blood. Slowly, the fighting stuttered to a halt as, one after another, the demon's reluctant followers dropped their swords.

"It's dead," Joanna said, walking forward, trying to take in the enormity of it. Harry got up and limped towards her. He put his arm round her shoulders.

"Yes, it's dead," Harry said with a sigh.

Suddenly, like a taut string snapping, everyone started grinning and talking. In the midst of it all, Joanna sought out Nasir.

"How did you know my mother's name?" she asked. "Back there in the forest. How did you recognise her?"

He looked at her. "She was... my wife," he said slowly.

Joanna took this in. It did not come as a surprise: a thought, half-formed, had already suggested as much.

"Then you are my father."

"So it would seem."

Nasir's face was impassive. Joanna didn't know what he thought, whether he wanted a daughter or not. She knew nothing of him. She bit her lip and gazed at him. Then, suddenly and impulsively, she did the thing that came most naturally to her and, flinging her arms around Nasir's neck, hugged him. Nasir stood motionless for a second under her embrace and, then, with a strange sound that might have been one brief convulsive sob, he slipped his arms around her waist and, dropping his head to the same level as hers, held her tight as if he

would never let her go.

Chapter 53

Dragonfly over Kazakhstan

A Primeval Short Story

I was flying over a large plain, somewhere in Central Asia. Somewhere that had once been Central Asia. I'd not seen any sign of life for miles, not even much by way of plant life beyond grass. When they've eaten anything with any meat on it the predators tend to start on the plant life. Very adaptable the predators, but then aren't we all. That was, I presume, the whole point.

I was carrying with me a small crystal map I'd picked up, well stolen, some timeline way back when there was a certain amount of diversity. When it was still possible to meet people who were descended from humans and remembered the fact. Back when there was still some hope that the ruthless processes of mutation and time travel could be stabilised. I should have stayed there really but something drove me forwards and, who knows, maybe everything would have changed anyway.

The map was sensitive to time and place and projected a small globe above it. I could zoom in to the details of landscape if I wished, or look at Helen's notes, though they were mostly minimal and cryptic. The map was invaluable because it showed the one fixed constant in the ever shifting timelines. The anomalies, mapped out for centuries now, my time at least, and mapped out for millennia either side of the 21st century. The hub of the chaos; the changes rippling out from that point wider and wider.

I'd decided to try going back in time. I'd not been back in time for decades. It was a gradual thing but at some point I'd realised that the people who went back had stopped coming forwards again. But now there was no one left, no one who was interested in more than the basics of food, survival and procreation to the extent that I had long ceased to count them as people at all - merely another

hazard to be avoided. A particularly lethal hazard to be avoided. But sooner or later I was going to have to go back, go back and make another abortive attempt to change something, anything.

I was bored, lonely and running low on hope. At some point, hiding out in the Himalayas a few months back, dodging predators and scavenging in the pickings they left behind, I'd decided it was better to go back and face whatever was waiting there instead of endlessly chasing forwards, hoping to find a time when things magically became all right again.

There was an anomaly up ahead of me. According to the map it led to that magical nexus point in the 21st century. Not so long before my own originating time. I was cutting it fine though, the anomaly was not going to remain open for much longer. I swooped low, glad it was in a nice wide open plain. I could see for miles and there wasn't a predator in sight. I levelled off and glided straight for it. I should have gone through but at the last minute something came through the other way hitting me in the chest and taking us both to the ground. The anomaly pulsed and vanished.

My wings hurt terribly. I struggled up flexing them out and trying to fold them back. The translucent sun catching material between the fingers was torn and would need time to heal. If there had been any predators nearby I would have been done for. I'd pushed the man off as I'd scrambled up but now I looked at him closely. He was a genuine human, as far as I could tell without a genetic sampler anyway. He even *looked* human which in my experience was eccentric at the least. He was crying out with his hands clutched to his face. I pulled them back and saw the white sticky strands of the World Mother covering his eyes, already starting to spread out across his face.

