

Poor Reflection

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Chapter 1

The sea vessel 'Foundry' slid effortlessly through the coastal waters. Its path through the sea was marked not only by the wake and trail of disturbance it left in the water behind, but more so and for further its path was marked by the cloud of smoke that it continuously belched into the pristine skies. What the smoke revealed was a course that hugged the shore line accepting those deviations required by a vessel that, despite the black plumes, was clearly not powered by engines. The ship has sails, and although the hull gleamed the sails were marred with smoke which was a product of other industrious activities entirely.

The ships prow, which formed the leading edge of the its smooth glistening silver hull created a bow wave that pushed an undulating wake towards a much smaller wooden boat that had traveled from a coastal village. The lightly furred, long eared creatures looked in awe at the vast shining monster, the waves from which were even now causing their small craft to bob and dip. Steadying themselves with spears they waited for some sign or response to indicate their fate, for being intelligent they knew that for now their future was not in their hands alone.

“Circle the target” Captain Wellshorn called into the speaking tube that rose from the deck to a point that allowed him command his crew from the comfort of his elaborate captain’s chair. He glanced over his shoulder at the smaller, crude wooden ship that lay 100 yards off the starboard of his gleaming and sleek vessel. He examined his nails.

The ships rigging moved soundlessly through perfect pulley systems as the vast sails fine-tuned their response to the wind that howled about the ship. It turned and then straightened.

“Bring the discs to bear. Bombardiers fire at will” At his order Captain Wellshorn casually stood from his seat and ambled over to the railing that separated his vantage point from the drop to the sea. This would be worth seeing. The wind ruffled his reddish hair and the sun glinted from two smooth metal rails that ran around his head and across his face at eye level. Putting his hand behind his head he pulled gently and a neat yet complex looking optical contraption circumnavigated his head and clicked into position in-front of his eyes. He had named this contraption the ‘Seewell Mk2’. He had a small scar above his right eye. The ‘Seewell Mk1’ had almost blinded him. With the twist of a delicate lever one lens telescoped out by a few inches and he turned his gaze to the enemy ship. ‘Yes’, he thought, the sea was just calm enough to use his favorite weapon, although it was a delicate decision.

The creatures on the enemy ship waved wooden projectile weapons at the ‘Foundry’, like smaller versions of the basilicas he had on deck. Most carried spears. He was sure that they wouldn’t risk attacking, he was simply too impressive.

He heard the bombardiers each call “fire” in near unison. Flicking the optical device back behind his head he glanced down in time to see a row of four gleaming disks, each about the size of a mans head, fly low from the side of his vessel. They skipped over the gentle waves like flat pebbles thrown at low trajectory. The third disk hit a rogue wave and careered

sideways cutting a sharp arc in the water before sinking. The rest continued skipping across the span between the boats. The edges of the disks were blurred and insubstantial.

As each disk struck the enemy vessel's wooden hull, thud...thud.....thud, those on board, unfortunate in being close enough to see them clearly, would notice that the edges of these discs were formed from a ring of sharp teeth like a circular saw. Thus embedded in the hull they waited the few timed seconds before....and for this Wellshorn flipped the 'Seewell Mk2' back to his eye...a sudden triple explosion shredded the side of the enemy vessel, which sunk out of sight within seconds. He turned and walked to his seat.

As if to form a punctuation mark the third rogue disk exploded from within the depths creating a fountain of foam and water and then a fine mist that flowed over the boat and cooled the captain's neck in a most satisfying fashion.

"Hmm". He knew it was an extravagant and showy way of dealing with these primitives, but they were close enough to the shore that anyone witnessing it would see how swiftly they had dealt with that inadequate vessel of war.

Leaning over to one side and reaching down he pulled two levers out of a bank of twelve that ran alongside his chair. Behind him a pair of rigid flags flipped into place along with a high tone from a steam whistle. The first flag held a simple blocky image of a man waving from the water, the second showed the image of a strange flat object hanging from a chain. Wellshorn looked thoughtful for a moment and rubbed his face, then leant over and pulled a third lever. Another flag appeared that showed a silhouette of a face with exaggerated stubble around the chin. His messages were thus. One, pick up any survivors, two, prepare the salvage magnet and three, bring me my razor.

It was, in particular, his 'Kite-Razor *Plus*' that he had requested. It was an extravagant and showy way of shaving but the crew were close enough to see him, so..... Well it was the done thing after all.

A victory like this was never passed over. It was one of the best opportunities the crew had for salvaging raw materials for their expensive vocation. The entire crew were engineers. They included chefs and deck hands, all of the required crew for a sea going mission, certainly, but each considered themselves chef-engineers and deckhand-engineers. They worked alongside navigator-engineers, gunner-engineers, and submariner-engineers. It was not unusual to see designs for some new contraption scrawled on the side of a barrel and every crewman had scraps of paper bundled inside their seaman's clothing. They each waited for their turn within the foundries and workshops that allowed each of them to create the prototypes and final working models that occasionally became an integral part of the voyage, but would more often be a whimsy that would require recycling. It was the obsession of their race but as such they used energy, wood and metals at an astonishing rate. The recycling of their carefully wrought and beloved objects almost as soon as they were made was considered necessary and inevitable, but believing that their pleasure came from the designing and the making, this often didn't matter. Nevertheless the rationing of paper and workshop time was a fraught political situation and formed a complex social structure managed by a committee with as much pomp and self-importance as you might find anywhere.

It was due to their continual need for energy that very early on in their journey some bright minded medic-engineer had struck upon a new invention. They had later seen the other primitive race utilize the same simple idea, so it was not as such a new-new invention, but was considered one of the most ingenious answers to their continuing lack of resources. It did

away with the wasteful energy burning engines that had powered the ship, and meant they could save coal and other fuels for their smelts, foundries and workshops. The invention was the *sail*. They had worked out a design of post that would hold the large cloth sheets above the ship and the rigging that would orchestrate the delicate movements that, with some fine tuning, made the ship the most efficient wind borne vessel ever likely to be seen anywhere. Most amazing of all is that this was the first significant navel voyage this race had ever made. They had tinkered, experimented and learned so quickly since setting off from their home port that the inevitable engineering spirit had allowed them to take a huge but necessary technological back-step with the re-invention of the Sail. And thus it was that their relatively inefficient, smoky and noisy coal powered ship became a very efficient, occasionally silent but more often noisy and smoky sailing vessel with a basic energy cost of zero. Unfortunately it was only really quiet if they shut down the smelts and foundries that filled a large portion of the ships bulk, and this was unthinkable, but the principle was sound.

And so it was that this shining monster, belching clouds of steam and smoke, and filled with the clashing of metals and the whine of drills and saws had reached this momentous point in it's maiden voyage, sitting next to the place where a wooden boat full of proud and simple folk had been blown out of the water in a matter of seconds.

'Sir, the salvage operation is complete'. Clementine, Captain Wellshorn's second in command was now standing on the captains deck, having climbed the short set of steps that led up to his privileged and elevated view-point at the rear of the 'foundry'.

'Mister Clementine', Wellshorn sighed, 'I wish you would show the crewmen a little class, why don't you use my lifting platform instead of the stairs. I *have* given you permission. You are an officer.'

Mister Clementine didn't even glance at the platform. He had watched Wellshorn use it often enough and he held his boiling contempt in check.

'No matter Clementine, you have saved me calling up a man. I'm sure they are busy with the salvaged materials. I shall walk among the crew. Join me.'

Wellshorn stepped towards the platform.

Clementine was in the presence of the four things that he held most in contempt in all his known experience. The chair, an elaborate throne with its levers that sent futile commands to the crew was the least of his hates. Flying in the air far behind the command deck was a small kite, its wire attached to a metal box on the railings of the deck. This was the 'kite-razor plus'. It was his third greatest hate. It remained lower in his list only because he had been roped into helping his brainless captain in designing the one part that allowed it to work, a flexible tube of interlocking metal pieces snaked from the side of the box. This tube, only 3 millimeters in width could transmit the power created by the pull of an ascending kite and the rotation created by the cogs within the box to the handheld device that was attached to its end. His beautifully designed flexible rotating worm of metal was what allowed Wellshorn alone to apply a handful of spinning blades, safely held behind a perforated sheet of fine metal, to his face in order to trim the reddish stubble that grew there. It was Wellshorn's Kite-Razor *plus*. Undoubtedly it contained some great concepts, but it was used for a pompous cause by an even more pompous man.

The Captain had just stepped onto his platform. This was Clementine's second most hated object. If Clementine had not come up to speak with the captain, the clueless idiot would have called one of the crew away from a valuable job, probably under the pretense of winding in the kite, which was bad enough, but inevitably he could then become nothing but extra weight, required to allow the captain's lifting platform to drop to the main deck. The

platform was a simple device counterbalanced by a heavy stone. The weight of two men would allow it to drop where it would be locked in place. When Wellshorn wished to ascend the mass of the stone alone was enough to lift him back to his deck and his ridiculous seat.

Clementine stepped onto the platform and pulled a lever. He was now stood next to his most jaw grinding, gut rotting hate, the Captain.

“Clementine, tell me, how is the feeling among the men?”

They had stepped from the platform and were immediately among the milling crew.

“Not too bad sir. The committee has had more appeals against the current workshop allocation than is usual. Maybe the crew are a little restless”

“I’m sure that recent victory will bolster their spirits, don’t you agree Clementine?”

Clementine looked away, trying to hide any emotion that would rise from that comment. The Native’s ship may have left the port to make a stand, a gesture of resistance if attacked, more likely just to show a presence as the ‘foundry’ passed, but equally it could have been the transport vessel for an emissary. Wellshorn had destroyed them in order to show off. Clementine knew this; however the crew was less inclined to think that way. For Clementine it was a situation which, had he been Captain, he would have handled so very differently. For the Crew it was the chance to fire guns and salvage metal. They were not political thinkers, and neither was the Captain.

Wellshorn broke into Clementine’s thoughts in the way only he could.