The World Mother. The other great predator. Luckily for us there was only a small fragment of her here though it was growing fast. I'd encountered a scientific base once, somewhere in Scotland, some time in the early twenty-second century. Scotland by that stage, in that timeline, was almost entirely swamped by the World Mother, great crystalline shards nestling among the mountains like the glaciers of the ice age. The base had a project to defeat her advance, to "wipe her from the face of time". A doomed project, it transpired. She advanced too fast and their research was too slow. I left before the inevitable but I took some compounds with me, enough to combat a small infestation, if you were unlucky to get some part of her on you but lucky enough to escape being engulfed.

I was trembling with panic as I fumbled through my bags. I might be able to out fly her but I couldn't out run her and I wouldn't be flying for a bit. I dug out the box of capsules. The man was swearing in a Scottish brogue, scrabbling at

his face. I found a syringe. Looking at him, I could see he now had strands on his fingers as well. I should have told him to hold still. He was wearing a T-shirt leaving his arms bare. I didn't bother with niceties, but pinned one down with my feet, standing on the wrist and upper arm. He swore some more and started battering me with his hand. Now I had the stuff on my trousers. Despite his struggles I managed to isolate a vein and plunged in the syringe. Then I gave myself a dose for good measure and poured more of the stuff on my leg. I watched as the strands curled up and dissolved into ash. The man sat up pulling the crumbling remains from his face. Our eyes met and his widened in a way I couldn't interpret at the time but I later realised was surprise.

"And what would you be?" he asked.

"My name is Stephen," I replied. He blinked, slowly, once. One hand reached out for my face but then dropped back suddenly. He said nothing.

"My current form is based on the idea of a dragonfly," I added into the awkward moment, "but with adaptations which allow me to process solar energy to an extent. And you are?"

"Cutter," he said, "Nick Cutter."

"You look human," I commented.

"You sound surprised. Humans are extinct I take it."

"It is hard to tell, but I think not. Although they never like to think so, a lot of humans adopted the predator form. However it is a long time since I met someone who chose the human form. It is not terribly efficient in many ways."

"Chose the human form?" there was a tone of vehemence, or perhaps disbelief in his voice.

I looked at him carefully, unanswering. He reply suggested to me that he didn't really understand what I was saying. This in turn gave me food for thought.

"That anomaly," I said at last, "it led back to the early 21st century?"

"Aye," he nodded.

"But you have never heard of the Shanghai nanites?"

"Never."

"That doesn't make much sense to me, they reached back to the 21st century long ago. In so far as long ago makes any sense when you're talking about time travel."

"Tell me about these Shanghai nanites."

I looked at the sun above us. It was early afternoon. I wanted to be somewhere safe, or at least comparatively safe, before dark.

"I'll explain as we walk," I said, gesturing to the mountains in the distance. "We can be seen too easily on this plain and there is a city in that direction. There

will be predators after us before dark."

As we walked he grilled me about the nanites and the anomalies. He was fascinated by the idea that everything became homogenised - as the nanites spread from organism to organism, anything with high enough cognitive abilities to have identifiable desires mutated constantly to fulfil those desires. There was, he observed, no evolution anymore, only mutation fuelled by the nanites interpretation of the host's needs and desires.

"But," I explained, "the nanites got carried back through the anomalies. They've been spreading backwards through time. There's been no real diversity for centuries now, long before your time. I don't understand how the 21st century can be as you describe."

"Well maybe, I don't know, I come from before the nanites got there."

I was silent.

"That's a skeptical expression, isn't it?" he said.

"Slightly."

"You only have this idea that time has been becoming more and more," Cutter waved his hand for a moment, "out of joint because you keep travelling. If you stayed in one time..."

"I'd become a victim as history changes."

"No, no, you cause the changes as you move, especially moving into the past. I may have fallen into your world though the anomaly, but the time line I find when I go back should be the same as when I left. Going forward can not effect the past."

"I disagree. The past of this timeline includes nanites well before the 21st century. Clearly by coming forward you have moved to a timeline where that is the case."

"Oh yes, and you've studied extensively the history of this time line to make sure, have you?"

"No, but it is the only thing that makes sense. If I go back I will find a world not so different from the 21st century as I last left it. That is the way time works, but by going back I will find an anomaly to the Permian or earlier and maybe find some way to control the changes."

"How long have you been trying this?" he asked. Then following my silence, "Is there any evidence it works?"

"There is nothing left to do but continue trying."

"It's a stupid and dangerous thing to do," he paused looking around the grassy plain. "Clearly."

We walked in silence for a bit. Every so often I flexed out my wings experimentally testing the healing as it occurred. I watched Nick Cutter cautiously as we went. He had fixed his face in a grim expression and seemed angry with me, though I could not really tell why. Thinking about it now I wonder if he was also hungry and thirsty. I had offered him no food or drink and it did not occur to me to do so until some hours later.

I was still curious about him though and my last question had been diverted into a discussion of the Shanghai nanites.

I tried again.

"When you came through that anomaly. What was happening? How did you come to have the World Mother on you?"

"The World Mother?" he asked, still sounding angry.

I gestured to my eyes, "The white stuff."

"Why do you call it the World Mother?"

I decided not to be sidetracked this time even though his tone had switched from confrontation to curiousity.

"How did you get it on you?"

He eyed me hard for a few seconds, then seemed to shrug. Or at least his shoulders made a slight movement and he looked away, breaking eye contact.

"Ah well, I was supposed to be meeting my ex-wife. She's," he paused, "she's got some mad ideas about the anomalies much like your own and the determination and skills to make her dangerous. I got a message from her asking to meet up."

"And you went?"

"I was talked into it. Miked up, " he extracted a small wire from his shirt, then bundled it up aggressively into his pocket, "for what good it did. They wanted to make a deal with her."

"They?"

"The people I work for."

"So what happened?"

"She didn't show up. I waited around the anomaly for a bit and then this crystal came up from the ground in front of me," he stared down at his hands bringing them up to his eyes. "This stuff then sort of shot into my face. I guess I fell back through the anomaly."

I digested this information.

"And you had never seen the World Mother before?"

"Like I said, who or what, is the World Mother?" he paused and frowned. "It was like I could hear a voice in my head, a woman's voice?"

I nodded, “That was her. No one quite knows who she is or even if she’s one person or some sort of gestalt. She was first reported in the Permian, a crystalline growth, with some sort of limited power of movement through rock. Creating crystals before her and rock again behind. But it became clear it was someone, a human, whose nanites had taken a strange turn. At first we thought she was a harmless curiousity but then we realised that she could convert what she touched to herself. Rock originally, and then people, and she grew slowly. She could also stretch across time in some way, cropping up in more and more eras, splitting off bits of herself and then reabsorbing them. I don’t think they can communicate across time but they, it, act with the same agenda I think, to grow and absorb more and more. Some fragment of her must have reached your time zone.”

“And will grow to consume it?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Sometimes she seems to just crop up, grab something and then vanish back through an anomaly.”

“And why do you call her the World Mother?”

“It’s a legend; a myth. That she manipulates everything, controls the anomalies, controls the changes, continuously shapes and reshapes the world to meet her ends. Effectively she created the world. The name stuck even though few believe the legend. ”

“How do we defeat her? That stuff you had?”

“Works only for small quantities. It’s useless on anything larger than a few square metres.”

“I’d like to take some back with me if possible. If I ever find a way back.”

I flicked on the map showing the anomalies and pointed ahead. “Anomalies tend to cluster - there is another due to open to the 21st century in a couple of days in that direction. It reaches back to within days of that last one,” I didn’t add that we had no hope of reaching it at our current pace. I hoped my wings would heal, and perhaps strengthen sufficiently that I could carry Cutter the distance. If not... if not I hadn’t yet decided what I would do. I did not need to decide yet whether to leave behind my first chance at companionship in more years than I cared to count or miss the anomaly.

It was early evening when I first caught sight of pursuit, over to one side of us where a spur of the encircling mountains thrust forward into the steppe. My eyesight must have been sharper than Cutter’s. In fact little about Cutter was truly optimised despite Darwin’s theories. I pointed to where I saw the predators streaming down the mountains and onto the plain. He simply shook his head.