“I will talk to one of them” he stopped walking. They stood near the door that led down to the senior chambers at the stern of the ship. Both Clementine’s and Wellshorn’s cabins were located within its confines but when the weather was good Clementine was known, much to the Captain’s distaste, to sleep on deck among the rigging.

A pair of crewmen were gutting fish nearby. A trolley of filleted meat stood to one side and three others were filled with as near as possible selected pieces of what was left over. Some fish bones were usable for immensely fine trigger mechanisms or other intricate parts of the Foundry's more delicate mechanical equipment. Oils extracted from the waste had numerous uses once refined. Other fatty pieces made fine bait or feed.

"You, man" called the Captain.

There was no response. An embarrassing silence settled between the two senior men as the crewmen continued to split flesh and chat about their new designs.

".....it was only an idea Jack, don't bite me head off, I'm not suggesting we all wear them. They'd be useful is all I thought"

"Yeah, useful for looking like a tit" the other sneered.

"Hey, Grahams" Clementine barked.

The first speaker, a man with grimy hands, holding a hook shaped knife spun on the spot.

"Yessir" he looked directly at Clementine.

A hardly discernible sideways nod from the second in command directed Grahams' attention to the Captain.

"Oh" He turned a few degrees and snapped into a more formal pose. "Yessir"

A wry smile passed over Clementine's mouth.

Wellshorn spoke, but as always in these situations his strong belief in his right to command barely disguised his discomfort at person to person interactions. "Man, err, Grahams was it? Well how are things? Hmmm?" the captain had stuck his chest out like he always did.

"Fine cappin." The fish gutter stuck his chest out too. "Good fish sir, very oily." he reached behind and grabbed one and proceeded to wave it around in front of Wellshorn. "Only the guts are real stubborn in these, and they taste like puke. Me and jack was saying last week, 'god these taste like puke', 'I bet them in the back aren't eating this shit' I said, 'bet they 'ave

some nice stuff saved' I said. Didn't I Jack" he looked back to Jack who was looking a bit grim knowing that Grahams was doing his usual insensitive rant. He could say anything at this point. It mattered nothing that it was the Captain he was speaking to. "Got the shits real bad after eating these" An audible groan came from behind Grahams who continued unabashed, "still they're good and oily" He took the fish in his left hand and held his right hand up to prove the point

"Grahams!" growled Clementine

"yessir." He said, accepting the ticking off.

"Anyway sir, sirs." He said nodding to Clementine, "I had this idea for a new whatsit thingy", he was gesturing around his middle. Jack groaned again. This time Grahams name was just recognizable from within the guttural sound. Grahams took no notice. "Could be very useful I reckon. I got the plans here." He reached his hand into his jerkin but then withdrew it, realizing his hands were in no fit state to be in there. "Anyway like I was saying..."

"Grahams, save it for the committee." Clementine added kindly, "The captain was wondering how you felt the battle went"

"Very slick sir, and we got some good metals an' stuff. Good job we finished them so quick sir." He looked back to the Captain "Else they may have been real trouble, yessir, a right nasty looking bunch, big spears and stuff."

Clementine smiled, he liked this Grahams and he wasn't too dim, a surprise. The Captain wouldn't have caught his sarcasm.

* * *

A wail rose above the noise on deck. A voice called from above. "Ship ahoy." It was natural, yet entirely senseless that most people looked upwards towards the voice where their chances

of seeing said ship were minimal at best. Nevertheless it didn't take long for the crew's eyes to begin to seek more sensible directions in which to gaze. The Captain had done neither. He had simply turned on his heels and walked back to his deck. Clementine had an excuse to use the stairs instead of the lifting platform this time. It would only lift one person.

They were back near Wellshorn's chair and only a little sun showed above the horizon to their right. "Captain?" Clementine turned to Wellshorn who was flipping his Seewell MK2 in front of his eyes. "One second Clementine."

It was now a few hours since they had met, and destroyed the native's vessel. They had encountered a span of water between two pieces of land. They didn't know if it was a river or just two landmasses but they were slowing down to assess the situation. There was a heavy boiling fog that had shielded the waterway and they hadn't wanted to get beached within enemy territory. Clementine drew out a standard retractable telescope and also looked foreword to the approaching ship.

"My god, it's as big as us" the captain exclaimed looking to Clementine.

He ran to his speaking tube. "Bring me side on and come to a halt, immediately. Keep the rigging poised, bring all starboard weapons to bear, all remaining crew man the rigging and hold position."

The ship did exactly that, the sails dropped and the rigging loosened. "Sir" a voice piped from the speaking tube "the other ship has done the same, we're keeping look out".

This was one situation where Clementine could happily watch the captain work. He was a fast thinker in a tactical situation and seemed to have a knack for warfare. If this ship belonged to the Natives they were in for a fight. However that would only be necessary because the captain's shoddy politics had made that the inevitable outcome.

The only clue to the opposing ships size came from the tips of the masts that stuck above the fog and an occasional vague suggestion of shape when the screen of thick mist momentarily thinned.

“What *are* they doing?”

“They appear to be blocking our passage sir, protecting something maybe?”

“Hmmm, I don’t like waiting games! But it would be foolish to rush into that fog; they may be hiding more vessels behind.”

“I agree Captain, but we also can’t remain battle ready all night, the boat will drift unless we drop anchor, and keeping the whole team alert till morning will leave them useless to fight”

“Agreed Clementine, but I need a little time to think, the crew will stay as ordered for now. Order a salinity test of the water, I want to know if that’s a river or not.” Wellshorn sat on his throne and stroked his chin pensively.

Clementine had walked to the front of the ship where some steps led up to the prow. He was leaning on the railing feeling uneasy. The sun had set but in doing so it had made him feel that something was very wrong. It had taken a long while to fathom it out but he had eventually decided that it was due to the light. Somehow it disturbed him. He had painted as a youth and knew about light and how shadows formed. Here the shadows and the sky didn’t seem to match. He turned one hundred and eighty degrees and saw the moon had risen further above the horizon, and then turned further so he looked down the boat, then back to where the occasional deck light and cabin glimmered from the other vessel through the shifting fog. His skin chilled even as the realization was forming in his mind. No, it couldn’t be right. It was impossible. He sprinted back towards the captain’s deck. He passed a basilica team, two men waiting by their large weapon, like an overgrown crossbow, all menacing shadows and taunted energy, its thick, fiercely tipped five-foot arrow waiting to fly.

“Prepare a flare and stand by, now” he raced onwards reaching the steps up to the Captain and jumping them 4 at a time.

“Sir, I must show you something”

Wellshorn lifted his head from his hand and looked at Clementine’s dark shape in puzzlement. Clementine shouted into the speaking tube “where’s that flare?”

“Ready sir”

“Fire! Fire it now”

He straightened, catching sight of the moon again and turned to look towards the veiled ship even then realizing that his demonstration was totally unnecessary. Every hair on his body stood on end and he trembled slightly as he pointed to where, in the dark night sky a bright object showed through the thinning Fog wall. “Sir”

Wellshorn stood looking where Clementine pointed then in his own moment of comprehension turned and looked at the sky behind them, the flare lifted up with a whistle dragging Wellshorn’s attention back to the shocking truth of what he was seeing. As it reached its summit Wellshorn gasped.

Directly above them was their flare and slightly behind both it and their ship the moon glowed brightly. Ahead and above the other ship another flare rose in exact synchronicity and beyond it another moon had finally lifted above the fog.

Chapter 2

“Sir? I’m sorry sir, please! Must we do this at night?”

Two men sat in a paddleboat hanging from the side-wall of the ship. In the dim moonlight fear made their eyes glow with too much white. Those four unblinking lights unsettled the

captain. “Yes we must young man” Wellshorn barked “do you think I’m going to sleep well wondering what the hell is going on here? hmm? Do you think my dreams will be sweet knowing that there’s a ..well a ..that we are here and also there ..or maybe that there’s a ..well, yes you see. It’s most necessary!

Clementine stepped in. “Pettin, if what we suspect is true then you will be in no danger, and you’ll be saving us all from a night of near insanity” he smiled.

“’s not right sir, with all respect. Goes against everything that’s as it should be sir. Gives me the bloody creeps if you’ll grant me the liberty to say sir”

“You have your orders men” Wellshorn snapped “are you saying you are refusing them?”

“We can’t rightly sir” Richardson, Willy Pettin’s scouting partner and official senior looked momentarily pleading “can we?”

“No you can’t. Lower away” Wellshorn called behind him and the sounds of a winch and ratchet accompanied the two hapless and reluctant adventurers down to the sea.

“The crew are becoming most insubordinate Clementine, unruly you might say, they lack respect!”

“They’re terrified sir, and this has certainly shaken me up.”

“Shhhh, good ‘Mother’ Clementine” Wellshorn looked around him “I sometimes wonder if you are really officer material!. What will the men think?”

He looked down from the opening in the ships hull that had housed the small boat and winch, he heard the paddles begin to operate and saw the beam of the two men’s lamp move back and forth across the sea ahead of them.

Down in the boat the two sailors Richardson and Pettin sat half-prone, paddling the boat. It had two sets of pedals side by side that the men operated with their feet. This turned a single paddle that was housed within an open inner hull of the small boat between the two men’s

legs. Richardson held the rudder in his left hand while Pettin held a compressed oil lantern with a range of lens settings. It was currently set to beam. Cloud and the enduring mist had begun to cover the moon so they were rapidly losing the helpful light it provided. The exertion of the past five minutes and the total lack of anything terrifying had dulled their fear. They had relaxed into their usual idle banter.

“George?” Pettin turned to Richardson “Do you think if I...”

“No I don’t Willy, it’s called mutiny”

“Well technically”

“No Willy, definitely”

“What if it’s an Accident?”

“You mean if you accidentally kill the Captain?”

“Yes”

“Well then it would be an Accident.” George Richardson looked squarely at Willy Pettin, or at least where he knew him to be. “Wouldn’t it?”

“Of course. But do you think anyone would mind?”

“Mind if the Captain was dead? Or mind that you killed him?”

“Well what’s the difference?”

“Lots Willy.” He rubbed his face. ”Take me for example. I might not give a rat’s ass if the Captain popped his toffee nosed pompous clogs, I’m sure there are some who might even do a little dance”

“On his dead corpse” Willy shone the lamp in George’s face.

“Hey idiot!!” Richardson shielded his eyes. “Look, him dying is one thing, but if you kill him and say for example I become captain.”

“Hehe, yeah right”

“I said for example. If I became captain then I’d want to know for sure who the resident Captain killer was, wouldn’t I? I’d be like a bit worried in case I wasn’t up to your Oh so high standards and might be a little concerned that I’d get a cosh round my noggin one night. It stands to reason and the ship ain’t that big so forget it.”

“Well it helps me relax”

“What!! Thinking about killing people helps you relax? I’m turning us round, Captain or no Captain!”

“Hehe, don’t be silly. I’m kidding”

The pair fell into silence for a few minutes, the rhythmic sound of the paddle and the movement of the boat on the gentle waves absorbed them.

“So what do you reckon we’ll find Willy?”

“I reckon it’s a boat just like ours only full of Women sailors just like us”

“Oh really? Fuck, imagine what the Captain would look like”

“That’s not nice I was enjoying that thought, you just ruined it”

They both started giggling. Once their mirth had subsided George passed Willy a leather pouch.

“Make us a smoke Willy”

Again they traveled in silence. The fog was beginning to form around them. Willy had put the lamp down and it now shone ineffectually against the side of the boat.

“I’m glad you can roll a cigarette in the Dark Willy, I’m not sure I can keep us straight for long though.”

“Nearly there” A flame flared up in Willy’s hand and quickly died but it was alight long enough and Willy let out a satisfied moan. Two deep glowing red embers waved in front of George’s face. He took one and they both leant further back in their seats and slowed their pedaling a little while they enjoyed the tobacco in the darkness.

A few moments later George broke the silence “right then” *fizz*, George’s cigarette butt hit the water. He stretched in his seat. *Fizz*, Willy’s butt did the same.

“Better get some light going again.”

Willy leant forward and lifted the lantern high. At exactly that moment they were suddenly blinded by a bright flash directly ahead, and their boat struck something solid, throwing them forward from their seats. “Shit”. The light stopped abruptly.

At that point too many things flashed through their minds. Firstly they were both struggling to get back onto their seats; secondly they had both been dazzled by the bright light that had briefly shone directly into their faces leaving them half blind before it quickly vanished. The last thought was Willy’s alone, and it was the horrific hot growing fear that you only get when you know you have done something monumentally stupid. He had dropped the lantern overboard.

“Get the light back on!”

George was beginning to backpedal frantically, fighting against Willy’s legs that were tangled up in his own pedals.

“err. George. Oh shit, shit.” the pedals were scraping against his legs “ouch, hold on”

“The light?”

“Its gone” He had managed to get his feet back on the pedals, and they were slowly backing away. “I dropped it.” He was feeling hot with embarrassment.

“Well pick it up again.”

“I can’t, it went overboard.”

“Fuck Willy, tell me you didn’t.”

“I just told you I did, fuck, I wasn’t expecting to hit something, what was it George, what was it?”

“What do you think, idiot, what we was looking for. OK stop pedaling, we need to check it out.”

“I’ve still got the matches, hold on.” Willy rummaged in his pockets, “Are you ready for this?”

“Do it!”

“Three, two, one, here we go” Willy struck the match and held it cupped it in his hands to get it going.

What they saw was on one hand totally out of place, terribly impossible considering the situation, yet on the face of it relatively familiar in itself. All they saw was their own shadowy shapes reflected at a distance of about twenty feet. Willy’s face stood out quite starkly in the light of the match held in front of his chest.

“So it is a mirror, I mean we hit it, right?”

“I suppose so, but it must be huge! Let’s move forward again.”

The match went out and they pedaled in darkness for a few seconds.

When they lit the next match they recoiled in shock. They were maybe only 10 feet away, face to face with themselves. The match blew out. “This is getting creepy” Willy lit another.

“Its just a mirror. It’s us, no big deal right?”

“Of course, it’s obviously us. No other boat would have someone as ugly as you in it” They laughed. The realization that although it was of unworldly proportions it was just a mirror curtailed their terror, though their hands still shook from the adrenaline coursing through their bodies.

Having completed their simple task they now had a tougher one to contemplate.

“So clever clogs, how do we get back without the light you dropped eh?”

“Dunno” Willy was feeling embarrassed again, so his words were down to a minimum. ”Ask them.” he said, nodding invisibly ahead into the darkness.

Thromp.....sssssslock.....thromp.....sssssslock.....thromp

Willy talked to himself.

“Damn, bugger, five minutes, five minutes in an empty room with that sodding captain and a meat cleaver, that’s all I ask”

Thromp.....sssssslock.....thromp....

“You go out on one little boat trip, look at some sodding mirror for 10 seconds and suddenly everyone thinks your some bloody expert on giant sodding mirrors”

He was trying not to look at the other him reflected in the huge glassy wall. Partly because it was beginning to get pretty disconcerting, and secondly because as with all mirrors the reflecting surface lay some distance underneath the glass. This mirror was so big that in this case he assumed that surface lay some four feet beneath the glass he climbed. This meant that his reflection, the only visually solid thing up here was some eight feet away. The glass was so clear that he felt he was climbing thin air.

He slammed the large rubber suction cup held in his hand against the glass above his head, *Thromp*. A valve closed and a vacuum held the cup in place. He twisted his foot and a valve in the cup beneath that foot opened and he sucked the cup away from the wall, *Ssssssssslock*, he lifted it and, *thromp*, kicked it back home a little higher up.

“And, sod the spirit of sodding fucking scientific enquiry too!!! Who cares what’s at the top, I don’t”

“Willy, stop your whining”

“Oh are you still there, Mr. George ‘I’ll sit in the bloody boat and that’s an order’ arse face.”

He couldn’t believe he was still in earshot. It meant he had a long way to climb.

“I am your superior....technically”

“No, you are my posterior...technically” he heard George laugh lightly and heard no more.

It was now daylight. They had returned to the ship following their initial nighttime sortie to glowing praise and plenty of hearty backslapping. This was followed by the assurance that they were clearly suited to this type of work and could continue the exploration of the barrier at first light. They would have the honour of discovering how high it was and what was behind, “no arguments” the captain had beamed at them.

Willy strained to the task. *Thromp.....sssssslock.....*

thromp....squeeeek. Every now and then a suction cup would slip making Pettin’s heart jump.

“Fuck”

When he finally caught sight of the vague and insubstantial top edge of the mirror Willy hooted. He picked up the pace. *Thromp..sslock..thromp..squeeeek.....sslock...thromp.* Finally as he pushed his hand above his head it met no resistance. He slammed the cup onto the Horizontal surface and used it to haul himself onto the top of the mirror, his eyes closed tight with the effort. He lay on the cool glass surface of the mirror top and turned his eyes to the view ahead.

“Noooooooooooo, oh fuckit!!!!” He lifted his head and covered his face with aching fingers.

Again he was looking at himself, laid out on the glass with a pained exclamation on his features. This time however he was eye to eye with the other him and he looked as pissed of and tired as he knew he felt. Rallying his frustrations he noted that this seemed more like a normal mirror, not the thick glassy one he now stood on. The surface was barely visible, or perhaps not at all.

“What the fuck?” he stood up.

Half heartedly, because he knew he wasn't going to climb further without a rest he slammed the Suction cup against the new mirror surface. *Frooomp*. The difference in sound wasn't necessary to immediately know that something was wrong. While he was climbing, the cups had held tightly to the mirror with little or no movement. Now, although he couldn't push any further or pull the suction cup away without opening the valve, his hand had total freedom of movement in every direction. It was like the surface had no friction. Come to think of it he couldn't see any surface. There was just him, looking exactly, well he assumed exactly like himself looking back doing exactly the things he was doing. He took his hand out of the strap that held the cup to his palm and let it go. Both his and his opposite's cup dropped to the floor. There they sat, still attached to each other and not moving or falling one direction or the other, until it started to roll. The surface must have been slightly titled, and the suction cup began to career away, along the invisible new barrier. He couldn't risk chasing along the glass surface and resigned to let it go. He kicked forwards, hurting his toe.

He spat at the surface in front of him. His spittle and that of his counterpart met and spread like it had hit a normal mirror yet the flattened spittle simply fell in exact unison to the glass floor and began to spread out. It didn't smear or streak and nothing remained except a perfectly clear view of himself and down to the sea where his ship sat, indistinct in the haze.

Willy's heart thudded. He really didn't like what was happening. He could swear that there was no surface between himself and his reflection. He held out a finger and cautiously pressed it forwards. His double matched him exactly. When their fingers met he gasped a little and immediately slammed his whole palm forward. It felt like he was touching palms with someone. It felt almost warm and..... He looked up at his face. He hadn't realised until then that he was crying. His skin began to prickle with the fear.

"Please....oh fuck, please..stop it" he threw his fist high trying to outwit the Doppelganger. Their fists struck. "no...don't" His other hand slapped hard, his eyes scrunched up and full of

water. There was a clapping sound as his palms met. “Its not a mirror, It’s me. Why is this happening?..oh please...please stop it. Let me past” Pushing with his entire upper body he wrestled palm to palm with his hateful image. He tried to touch his mirror face but the others fingers got in the way. He ducked down and tried to roll quickly under his opponent but simply struck his own rolling body. Suddenly he felt a strong tug at his back. “aaagrrgh” he spun round but no one was behind. Finally his racing mind remembered the thin message wire that ran down to his friend in the boat. He wanted to be back with George, he didn’t like it here. Why had they made him come? It wasn’t fair.

Sniffing away his tears, he and himself, back to back slid down and sat on the cool glass floor. It was then he began to sob uncontrollably. After a few moments he pulled something out of his shirt.