“What am I looking at?”

“Predators,” I said, “they’re an extremely efficient, mostly four-legged form.

They hunt by sonar."

"About this big," Cutter indicated with his hands, "dark blue, grey colour, evolved from bats."

I nodded, "Originally a lot of them were bats, but the efficiency of the form proved attractive to other species as well. A lot of people eventually mutated towards them, if they weren't eaten first, that is."

I thought of Daniel. "I just want a simple life," he had said, once it became obvious what was happening. Once I had spent days with him trying to instill some hope for an intelligent future in him, trying uselessly to change the desires in his heart. "No complications, just food and sleep. To forget about all this." We were in a tiny ghost town out in Arizona. I don't think it had even been abandoned because of predators, or nanite mutation, or the World Mother, or anomalies but it had symbolised the new world order for him. I left him there. Never looked back. For all I knew he was in that pack now, heading for us, all memories of me long forgotten or rendered irrelevant - who could tell?

"We're in trouble then," said Cutter and there was the faintest hint of a smile at his mouth. A 'wry smile' perhaps or maybe he craved danger?

"We run," I said. "The city shouldn't be far now, assuming its still there. We may find safety."

And we ran.

Cutter was not an efficient runner. He was slow and gasped for breath. In the end we progressed little faster than a walk. Nervously I flexed my wings. They were possibly strong enough to carry him a short distance. There was a faint gleam on the horizon. I hoped it was the towers of Shymkent. I hoped that in this timeline Shymkent had towers. Glancing behind and to one side I saw the predators were gaining on us, faster than I had hoped. Cutter could now see them too. He glanced frequently over his shoulder as he ran, but his breathing was short and swift. I don't think he could have commented if he'd wanted to.

The city edged towards us so slowly, but I could see towers, thank the World Mother. Then as the predators came up on our heels I stretched out my wings and rose into the air, lifting up Cutter as I rose. He was like a dead weight in my hands and I dropped between wing beats. One of the predators leaped up catching his foot. He cried and kicked out, instinctively I think. Shoe and predator fell away.

"You left that a little late," I heard him say.

"I can not carry you far. You would rather I left you behind?"

"Oh no! Believe me, I'm very grateful."

I flew us as far as I reasonably could to one of the wide circular platforms atop a sheer slender tower. Cutter peered down over the side in the twilight at the

ground hundreds of feet below.

"Why build up in the sky?" he asked.

"The predators never develop wings, no one knows why, though there are theories. People are safe up here."

Cutter straigtened up, turning away from the view and facing me confrontationally.

"What people?"

He was right, as the last rays of the sun vanished not a single light appeared in the whole city. I had grown so used to abandoned cities, spread throughout time like the flotsam from a storm that I hardly wondered at the fact any more. The place wore a thick blanket of silence. Until Cutter broke the window of the nearest house, that is, and let us inside.

I switched on my torch and we could see light wooden furniture and cloth coverings on the walls, trying to make the interior of the house feel like a Yurt. The temperature was dropping viciously. What looked like a house control unit stood by the door and I tried switching it on, but nothing happened. Wires led from it and I began to trace them.

"What are you looking for?"

"Some way to turn the heating back on. Hopefully this is solar powered."

"And if it isn't?" I shrugged, I was a long way from out of ideas but I didn't feel like discussing endless back up plans. We'd see if this worked first.

Cutter looked around him, then picked up one of the chairs and smashed it hard against the floor, proceeding to break it into bits.

"You have any such thing as a lighter in that bag of yours?" he asked.

Countless millennia of civilisation, if you take the looping timelines into account, and we squatted in the doorway of the house like savages, while Cutter tended a fire on the terrace. I found some tinned food in the kitchen which we heated up and ate, wrapped in elaborately embroidered blankets. The food had a strong spicy flavour; "Curried Goat" written on the tin in Cyrillic lettering though somehow I doubted it. I thought I might have to get into a long explanation of cultural references to Cutter but the word 'Goat' didn't appear to worry him any. Savagery has its advantages I guess.