George felt the message wire pull tighter, a brief tug. He waited, looking upwards. A few seconds later an object appeared traveling down the wire. Finally a weighted piece of paper slid into his hand. On it were just two words that caused George to look up, concern lining his features. “Willy.....Willy!” he shouted as loud as he could. The tear-stained message simply read “*Help me*”

George had raced back to ‘The Foundry’ as fast as he could manage without his partner and best mate pedaling with him. He could hardly control the fear and worry for Willy. Willy might moan but he never showed real emotion. His message had torn at George, as he knew that it meant only one thing. Willy was terrified. He could have been in threat of imminent death and the message would have read more like ‘Hey you lazy bastard, get your arse up

here'. George paced angrily, frequently looking at the Captain with barely disguised hatred.

"I'm going back, just give me another set of suction cups"

Clementine was staring up through the fog with a shiny brass telescope hoping it would be thin enough that he could catch sight of Willy. Then he did. A gap had appeared in the mist and Clementine saw Willy sat high in the air dangling his legs over an edge that Clementine couldn't see, like he was floating. He was just sat there, maybe with his head in his hands, he wasn't sure but he could tell he was rocking back and forth in a way that Clementine felt might put him at significant risk of slipping off and falling to his certain death.

"Mr. George, you've done quite enough for now, let me think."

"Err. Sir I've seen him" Clementine didn't take his telescope off Willy's image.

"What's he doing?" Richardson raced up to Clementine "Is he OK?"

The second in command looked at the Captain rather than George Richardson. "Nothing. Sir, he's just sitting there...I think"

"Just sitting there? What does he think this is? The lazy oaf, this is an outrage! I'll have him courtmar..." His sentence was cut short by George's hands closing round his windpipe.

Clementine grabbed him and pulled him away. The Captain was outraged. He pulled a pistol from his belt. The gun was gleaming steel with a long barrel and elaborate handle.

"You'll pay for that." He took aim. Clementine pushed George aside. "Captain, no." The gun was rock steady in the Wellshorn's hand, and effortlessly tracked George's movement to the floor, now pointing down to where George lay sprawled, his face was bright red.

Before the Captains offended upper-class sensibilities could take over and pull the trigger Clementine called to two men. "You and you, take him down to the brig." He pointed at George. The men moved into range of the Captains pistol with obvious trepidation. They helped George to his feet and led him away. The Captain called after him.

"You'll pay for that. As soon as I get back, I swear!!"

It took a second for the words to sink in. Clementine turned quickly to the Captain.

“You’re going up there?”

“Yes I am. And I’m going to thrash that lazy slob to within an inch of his life. Can I not trust anyone? He spun round and headed aft to his private quarters.”

Ten minutes later the Captain had returned. He was still furious and was presenting himself in his full military officer finery.

Two pistols sat at his hip. His ceremonial sword lay in a bright green scabbard across his back. His left forearm held a shining metal spring-shield. As he approached Clementine his right hand punched a button on the inside of his left wrist and the shield sprang into action. It consisted of 6 light but hardened steel triangular plates that normally sat folded under each other as one thick shining wedge, the point of which sat at mid forearm secured on a pivot. The mechanism that deployed the shield sat under the six metal sections and around the arm. On hitting the button five of the segments rotated at their point. The top one traveled furthest, completing almost a full circle until it met back with the bottom most segment. Each subsequent one traveled one sixth less distance. With a metallic *Schinnngg* the shield formed into a circular six-segmented plate. “Clementine! You will personally take me to the mirror base. We leave immediately!”

“Yes sir” Clementine climbed into the small boat. He was concerned. The Captain seemed to have really lost his notebook this time. He looked like he was going into battle. The equipment he carried would make the climb arduous. He kept his mouth shut. In this frame of mind the Captain may demote him or even kill him without hesitation or regard for the reaction it would cause among the crew.

The Captain jumped into the small boat and sat at the front looking forward. He was apparently not going to pedal.

The boat was lowered and they set off. The sun was rising in the sky and as the captain removed his sword with a flourish it reflected the sun with a blinding flash. He turned and sat looking back at Clementine, his sword pointing forwards.

“I will have respect and co-operation from the crew Clementine! And that includes you.”

“You have my full respect Captain and that of the crewmen.”

Their society had one significant problem regarding hierarchy. This lay in the fact that as a race they only had an estimated 500 years of known history. As far as all records show they're entire people descended from four Children. The exact reason for those children finding themselves at the center of their current homeland was unclear although many theories existed and were fiercely contested. One of these original ancestors was a girl of maybe 10 years. The others were infants. Two boys maybe 4 or 5 and a baby girl. The eldest, barely more than a baby herself had nurtured her charges in an unknown environment. The land was fertile and luckily they had survived. However this meant that only 20 or 25 generations had passed since this mysterious time and with no great history to speak of people didn't tend to think in terms of 'betters'. They knew they all descended from the same four people, they were all brothers and sisters.

The society had existed almost purely as a meritocracy but in time those who held power naturally tended to try and bestow their power and influence on their children. This they inevitably managed to a degree but it was a recent change. This shift was what allowed an unrounded and unstable character such as Wellshorn to take command of an expedition such as this. The power bestowed to this new breed of rulers was fragile and it did not sit well in the minds of those they lorded over.

“I know the men question my right to command. They feel that I was given this esteemed position through birth and not ability!”

Clementine knew exactly why Wellshorn was given this command. The opportunity was only there because of his Mothers influence but he was also a natural warrior and an accomplished military tactician. He had fought through the wild-lands that had separated their home from the sea and had been glorious in battle. He was the perfect man to command a warship as part of an attacking fleet, but he was not the man to head a mission of discovery. He was not a thinker or a politician. It was the fault of his people to believe that this mission should be a military one. Somewhere in their past a precedent had been set, one of discovery and expansion, but discovery in order to control, to bend the land to their will and their needs, and to consume what they found. Clementine knew that on their return the discovery of a new race would start discussions that would lead to an invasion.

“Sir, you proved your right to lead this mission in the ravines and plains of the Wild-lands. The belief that this mission would subsequently also face hostility made your selection as Captain the most logical one sir.”

Wellshorn grinned. Clementine didn't like it. When Wellshorn got an angry bloodlust, especially in battle, an intelligence came over him that was otherwise never present. This may be why he always fought as a first resort. It allowed him to think in the way that made him most powerful, it brought the best out in him. You couldn't really blame him for that.

“Correct Clementine, but you don't really agree do you! When I asked to have you as my second it was because you had skills that I lacked. You are slow and thoughtful, measured, and I needed that. But you believe we got the priorities wrong. I can see it now. You feel this should be a peaceful mission of discovery, to search for allies, friends, to form links. As such I think that you would like me as *your* second in command to provide the military zeal incase of trouble. Am I right?”

“Please Captain, the decision was not mine and however I feel, you are the Captain. It is my role to support you in your decisions and to help make this voyage a success. It *has* been a

success with you as Captain. My personal thoughts about whether or not it could be done differently are of no consequence. I repeat you have my loyalty and respect Captain”

Wellshorn growled and looked over his shoulder. He looked back and brought his sword close to his face. Sticking out his tongue he ran it briefly over the cutting edge and grimaced slightly. When he pulled the sword away Clementine could see that Wellshorn had cut his tongue. The captain smiled, wiping blood onto his lips and then seemed to savour the taste like a wine. He looked directly at Clementine and his eyes seemed to flare slightly. It was like taking a drug to maintain his clarity of thought, to hold onto the fighting lust, the taste of blood to keep him operating in the way he did best. Having been denied a fight by Clementine’s careful reply he needed to fuel his anger in other ways. For the first time in a long while Clementine felt like a child. He was seeing the Captain in a way that filled him with a kind of awe, a fearful respect for something that he could never really understand.

For a few minutes Clementine had been able to see their vague reflection approaching the mirror. Wellshorn had not taken his eyes off of Clementine’s face and he was feeling like prey.

“Err Captain, we are nearly there. This should be the spot where George and Pettin stopped.”

The fog, although thinner, still sat around the base of the mirror so they couldn’t see the tiny figure of Pettin sitting at the top.

When they reached the mirror the Captain sheathed his sword and rotated the spring-shields plates until they clicked back into place. He picked up the climbing cups and attached them first to his feet, then his hands. He rammed the first cup onto the shiny surface and then used it’s anchorage to haul the boat to a safe position.

“Captain” Clementine stood up holding a spool of thin wire and a notebook. “Take a message wire” he clipped the spool to the boat and the end of the wire to Wellshorn’s Jacket.

“With the greatest respect sir, go easy on Pettin, this is a strange thing to cope with.”

The captain simply growled again.

“And good luck Captain” Wellshorn began to climb.

Clementine sat in the boat looking about him. The fog obscured his view but just as he was about to lie back he noticed something floating in the water nearby, a dark shape. He maneuvered the small boat and looked closer. A set of rubber climbing cups floated on the surface. He looked up puzzled, Pettin was not attached to them, and there were only 3, one had been unclipped. He fished them out without difficulty and placed them in the boat next to another spare set of cups. He then leant back in his seat to think and wait.

He thought of the Great-Mother again, a tiny child and her three fostered babies. She must have been so scared but the animal in her would have fought to survive, found shelter and collected food. One theory, certainly the most acceptable was that a wandering party, explorers maybe had fallen foul of some disaster and the children had been the only survivors. Where they had come from or why they were there could only be guessed at. Their race was certainly not descended from the vicious creatures that had separated their homeland from the sea. Wellshorn, Clementine and other army troops had fought them successfully and they were now held back by a fortified supply route between their old border and the coast. They were nothing but animals, frighteningly well evolved killers but just beasts. They were also not from the natives stock they had met on their voyage, they were anatomically quite different. They had captured one alive about a month ago and two more from the previous battle two days ago. They were being kept well and unmolested under Clementine’s orders, not that the crew had shown any real desire to inflict further harm on the captives. He spent as much time as possible sat with them, learning their language. He had not questioned them

much about their race yet, it was purely a language fact finding exercise. They talked in much deeper tones than his own people. Their necks were so wide they were almost non-existent and probably housed a larger voice box. They were of a similar design, upright with two arms and two legs but their ears were long, hairy and quite floppy. It seemed their fashion to fasten them above their heads with ornate clips. Their faces were pointier than his with teeth that protruded slightly, more like a grazing animal while his own races face and teeth seemed more predatory. Their chests were wide yet their waists very narrow. He didn't know for some time that they also had a tail about 12 inches long. It had a flattened end which he eventually discovered was slightly armoured being of almost nail like material. They curved their tail between their legs and protected their genital areas with the hardened plate. For all their differences Clementine still liked them. They were gentler and more pensive, taken to looks of deep contemplation, especially when eating which they did slowly. They talked about as much as his own race but tended to do so with a graceful passion as if whatever they discussed was always meaningful. They used their bodies and clothing a lot in any conversation making their language very visual. And they showed an amazing ability to listen. If one spoke the others would watch in seeming rapture. He was only now getting to a point where he could begin questioning them about their people but it seemed they were an arable race with a deep interest in philosophy and art. They were hard to question, they seemed so empathic and so curious that he tended to find himself giving information rather than receiving it. In time he would learn more. He enjoyed the time he had spent with the initial captive and now all three but he was also well aware that whatever turn the future took he was making himself indispensable and indeed very powerful through his efforts.

His reverie was suddenly broken by a growing shout that quickly turned into a scream, the cry of a falling man and....Clementine struggled to stand in the small boat, he could not see through the fog but a splash came soon after and brought the shout to an end.

“Pettin!” he called. If the captain had reached the top it had to be Pettin that had fallen, most likely pushed. The alternative was that the captain slipped before he made it all the way. He grabbed the message wire just as it began to spool out with a high whine like a fishing reel snaring an angry fish. This meant it was the captain and the wire was too fragile to pull him up from the depths. All the metal he carried had ensured that he didn’t float.

When Clementine finally reached the top he found Pettin hugging his knees, surrounded by tiny lead pellets. He looked like a traumatised child, rocking slightly. He looked up. “Sir. It was an accident sir, I promise.” His eyes pleaded in an almost pathetic way. “He was like a wild animal, it was terrible. And when he saw his reflection he just...just lost it sir, trying to kill himself or something. I mean bonkers, I never seen...”He looked towards the edge ” It’s a long way down,” he shivered “it *was* an accident sir.....”

Clementine cut in, “Of course it was Pettin, don’t worry for now” He looked at his reflection.

“Leave it sir. Please. Take my advice on this one. Just leave it”

He intended to. The mirror had turned Pettin into a child, and caused the Captain to lose control at the one time he was at his best. Clementine was however curious what it would do to him.

He allowed himself to gaze at his reflection for a few seconds, and with a wry smile flipped a casual salute in the direction of his double and began to help Pettin prepare for the journey

back to the boat. That smile had said it all. Was he really that calculating? Maybe. He looked over the edge of the mirror as he helped Pettin to his feet. 'Yes' he thought, 'it *was* a long way down'.

Chapter 3

It was a week later and Clementine looked down to the enclosed stone courtyard below the window in the natives meeting hall. His eyes were wide with disbelief and his heart ached with a confused sense of responsibility. Having traveled to this place, the native's main port and the very same town that had launched the ill fated vessel that Wellshorn had so casually dispatched, only a small amount of discussion between Clementine and the native council had initiated a careless and rash flurry of attempted scientific activity that led to the disastrous mess he was witnessing below the window.

A wooden cart stood burning in one corner, charring the crude brickwork around it, but that was nothing. A horse, its rear end alight was repeatedly charging at the gate to the courtyard making a noise like nothing Clementine had heard. Outside the door natives were making futile attempts to gain entry to the courtyard in order to provide assistance but they understandably feared the frenzied mammal that blocked the gate's entrance. Another horse, its buttocks also burning but less so now, lay dead on the dirt floor. It had died sooner due to a blow from a huge piece of shrapnel. This had flown at high speed across the courtyard from a large and totally sealed metal container that had exploded after being filled with water and heated above a raging fire in the corner. Three Natives lay also dead or dying from similar wounds. These unfortunates had orchestrated this lethal scientific adventure and like many brave frontiersman they had payed with their lives. They were all dressed in the familiar

robes of the thinking class and all held a sort of clipboard on which they had obviously been making notes, or at least had been whilst their hand were still capable. Another had evaded the flying metal but was badly scolded by the explosion of escaping water and steam.

Coming here may have been a big mistake but he had wanted to repair the political damage caused by Wellshorn's unceremonious destruction of the natives vessel. He had left the mirror about a week ago leading a small troop of crew and the captive natives along the coast in search of information about the mirror and to do some damage limitation. He had done well to heal any ill feeling in native council, but he also feared it was way too easy. He sighed. What worried him most was that although his methods were very different to Wellshorns he had successfully done as much damage with words as Wellshorn had done with weapons.

His meditations were interrupted as the door behind him opened and the Leader of this Lording thinker class entered looking worried.

This man, Galgaloon had been downstairs supervising the experiments, but had come out unharmed when the explosion devastated the courtyard. The sound had drawn Clementine from his guest bed-chamber nearby to this window in the main meeting hall. Galgaloon must have seen him at the window and had left the courtyard now that people had arrived from the main building to assist. He didn't look angry which surprised Clementine considering this mess was in many ways his fault. To Clementine's people, any information, no matter how small was always a good thing. For these people the careless words that Clementine had used to allude to his own races scientific achievements had caused them act in a way that led to this fatal disaster.

It had started at a meeting in this very room the night before. It had held Galgaloon, who seemed the highest-ranking native in this area and ten of his senior Thinkers and it had been very strange indeed.

The Meeting

The faces that stared from the Natives about the meeting table bored into Clementine. Galgaloon was ignorant to the intense scrutiny of the new arrival as he shuffled rough discoloured papers, made harder because he seemed inclined to have one finger touching his nose whenever feasible. Clementine had not yet discovered what this gesture meant. Eventually, without looking up Galgaloon spoke.

“Hrummph. Now then, it shall be seen that the meeting is due to start”.

Lindilin, one of the captured and now befriended natives who, due to protocol, had to sit under the table practically between Clementine’s legs, translated any words that Clementine didn’t understand. Lindilin seemed ecstatic with both his physical position and his responsibility but it was somewhat uncomfortable for Clementine to have to strain his head downwards when he needed help.

When the leader spoke all the faces turned to Galgaloon and Clementine saw that they looked to their leader in much the same intensity that they had looked at him. He remembered the natives in the ship and how closely they attended to each other when they talked.

“You will now be more formally introduced to our esteemed guest Clementeen. He is a leader of the race recently encountered and they have proved themselves to be very powerful. He and a party of his people have presented themselves in peace and hopefully it will be said that we have learnt from them.”

He did not look up while he talked but used his arms to gesticulate and manipulate his clothing with meaning that eluded Clementine.

“The scribe should record that this meeting is intended to share information and information given shows that he has many questions to ask.”

He had still not looked up from his papers while he talked yet he gently gestured to a man sat three people to his left. “Raglagaan? We witness your ears informal. Why do you dissent?”

Clementine looked over and saw that one of the natives had unclipped his ears from the formal position he had learned about from the captives. Raglagaan’s ears hung loosely, the ornate clip that had held them on top of his head sat on the table in defiance. It seemed that this meant he had stepped out of the group norm.

The dissenter replied. “I heard it said that ‘his people have presented themselves in peace’ but those on the shore saw my brother die on the ship this man destroyed. I hope it is seen that my small gesture of displeasure is not out of place.” Clementine needed a lengthier translation of “brother” but it appeared the explanation was simple.

“Firstly Raglagaan, this man has explained that his leader at the time was not doing right, and also note that *your* brother is one of the few who washed up on the beach the next day. By traveling to your homestead would he not be seen growing in your ground area?”

“For that thanks can be given.”

Clementine was able to make some sense of this. An experience on his journey here was clearly related to the burial process they were currently discussing.

* * *

When he had left the mirror he had brought the three natives from the brig plus Willy Pettin, George Richardson, Grahams, and also Grahams fish gutting partner Jack because they were inseparable. He had split the rest of the crew into 3 groups. Two traveled in opposite directions along the mirror to see how far it stretched with strict orders to withdraw from any encounters. He wanted no more bloodshed. The last group stayed on the boat with full

workshop rights in order to keep them from feeling the urge to mutiny. They would be happy as they could be. They also had the task of firing up the long unused engines the moment they saw a flare from the shore. This would signify Clementine's return and the need for a fast getaway. He had not wanted to take the ship partly due to the effect its reappearance would have on the natives but also because he would gain nothing in the way of knowledge and understanding traveling by sea. He would learn more experiencing the native land on foot.

Randilon, Lindilin and Moldolon the natives, observed everything in gentle childlike amusement. Clementine had of course made inquiries regarding the mirror. They responded in a way that gave the impression that it was a feature that was as natural as the coast. They called it the 'other-us place' but when pressed simply said. "There is nowhere to go there. We take no interest. The other-us do nothing novel, only what we do, so there is nothing of interest. Speak with our scientists. I believe the ancients paid some attention to their other-them, but I feel you will be disappointed."

When he inquired about its size they simply shrugged and responded "From your ship it is only a mile inland to the borders of the Hunjopie, so the mirror soon lies within their borders. I don't know if we ever asked them about it. There is no interest. People tried farming near it, but they wandered off. I think they gave up farming, became builders." That was all he could get.

One thing he had managed to learn from them was about the nation's politics.

The native culture was currently, and for most of their history a very peaceful one. There were three main nations that bordered each other on the Native's landmass. A few other minor tribes existed with small territories but the borders between all the neighbors were blurred and insubstantial. The inhabitants of each of the three nations had differed physically in some small but significant ways. Way back when the nations were smaller tribes the leader of each was decided based on a particular merit. The Molines, the local tribe, favoured long

ears, as they signified intelligence and integrity. The Gunbales sought leaders with a large and massy tail plate. The nail like plaque which was used to protect the genitals signified fertility and drive. Finally parents of the Hunjopie tribe prayed their offspring would be born with long dexterous fingers signifying a cunning and resourceful heir. The largest or longest of these features clearly decided who should lead. It was a simple if slightly naïve system. Although these beliefs still existed and higher positions tended to be bestowed upon those with the greater attributes, a leader was no longer replaced by a competitor who's body part outgrew that of their leader.