"You weren't ever human, I take it," Cutter asked, as we finished it off.

"No, I'm first generation uplift though," I've always been rather proud of that fact.

"First generation?"

"The first generation of my species to be infected by nanites, the first to develop higher sentience."

I could still remember dimly the Antarctic wastes as they had been, not wastes of course to us. My brain structures had shifted so many times since then though that the memories were dim and vague. Like memories of childhood in humans, or so I have been told.

"So what species are you?" he asked. "Were you orginally," he amended.

"I'm a Penguin."

Cutter spluttered over his goat and the first real smile appeared on his face since I'd met him. I've never coped with this reaction well. Here was the first sentient non-predator I had met in over a hundred years and he was laughing at me. I put down my empty bowl and walked out on the terrace. He came out maybe a minute later.

"I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to laugh."

Was that genuine or sarcasm? I couldn't tell. I treated it as genuine. It was neither the time nor place for an argument.

"Come, let us sleep."

"I'll take first watch."

I didn't think watches were necessary, but humoured him none-the-less. Just as well as it transpired. He let me sleep for a couple of hours, then woke me and slept himself. We continued in this way through the night. Maybe an hour before dawn he woke me. He had found more wood somewhere which he had added to the fire to create a strong blaze. He had also tied rags made from the wall hangings round some of the thicker pieces. A large tin of something that smelt like oil was open on the table.

"Look," he said.

He lit one of his improvised torches and dropped it over the edge of the terrrace. As it spiralled down I saw the predators, no more than a hundred feet below us, climbing the thin tower.

"They've adapted to climb the towers," I said.

"Explains where the people went," he observed.

Did it? I wondered. We saw no sign of a struggle in the whole place. Everything was packed up and locked. I think the people had already gone, the process more religious people referred to as rapture perhaps, or gone back or forward or to some other place in this time zone.

The muscles in my back were already stronger than they had been this time yesterday. Another twenty four hours and I would be able to carry both our weights with ease. My night-sight isn't good, though.

I had wanted to explore this city and, if I am honest, to scavenge for supplies, before making a break for the next anomaly. I had enough food to last for a while

but my clothes were becoming worn and a T-shirt and jeans weren't the most practical garb for the steppe. T-shirts never lasted long anyway, unless they were explicitly designed for winged people - the tear in the back tended to extend until they fell apart.

I circled the platform we were on, seeking inspiration and came to a narrow bridge made of a wood-based compound strung between it and another platform a breath-taking mile away. Dawn must have been close. If Cutter could get across and remove the bridge we would be able to see before the predators reached us again. I flew back to him explaining the idea; gathered my pack and headed across the gap. The new platform appeared to be the housing for a large piece of machinery. I didn't look too closely but dumped my pack and snatched up a barrel of oil.

Cutter was more than half way across the bridge when I caught up with him. He held a flaming torch in one hand and what looked like a flat-bladed paddle in the other. His gait was slightly lop-sided - one shoe off and one shoe on. He hadn't found a replacement for the lost one. I opened the oil and began pouring it back along the bridge behind him. I didn't get far, a predator was already on the bridge. I flew up out of reach as it leapt at me and then headed back, shouting at Cutter to hurry.

At the end of the bridge he turned and threw down the torch behind him. I doused the area in oil and watched it catch and burn, the flames springing reassuringly high. Cutter stood at the end of the bridge clutching the paddle. Suddenly the predator bounded through the flames, screeching with pain but still intent on its prey. To my surprise Cutter held his ground and, as the predator leapt at him he swung the paddle. He hit it square in the face and it rebounded back into the fire. The bridge gave way under the impact and I watched the flaming beast fall to the ground below. Cutter looked appreciatively at the piece of wood he was carrying.

"...and I thought Cricket was only for Sassenachs," he said cryptically.

Dawn revealed a sea of predators below us, some already half-way up the tower. But it also revealed a cable car system, strung between the buildings and then off into the distance in the direction we wanted to go. There had been no cable car in Shymkent the last time I'd been here, but that was in another time line. Big solar panels and storage batteries were mounted on top of the building and miraculously it didn't take long to start the system. I had no idea if it would out run the predators but it seemed worth a try and it minimized the time I might need to carry Cutter for. We debated crossing another of the bridges to scavenge for warm clothes and shoes for Cutter but the predators were uncomfortably close. It was a risk neither of us was keen to take.

The cable car itself was luxuriously furnished with upholstered seats, large enough to stretch out on, and a thick deep carpet. A panoramic window stretched across one half, while the other contained a small kitchen and bathroom. Clearly people had made long journeys this way. Simple controls were situated by the door letting us shunt the car on and off the wire as we passed stations.

We travelled swiftly towards and then over the Altay mountains, then headed out towards the Pacific. We passed through two more cities along the way, both silent and deserted.

"What happened to the people?" asked Cutter.

"Some became predators. Others got eaten. People went through the anomalies and didn't come back. Whole communities become seized by a belief in transcendence. The nanites try to oblige, they all vanish." I shrugged. "As time has become more mixed up there have been fewer and fewer people, but more and more predators."

"What do they eat? When they can't get us that is."

"Each other sometimes, plants, there are some species of fish and insect, even some small mammals and birds, that don't seem to be susceptible to nanite mutation. Eventually packs starve if they don't find their way to better populated time zones. Once there, of course, the time zone ceases to have much by way of a population. If you go forward from this point in time, there is little to be seen. Pretty much all large animal life is dead by about a hundred years from now. Or at least it was, last time there were enough people in any time zone to study that sort of thing."

"But there was someone to build all this." Cutter went and stood at the cable car window, gazing at the lines of pylons, placed miles apart from each other stretching into the distance in either direction. "The human race hasn't unhappened itself yet." I forbore from pointing out that there was a distinction between people and humans and humans hadn't necessarily had anything to do with the cable car at all.

"Not yet, no," I agreed.

He turned his back to the view and stared at me intently. "Do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

"Not necessarily."

"Your name, Stephen, how did you come by it?"

"That's what the woman who gave me the nanites called me." I recalled her standing before me, leaning over, holding out her hand, the nanites drifting across the gap between us, a kind of smoky haze. They must have already been working within me at that point - the image is so much clearer in my mind than others of

my former life.

"She picked me up in the mid-21st century, that's a very dense period for anomalies. She was holed up in an old research station in the Antarctic studying the effects of the nanites as they crossed the species barrier. She was something of a pioneer in that regard. She had to conduct her research in secret."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know, last time I saw Helen was back in the Permian, we didn't part well." When I stole her map and notes.

"Helen? About my height, a little shorter, brown hair," he patted at his pockets. "Ach, I don't have a photograph of her anymore."

"I do," I pulled out a picture of Helen, as I had originally seen her, from my pack.

Cutter took it and then hit it with the back of his hand, "That's her, I should have *known* she'd be behind all this somehow."

"Many have said that," I said defensively, "but there is ample evidence that nanites had already crossed the species barrier before she began her research. Helen at least allowed some understanding of the process."

"Oh, I'm sure she acted all innocent. But believe me, I know Helen, her motives were always far from altruistic."

"I doubt you knew her as well as I did."

"I was *married* to her."

This took me aback somewhat. Helen had never mentioned a husband to me. But she was secretive by nature. She had lost someone in the timelines. Someone I sometimes suspected she was obsessively trying to recover, endlessly going back and forward, tweaking something here, pushing something there, experimenting, she always insisted. I had assumed that it was Stephen she sought to recover. I'd found a picture of him once and even worn his face for a while until Helen called me a love-sick puppy. I wondered, uncomfortably, now how much of that face I still had. I long ago had ceased wanting to look like Stephen Hart but I hadn't particularly wanted to look like anything else either. I'd lost the hair for an iridescent armoured scull cap that projected down my forehead and over my nose. I'd strengthened the bones in the rest of my face which probably changed their shape a bit.