He imagined that the world of politics rarely reached the area they currently traveled through, it was practically deserted. Nevertheless their journey was not devoid of incident.

The first sign of life they encountered had been some form of small-holding. The two natives who farmed here seemed a slack and unmotivated pair. Hardly interested or surprised in what they confronted approaching their home. The captive natives were obviously pleased to meet their own kind again but they had not attempted to rally an attack on Clementine's crew and had not attempted to stay. They seemed keen to remain with the party. They had also been useful in stopping what may well have been a serious inter-racial incident.

Clementine, the natives and the two residents of the farm had been talking by the front entrance to the modest circular main dwelling. Halfway through the conversation one of the Natives, called Moldolon had run from where they stood, shouting "Jack no, Pettin no, Jack no, Pettin no, Jack no, please, please"

Clementine had looked over and seen Pettin and Jack tussling in the dirt near a small fenced in enclosure. The rest of his team had started to head over just before Moldolon reached them. By the time they arrived he had sat directly between the two combatants and the

enclosure, closed his eyes and spread his arms as if to block them. He then began to repeat “no.no.no.no.no.”

As Clementine approached he could hear a childish argument between the two men, who were being pulled apart by the others.

“Its mine”

“I saw it first”

“I’m starving, it’s mine”

“Well you’re not having it!”

As he got closer Clementine began to get the occasional drifting scent of two totally contrasting aromas. The first was a nauseating smell, like that of old rotting flesh, the other was so seductive his mouth began to water immediately. It seemed to reach inside him, right down to the animal cell level, and it simply said ‘eat, and you will be well and nourished’. His digestive system kicked into play and he felt his stomach rumble and his saliva pooled around his tongue. All the men were now looking over Moldolon’s head into the small enclosure within which sat a strange looking plant. It was topped by a fruit of spherical shape with a veined papery covering. Below this a stem met with the large bulbous body of the plant, about the size of a head. He could see that the plant was not rooted directly in the ground, rather into something else buried and partly protruding from the soil. Clementine then realised what he was seeing. It was the back of a corpse. By the covering of hair on the flesh he saw that it was one of the natives. It has been slit along the spine and the plant was rooted within the open rotting flesh. Although the image revolted his mind, his body was reacting to the scent of the plant, creating a desire that was impelling him forward towards the enclosure. Faintly in the back of his mind he could hear a voice “no.no.no.no.please. no” but it meant nothing.

Suddenly the scent changed again as an overwhelming stench filled his nostrils stopping him in his tracks. It was revolting and his stomach shut down, driving all thought of food from his mind. He spun to locate its source and saw his men recoiling away from both Moldolon and the plant. Covering his nose Clementine looked at the sitting figure who had stopped presenting his arms as a barrier but was using them to waft the lower part of his shirt as if to dry it or allow air to his belly. He no longer looked concerned but embarrassed and both his trousers and the floor between his legs were wet with some foul looking liquid.

“Please see how sorry I am Mr Clementine. It is a species trait that is rarely used and you allowed no alternative.”

He looked down at the strange movement the creature was making and it dawned on him that in some alien way Moldolon had farted. He was wafting the smell in a way that any drunken crewman might do to enhance his own bodily functions. Unlike his crewmen Moldolon did not look cheerful about this display, he looked meek and embarrassed.

The other natives ushered the men to a distance further from the plant and Moldolon walked some way in the opposite direction hopefully taking the smell with him. He looked mortified with what he had done, and rightfully so, the smell had been horrific. Nevertheless for now it had broken the spell of the plant.

The other two Natives from the ship, Randilon and Lindilin began to explain in a patient manner all about the plant, its sacred nature and the near disaster that had been averted by Moldolon’s quick thinking but seemingly highly entertaining actions. Between native giggling that Clementine had learnt involved grabbing the ears and pumping them up and down, they explained that the plant formed part of their death ritual and allowed their people to accept the passing of a loved one. It was a solemn subject and they were trying hard to remain serious. The seedpod that grew at the plant’s top, the part that Clementine’s crewmen

found so compelling would be stored for the next time someone died. The large plant mass, if grown within a decaying corpse was an incredibly nutritious and healthy food source and would feed one man for two weeks or more giving him immense vigor. Their custom was that when ready it would be shared among those close to the dead friend and all would gain some benefit. It was believed to cure deadly ailments and restore potency to ones loins. The thought of a loved one dying and not being used in this way was unthinkable. The natives seemed to appreciate the overpowering desire for the paper enclosed fruit but theorized that either their strict rules gave them strength to resist or that their differing physiology meant the lure was not as compelling. The plant seemed to only exude this luring smell at particular times and they had never been able to formulate a pattern. It was also possible for one person to be attracted and another not at all. There were historical accounts of individuals giving in to the lure of the fruiting pod but that in each case, without fail, the brief moment of weakness had ended in madness. Reports of elusive voices expressing pain and frustration to an unbearable degree had led these unfortunates to take their own lives, screaming to be set free from their torment. Maybe this inherited fear was alone enough to strengthen their will against their desire.

Clementine looked over to where Moldolon had retreated to and saw Grahams, gently coaching the embarrassed creature back towards the group. Grahams in his good natured way had found the Natives as compelling as Clementine, but without his calculating need to gain power through their association, Grahams was openly affectionate and even went as far as petting them a little. He could now hear Grahams speaking to Moldolon in gentle tones; made nasal by the fact he had one hand pinching his nose. “Dow, weally, it didumt spell dat bad addall, honeatdly. Why am I holbing my dose? Oh it got hurt in the scuffle back dere, really your fide, come back.” Moldolon was looking at Grahams with an indecipherable expression.

Clementine became aware of movement and saw that Randilon and Lindilin were pumping their ears with seeming glee. Moldolon looked over and seeing the laughter from his friends immediately turned and headed away again. Grahams looked over with a scolding look and headed after him again. "igdore dem, look we'll design some sort of..." Clementine saw him begin to gesticulate some new contraption but could no longer hear his voice.

Richardson, who managed to keep himself both fully ingratiated with the crew yet also able to maintain a serious aspect among officers had stood quietly alongside Clementine listening patiently to the speech of the Natives. They had no more information available on the mirror, simply an amazing level of disinterest.

Clementine turned to look at where Pettin and Jack had put themselves, hoping they were not fighting and found them hunched over on the dirt some 20 feet away intently working on something.

Moldolon eventually returned but was quiet for some time. He had washed himself and his jerkin with water from a trough.

Once they had moved on from the farm Clementine discreetly questioned the other two and it seemed that the Natives had an ability to vacate their upper bowels through an opening in their belly. This was to facilitate escape from predators in their earlier days, not only allowing the digestive system to shut down but also making them very unappetizing indeed. Their lower bowels seemed to process their stomach contents so that their regular bodily functions were not nearly as noxious.

If Clementine was not wrong the other two seemed to continue goading Moldolon a little, but there was also something serious on their minds. Clementine felt sure it was to do with the reasons behind the fact that now Moldolon spent most of his time gazing at Grahams with an indecipherable expression on his alien features.

* * *

The party had moved on and the two natives at the farm watched them until they were some distance away. The taller of the two headed back to the farmhouse but was called back by an exclamation from the other. “Vervalon, look” he was pointing to the dirt where Pettin and Jack had been sat during the discussions. They both looked down. Sitting on the ground was a small and perfectly formed wooden object about six inches long. It had been whittled and shaped from some discarded wood and the shavings lay all around. Vervalon bent down and lifted it so they could look closer. They recognised the basic shape. It was like the small projectile weapons that they occasionally used for hunting. A curved wooden staff with a tight wire which when pulled taught could fire a sharpened stick, a stick-sling. Pettin and George knew the principle as a bow and arrow but this was modeled on the huge and robust basilicas that they had on the ship, like a giant crossbow. It even had wheels that turned. Both Vervalon and Fredolol smiled. Vervalon lifted it to face level and peered closer at the fine workmanship when with a slight snapping sound the machine released its arrow. Vervalon turned to his friend with a puzzled look and Freedolol saw that the fine narrow stick it had fired was now, although it had done no real damage, protruding from the furry skin of his friend’s forehead.

* * *

A number of days later, sat at the official meeting in the natives’ port town, Clementine could reflect on this encounter. It helped Clementine understand the relief that Raglagaan, the dissenting Moline with his informal ears, must have felt having managed to recover the body of his brother who had died on their destroyed boat. There would be others who had lost their

loved ones and had not retrieved their corpses. That would be a severe blow. Following his outburst at the meeting table Raglagaan was now calmer. Agreeing to return his ears to their formal position he added some final words. "It would be most sensible if we did not continue this meeting until we have discussed with Mr. Clementeen regarding his 'fire purpose' and with that information to hand further thoughts on his intentions and nature would be clarified."

Raglagaan looked to Galgaloon who opened his tunic wide. Raglagaan did likewise and they looked around the table. Each member in turn opened their tunics, it was a vote and it was clear that whatever it meant, Clementine's 'fire purpose' was to be investigated before any further proceedings could take place.

"Tootinool, as senior spiritual thinker I suggest you present our wishes to our guest."

Tootinool was first to close his vest and he looked to Clementine. "Please witness and attend to my explanation." He stood and removed an oil lamp from the stone wall behind him, bringing his significantly more colourful clothing into clearer view. He placed the lamp on the table. "Fire can be seen to be much like life Mr. Clementine" he was the first to pronounce his name correctly, "and each fire is created for a purpose. This fire was created by our small-eared servant to light the room. In a very real sense he created a life within this fire, and the process that takes place within that simple act is reflected upwards through the spiritual layers of our world. Just as you will witness our people creating many fires for many reasons, we know that our creators spark us into life for a particular reason. They themselves in turn will have been in this way 'lit' to serve a purpose. What you should hear from me is this. The fires that you create within this world are in the main a reflection of the reasons why you were created. Your purpose in this world can be confirmed from the fires you create. Why do you light fires Mr Clementine?"