But now I wondered if my name sake had been a side-show. I had been wondering how it was Cutter came from a past so radically different from the 21st centuries I had seen. Ones where the human race was already long gone, in any recognisable form at least. Had Helen somehow, finally, succeeded in controlling the time lines? I looked at Nick Cutter and pondered how much to tell him.

"I knew her for a hundred years," I said in the end. "She changed a lot in that time. This map was hers." The map, with the intriguing red mark around the anomaly Cutter had come through, the mark that had finally sparked my determination to go back. Had Helen been waiting by every anomaly on that map all through history, removing time travellers as they came through? Surely that was impossible, even for her?

Cutter stood up and leaned his forehead against the Window looking down, "Did you love her?" he asked.

"Did you?"

"For a time."

A few things were beginning to fall into place in my mind. Sub-texts of conversations I had had hundreds of years earlier. "You disagreed with her methods."

"Aye, I disagreed with her methods," he was almost shouting. "Time is not a laboratory. It's not a scientist's play ground. You must believe that Helen was never interested in improving things for anyone, just in knowledge for its own sake."

"You think knowledge for its own sake has no value?"

"It's a luxury you can't afford when people are dying."

"Nothing lasts forever, Cutter, everything becomes extinct eventually," even as I said it I knew I was parroting something Helen had said to me.

His face took on a fixed, disappointed look. "There is a value in compassion, Stephen. The heat death of the universe is not an excuse for callousness, manipulation and cruelty."

I looked away from his gaze. I realised that this had been at the heart of my final split with Helen, but still I felt the need to defend her in the face of his anger.

"Sometimes to be truly compassionate sacrifies have to be made. Sometimes the official response is wrong, destructive, driven by collective conservatism and incapable of flexible response. In the face of the collapse of bio-diversity and the barriers between the time zones it is necessary to take a wider view than individual lives."

"Stephen didn't believe that," Cutter said. He shook his head and sat down. "He believed the government approach was wrong, aye. But he never lost sight of the importance of individual lives."

His head dropped into his hands.

"I am not Stephen," I said eventually and realised that, even so long after my split with Helen, it cost me to acknowledge that.

He looked up. "I know," he said heavily.

He stood up again and turned away from me to the window once more, saying something quietly. It sounded like "No absolution here."

We travelled in silence for some time after that. Every so often Cutter glared at me across the cable car. He was company, and I was still grateful for that after so long alone, but I began to wonder if he was going to be difficult.

As if reading my thoughts he spoke up, "You can't come back through this anomaly with me."

"Why not?"

"I want to get back to my 21st century, not yours, not one where everyone has been used to travelling through time for centuries already. Not one where nanites have replaced evolution."

"Why does that mean I can't come with you?"

"Everything you've told me describes a progression, as you've gone back and forward through time, as your people have gone back and forwards through time, things have got worse and worse. If you come with me, I get committed to that sequence of events. If I go on my own, and I'm travelling backwards, then maybe, just maybe I'll get back to the time line I came from."

As I thought, he was going to be difficult. I had heard a lot of mad theories of time travel in my time and this made less sense than most.

He ran his hand through his hair. "You even look like him when you disagree with me," he said.

I felt myself smile at that. "I didn't agree with Helen so much," I admitted, "not at the end. Too many people were dying. She insisted that we could put it all right once we understood how to control the time lines but the chaos was spreading so fast. I thought it was time to start trying actively to put it right."

He glared at me a moment then his face relaxed and he looked out at the scenery once more. Obscurely I felt he had forgiven me for something, but I couldn't tell you for what. After that we chatted on and off for several hours, comparing notes, circling around the issues of Helen and Stephen. I never did tell him what I thought Helen was doing. He never told me who Stephen had been.

We were somewhere in eastern Xinjiang I judged. I was heating food in the kitchen when I heard Cutter gasp. I came through and looked out of the window. The World Mother stretched ahead of us as far as the eye could see.

I began opening the door of the cable car. I had spent some time earlier working out how to bypass the controls. There was no guarantee the system would continue to take us in the right direction and we didn't want to be trapped in it until we reached a station.

"What are you doing?" asked Cutter.