The abrupt end to his monologue threw Clementine for a second. “Well.....Like you I create fire for light and heat and to cook.” He knew this was a pale answer and although he hoped it would be sufficient he guessed it would not be.

“Ahhh, well for light and heat, they are very passive, and for everyone. But to cook, there is something, you are a cook?”

“Well no, I mean rarely, I have people who cook for me mostly”

“Then think again Mr Clementine”

“We use fire to destroy, to burn” he looked to his left and saw some uncomfortable movements among the natives as they recalled the fiery explosions that destroyed the small wooden boat that had come to meet them. They drew their tunics closer around them. Realising his mistake he quickly backtracked “but I say ‘we’ meaning that many of our race do that, those dedicated to war, I rarely use fire that way, I am a peaceful man dedicated to learning and exploration.”

Then it came to him, the answer that would be most appropriate and on reflection the most truthful, “I personally use fire for movement, I cause objects to move with fire.” He thought back to his time fighting through the wild borders of their homeland. It is where he had found his place in the army and why he had been chosen for the voyage they were now on. It was his skill with engines and propulsion that brought him here and the reason why he had not been pleased when they had reverted to sail power.

He had obviously sparked interest among the listeners as they began to murmur.

Tootinoole spoke up first. ”Interesting, although confusion would be apparent to anyone looking at me. Gross-scientist Lookineef, shed light on this.”

He was the largest person at the table, sat directly to Clementine’s right. Clementine assumed the term ‘Gross-scientist’ implied a scientist who studied more basic physical principles, rather than ‘gross’ due to his significant personal bulk. Lookineef pulled his tunic tightly

round his bulk, bowed his head and placed a broad hand over his ears, concealing them.

“Many have witnessed embers jump from a fire as if they have been bought to life, but there is no knowledge on this matter I can bring to this meeting.”

“Indeed” it was Galgaloon again, “I believe Mr Clementine has much to teach us”

* * *

Now, looking down at the dying horse and the dead scientists he regretted opening his mouth. He would have prepared words with more care had he known, but they had requested a brief taste of his knowledge before larger discussions could take place in their workshop. He had explained that fire and heat has the ability to agitate. He had explained by causing fires within particular parts of machines and vehicles they can be encouraged to move, to become more agitated, just as might happen if you put a flame to a horses behind, it would respond with agitation and increased movement. Now he cringed at the memory. He had mentioned water and asked them to reflect on the movement of water when it boiled, and then talked of water heated within a sealed system and how it becomes excited and ready to burst forth with power that can cause movement of larger pieces of machinery. He put his hand over his eyes, stupidity, and even worse it was bad science, a steam engine didn't work that way.

He pulled himself together; He really wasn't to have known.

He had deep concerns about the future of this gentle race. Contact between his people and the Molines could only spell disaster. They would find wonder in the skills and gadgets that his people had to offer. They would end up being bought for the price of a ship or a powered vehicle and their species would steadily loose their land, die out or become subservient pets

to his own bold conquering race. He had seen it happen already among his small party whilst they had continued on their journey that brought them here.

* * *

Following Grahams kindness to Moldolon after the embarrassing smell situation Moldolon had become like a pet. It was quite pitiful to see. Clementine had discouraged Grahams from reinforcing the behavior but it wasn't in Grahams nature to be hard or even disinterested and his gestures of firmness had seemed to become a game to the young native. On one occasion Grahams had tried to put a stop to Moldolon following behind him everywhere he went. He had gone to urinate behind a tree and found Moldolon pacing behind. When Grahams pointed back to the group and insisted he go back, the young Native had turned and walked away. The group could see a huge grin on its face and it had covered its eyes with its ears, a gesture now known to mean that the Native was being intentionally naughty. It had then quickly looked over its shoulder and seeing Grahams was not looking had turned and sneaked up behind so that as Grahams got to the tree and started to undo his trousers he turned to look finding Moldolon's face about a foot from his. Its eyes had flicked from looking at Grahams face in an innocent search for approval and to his trousers in a childlike curiosity. Graham had actually become quite irritated but the Native didn't realise. He had gently shoved Moldolon steadily backwards until he was about 10 feet from the tree and then pushed him to the floor, not violently but firmly saying 'Stay there..please'. Moldolon had stayed, his eyes closed and face raised a little to the sky and his arms crossed holding his tunic tightly around him. He was still grinning. When Grahams had finished and walked back to the group he passed the young native who remained in exactly the same pose. As he reached the group he sighed and knew what was going on. He had told Moldolon to stay and staying he was.

Clementine had put a hand on Grahams shoulder and walked over to retrieve the creature. He would not move. “Grahams said stay. Grahams said stay. I am staying till Grahams says so. No. Grahams must come and get me.” It shook its head and its ears flapped about. Strangely Moldolon had not had his ears in the formal position ever since the previous incident.

They had left him sitting there and walked on. Five minutes later Grahams heard a noise and found Moldolon walking about a foot behind him looking at his face in pleasure. It was nearly the last straw when Grahams woke that night to find Moldolon had gone to sleep hugging his right leg. He had shaken Moldolon off almost angrily but had decided not to tell anyone. He was flattered, but the doe eyed attention of his new friend was a little unsettling.

The other two Moline had shown some concern. “Clementine, he is the youngest of us by six years. He is but a calf. Please forgive him, he is intelligent but he is just a little over playful. His ears are long, one day he will be great” Clementine had nodded his acceptance with a serious look but was momentarily amazed at how quickly they were picking up his language. He had walked ahead with his arms behind his back. He was learning their language quite successfully but not nearly as fast as they were. They puzzled him. They were such quick learners and very intelligent yet they had taken no steps towards technology or significant advancement as far as he could see. He stopped to let the group catch up and immediately felt a light blow from behind. He turned and saw Randilon and Lindilin stood behind him with their arms behind their backs. They had a serious contemplative look on their faces and had been walking so close behind that they had bumped into him when he had stopped. A look of concern had crossed his face and Lindilin immediately remarked, looking even graver than he already did “Yes Clementine, it is a serious matter” he nodded in that thoughtful way that Clementine often did. Randilon looked to Lindilin and with a little too much enthusiasm he too nodded. “Very grave indeed” he said.

To Clementine's own surprise he had burst out laughing. He should have been annoyed. These two were doing to him just what Moldolon was doing with Grahams only in a supposedly more grown up manner and they didn't even know it. They thought they were being serious and behaving in the way that seemed right, Clementine's way, but really they were just following their master and looking for approval. He hadn't noticed it before but they had been slowly building up to this over the past few days. He had been pleased when six hours later they had arrived at the large town that was the center of the Moline nation and embarrassingly the same port that had sent the small doomed boat to meet them eight days ago. He had been presented to their Leader 'Galgaloon' and immediately sought forgiveness, explaining the rash and atypical nature of his dead leader. Shortly following that the strange meeting had been called.

* * *

Now, stood next to Clementine in that same room, as the smell of roasted horse mingled with the oily smell the lamps had left hanging on the stones and furniture Galgaloon spoke in sad tones. "Do not think of us too badly Clementine. I know this must appear stupid. I have been thinking about your expression at the end of the meeting and I fear you think us as dumb as the boulder beasts we talked about."

"I mustn't judge, Galgaloon, but you are so different. There is a lot that is very special about your people and looking down there I think I, we, will destroy you. I had a dream last night."

At this point Galgaloon sat and a look of intent rapture crossed his face. Clementine was

getting used to their look of rapt attention when hearing something of interest but he still felt a little uncomfortable. He continued but spent much of the time looking out into the courtyard.

“In this dream I saw my race and in particular it showed me the way we behave and our place on this planet. I saw us spreading across both our own continent and ultimately yours, but most importantly of all I had an overriding sense that it wasn’t meant to happen, that we don’t belong. You asked me if I think your race is stupid. Well, honestly you do lack a lot of the abilities we possess with tools and machines and our thinking about the physical but I’ve had a chance to sit back and look at your people. This place is in wonderful hands under your control. You use the land you have well, you even recycle your dead for Mothers sake. And then in my dream I saw all your faces around that table and your innocent pleading looks ready to lap up any information I would pass to you and I saw your faces change, as greed flooded your features. I plan to leave you Galgaloon, I must. And you *must* forget all I have told you. Stick to your own path and I will find a way, some way to make sure my people leave you alone.

“You mustn’t! Anyone would witness that we are learning so much already. Your previous suggestion that our scientists have discussions with your kinsmen regarding the Boulderbeast issue can be seen to have happened with great success. We have made astonishing headway, and our future will show us using them in battle.” Galgaloon’s eyes flashed in a way Clementine didn’t like when he mentioned battle. This was not their way. They were changing already.

Clementine placed his hand over his eyes. For some reason Galgaloon giggled. It had started already. The subject of the Boulderbeasts had been introduced to him at the end of the previous nights meeting.

During the meeting a report from their agricultural scientist, one area along with their culinary skills that they could clearly claim to excel at, disclosed their new plans to deter the ‘blundering boulderbeasts’ that lived on the plains. The boulder beasts were huge four-legged flat-headed boulders of muscle and bone. Phenomenally stupid they were known to attack each other on sight by simply charging head on. Ultimately both parties would end up stunned and likely have a huge headache. They would then simply stagger off somewhat less agitated until they recovered and their vision returned enough that they could focus properly on their next target. Apparently too many properties and crops had been destroyed in their outer lying homesteads so they had devised a plan to erect blue screens around these farms. A great idea, as it appeared that the boulder beast had a serious aversion to bright blue. The screens would divert them because luckily, as was well known to their scientific community, and this is what gave Clementine his definite belief in the natives inherent naively, the boulder beasts could not get over the screens because they had never learnt to fly. This was obvious, stated the scientist, because their aversion to blue had prevented them developing flight as it would take them closer to the blue sky. The whole table had nodded in agreement at this deep wisdom while Clementine looked at them each in total shock. He looked to Galgaloon who smiled as if pleased at what he was hearing. Clementine could not help but look incredulous and shook his head.