"She'll try to reach up to us, she's probably infested the pylons. We'll be safer flying."

"How fast can she move?"

"Fast enough," I said. "It's possible to out fly her but she doesn't tire."

"We'll wait. See if she reacts to our presence. Leave the door open so we can get out but I don't want us tired out before its necessary. How far do we have to go?"

I opened the map. "The anomaly opens, is open now, in a cave system near Lanzhou. It stays open for another three days."

"We wait," he said decisively. "Save your strength."

We waited several hours. After a bit I shut the door. We travelled past dozens of pylons rising out of the World Mother. As each one loomed up I watched it anxiously for strands of the World Mother snaking up the struts until Cutter told me to sleep, insisting there was no danger. To my surprise, I did. Cutter sat in the window, the map illuminated in one hand - the expanse of the World Mother stretching beyond him pinkish red and crystalline into the distance as the sun set.

In the morning the we left the car. The line of pylons had started to veer south of our heading.

"At the moment we're just another lump of metal moving around." Cutter cautioned me before we left. "Once we're out there we become something living. If she has enough awareness she'll come after us then."

I took his advice, after all his thoughts had been touched by the World Mother, and it was a good warning. I headed upwards as we left the car and almost immediately crystalline strands threw themselves up, trying to reach us. Fine, filament columns leaped into the air and I had to swerve in between them in aerial twists and turns as I rose higher. Eventually she stopped. Looking back I saw a landscape of looped crystal arches behind us, testament to our flight.

I circled round the mountains when we reached them. They rose out of the World Mother, strangely uncovered in her sea of white. Cutter was fiddling with the map, using its sensors to probe the area. He managed to get it to distinguish between the World Mother and her surroundings showing that the mountains were clear of her, inside as well as out.

"It's a trap," said Cutter.

"Do we have a choice?"

"No."

Cautiously we landed at the entrance to the cave system.

"She'll puruse us," said Cutter, "once we can't fly away."

"How do you know?"

He smiled at me, "It's what I'd do in her place."

I looked down the slope behind me to the World Mother far below and imagined her racing up the hill once we entered the tunnel mouth. I pulled the remains of my precious compound from my bag and shared it between us. It was probably no good, there was too much of her here, but it gave us some reassurance.

We ran, Cutter still limping with only one shoe. It was not long before the anomaly appeared ahead of us. Then Cutter stopped. I realised he was thinking of what he'd said earlier, about what would happen if we entered the anomaly together. We faced each other in silence for a moment and then, with a kind of crashing sound the World Mother rose up through the floor. She hadn't been behind us at all but had come up through the fabric of the mountain, knowing where we were heading.

Cutter threw himself to one side. A spur of crystal stood between us, between me and the anomaly. I ran to leap over it, but was too late, my outstretched wings became caught like a fly in a web as I cleared its top, strands weaving themselves around me.

"Run," I shouted. "Run."

He reached out to me, grabbing a foot and I kicked him viciously, forcing him to let go.

"Don't let her win. Run now. You wouldn't have let me come with you anyway."

He started towards me again. "I'm not losing anyone else," he said.

"Fucking Hell," I said, dredging Helen's turn of phrase from my memory, "you Neanderthal idiot! I'm dead already. What earthly point is served by you dying as well?" I kicked him again for good measure. As hard as I could.

Cutter staggered back with a look of horror. I felt the strands creeping over my shoulders and across my face. But I knew where she was now - racing through the mountain, heading for the anomaly, racing Cutter as he ran.

At last, he finally ran. He had opened the vials of compound, emptying them on the floor. Not enough to destroy her, but it slowed her down, confused her senses at the periphery. Confused my senses at the periphery as well, as she burrowed into my brain.

He was still within calling distance.

"Nick," I cried, my voice changing as the World Mother seized my vocal chords, "Nick, wait! I've got it all planned. I've worked out how to control the changes. I've *been* controlling the changes. I've remade the world. I'm putting it to rights. Come with me. See what I have done. We can live forever. Study everything. Do you hear me Nick? This time you have to come with me. I was

right."

He did not look back.