“Clementine, do you have a suggestion?”

“Well other than suggesting that you’re absolutely bonk....” he stopped himself. “Sorry, er, well have you, have you ever tried using their apparent bulk and power to your own aims? Like you might with a horse?”

“They will not co-operate, too many of our folk have subsequently been witnessed growing in their homestead gardens after such attempts.”

“Well, speak with Jack and Grahams about that, I’ll arrange for you to meet them in the morning.”

So he had, and now he stood with Galgaloon waiting with a profound sense of fear to hear what ingenious plan they had come up with and prepared to weigh up the damage it would cause these people.

“It was quite an astounding idea” Galgaloon gushed.

Of course it was, thought Clementine. Those two could create a machine to catch the sun if you gave them the time. Before Galgaloon could continue he interjected.

“Galgaloon, can you not see my point. I have not heard a single word of battle from your people in the few days I have been here. I don’t know your people well but I’m pretty certain that you haven’t discussed war of any kind in years. Tell me I’m wrong!”

Glagaloon didn’t.

”Now after only a short time I hear you talk of using Jack and Pettin’s ideas to turn the Boulderbeast into a battle machine? That’s all wrong, it’s us talking through you!!”

“You underestimate us Clementine. *You* are not everything. I believe you will have heard about our tradition of trading individuals between our nations based on the 3 prized characteristics, ears, genital plate and fingers. Well this process, over generations has influenced each nation’s genetic stock so that births naturally favour the body attribute it imports from others. This is simply because those people are given such powerful positions and get the best breeding rights. It has now become so rare that our nation will produce offspring with fingers or tail-plates that will come close to those of our neighbors own inhabitants that now this trade is collapsing. *We* must pray that the occasional freak is born to our people with fingers or a genital plate that will match those of the Gunbales or the Hunjopie. It has been fifty years or more that either has produced an ear-blessed individual to

compete with our average citizen. Without this sharing of people tension is growing and war is shortly inevitable. Now you tell us that we are at risk from your own military? Well then, let me tell you what your men proposed.”

Clementine simply nodded, feeling slightly belittled.

“What they propose is a reinforced box, to be strapped to the back of the beast in which a rider could sit. The beast being so massive and strong could hold all manner of projectile weapons, and perhaps spikes attached to armour plating. From inside the riders casing a set of wires will control a pair of small blue screens ingeniously placed around the eyes of the boulder beast. By presenting the blue screen on the left to the Boulderbeast’s vision it would cause it to veer right and likewise with the right screen. Currently the issue of making the beast move at all is a bit of an all or nothing situation. One suggestion is that a mirror or even a picture of another boulderbeast dropped in front of the beasts vision would cause it to charge, as they always do, nature would take over, but they charge with such ferocity. It would be a case of...what did Pettin call it.. a ‘one speed gearbox’, hmmm whatever that means, Full speed or stop. Jack is currently working on a process for what he called an ‘accelerator’ but he said he needed ‘field tests’ to ascertain whether a smaller image cause a slower charge than a larger one, maybe through use of ‘concave mirrors’ or a series of images of differing sizes? It is in the early stages. I personally thought we could simply set fire to their bottoms.” Galgaloon smirked and covered his eyes in the same way that Moldolon had with his ears to show he was being a bit wicked, but of course Galgaloon’s ears were firmly clamped in the formal position.

Briefly Clementine considered that staying with these folk would be pleasant and with war afoot, battle and diplomacy were in demand. He’d love to watch them learn and grow and was beginning to cherish the fascinating looks that came across their faces like just now when even this old wisened creature had made his little Joke. ‘Damn it’ He span and looked out of

the window again. He had a horrible feeling he was falling in love. That could only be bad. A thought then struck him. “Galgaloon, I have never seen any of your females. The farm had two males, but that was all. Your servants are males, your scientists, unless..” at this he blushed” I just can’t tell you apart?”

Galgaloon didn’t look upset.

“I need to get the translation right, by females you mean the different sex to myself and those you have seen?” Clementine nodded.

Galgaloon continued. “Well our *females* are not suited to normal civilized life. They are a lot rarer than the *males* and they tend to roam. I believe that we get one female entering this town every six weeks. There are at the last count five hundred and twelve throughout our nation. Often they live in solitude in the wilderness, picking fights with Boulderbeasts no doubt. They inevitably get a regular urge to mate and will then be attracted to a town or village. Obviously the interest they attract is enormous and they don’t stay for long, poor devils must get exhausted. Normally there is a tagger along with them. The tagger will follow the female at a discreet distance. He can then report the approach of the female to a nearby town, allowing them to prepare their breed games. Here..” Galgaloon fished in his tunic “ I have a small painting of my last breed partner.” He opened a small locket and inside was the most imposing creature Clementine had ever seen. By the scale of the scene painted around it the female must have been eight feet tall, and about four feet across. If the males were like grazing animals, the females were as similar to them as the Mythical horned beasts were to a cow in a field. It had the horns to match and was dressed in leather and gold bands.

“Quite a specimen I can assure you” Galgaloon felt his belly. Clementine seemed confused.

“But Galgaloon, if you only have five hundred breeding females, how do you maintain your population?”

“I don’t understand, one female can service twenty males in one pass through a town like this. Us males have a huge party when all twenty or so babies are born all within a week of each other. The season when I bore my child we had thirty-five, as I say, quite a specimen”

It all clicked into place, a simple translation mistake that had never been corrected. The entire clean, agricultural civilisation was run by the intelligent, resourceful and careful females of the species, who were sporadically serviced by these vast brutish male wanderers.

“Galgaloon, I think we have made...” he stopped himself. The explanation would wait. He looked out into the courtyard. During their conversation all the dead and wounded had been removed and he saw the blackened rear end of a horse disappear out through the now open gates.

He turned to Galgaloon, smiling “I think I should go and see how my crew is getting on”

“Yes Clementine.” Galgaloon stood and removed the clip from her ears allowing them to fall loose over her shoulders. “After, I will take you to new quarters near my home, it is a beautiful area.” Galgaloon headed to the door and Clementine followed *her* out of the room.

The workshop was like a dream world. Clementine missed being responsibility free and having time to indulge his intellectual whims. He must find a way to spend some time here. He could feel heat coming from a forge to his left, but this side of the room was heavily ventilated. Benches with tools lay everywhere and compared to the cramped spaces of the boat it seemed huge. Grahams and Jack were scribbling feverishly on a blackboard. Two new natives were sitting at a table talking with Moldolon who was cautiously writing their words down, and he saw some elaborate sketches of what the Boulderbeasts looked like complete with their impressive dimensions scribbled alongside. His, no Clementine now corrected himself, her ears were now formally clipped on top of her head. The normal native rapture

while listening was broken by the occasional glance back towards Grahams, which happened now as he began to speak.

“Alright sir? Err Cappin” he saluted “How you been? Err if you don’t mind me asking sir?” Jack simply nodded from beside the backboard in his reserved fashion. It was his usual role to quietly react with astonishment or amusement at the complete drivel that often came out of Grahams mouth. Only Grahams was far from stupid, his mouth just had a tendency to run amok.

Clementine nodded warmly back to Jack and spoke to Grahams. “Very well, although I’ve got no further finding information on the mirror. I’ve been promised a look at some texts written sometime ago. However I’ve been told that none of the books were ever finished. There’s some theme emerging there, the farmers got bored when they farmed near its base, the Moline show no interest in such an astounding phenomenon, and none of their studies were completed. It’s like the mirror has been discouraging these peoples attention.”

Jack spoke up. “You make it sound like there’s an intelligence at work behind it”

“Yes, I hadn’t thought that but I suppose I am”

“Well” said Grahams “I always say that us guys is about as intelligent as you can get, yerself included o’course cappin. So we’ll just have to work out a way of confounding it, that’s all. Hey Jack, you never got close to it did you? I reckon your face’d do the trick no problem.”

“Where are Richardson and Pettin? I want them here for any discussions on that matter”

“What matter? Jack’s face? I’m not sure they’d be interested sir. Probably why they’re not here now sir. Too ugly for them to cope with obviously.”

“Grahams, please shut up!”

“Sorry sir. No they’re out exploring sir, I guess they’ve got the bug. Randilon’s showing them about. Should be back soon, we’re getting dinner served. Have you *tasted* their food? ‘s

somehin' special I can tell you. I could get used to this, being treated like kings we are." He smiled.

Behind his back Moldolon's face broke into a smile twice as big.

It had now turned dark and shortly after Galgaloon had escorted Clementine and Lindilin to the workshop Lindilin had retired to a large telescope in the corner of the workshop. From some discussions with the Moline it appeared they had an almost spiritual interest in the stars. To Clementine's race they were simply out there and although some scientists were working on methods of flight for which they had some success, their only real interest was the fact that it may be an eventual step in their growth and expansion to explore far enough upwards to encounter the true nature of these celestial bodies, but as realists they knew that was a long way off. One step at a time, and little point in dwelling on the mountain over the sea until you manage to make a boat. The stars had of course been studied enough to establish a basis for time measurement and navigation, but for that they were simply a clockwork tool, disturbed only by the measurable fluctuations they presented. He wandered over to where Lindilin stood just as Pettin and Richardson returned and sat down to sketch some designs inspired by their experience of the town and its people. Clementine addressed them quickly.

"Pettin, Richardson, you have had the closest encounter with the mirror. What would be your initial reaction if I proposed that it is artificial, somehow maintained by an intelligence?"

Pettin spoke first, "Fuck Captain, that's pretty wild, why would it? I mean fuck, that would be" he held his arms wide, then high, trying to express the enormity of the task, "fuck!! What for?"

"To hide something? I'm not sure." He explained their previous conversation.

Richardson presented a more rational, and quite lengthy response. "It is definitely such an extreme object that it must either be considered in terms of 'God'" he gave a look that

discredited that statement immediately “or as some form of Illusion, Phantasm, or Projection. There is no way that it just grew like a mountain or a tree, and if it’s not part of the scenery then it’s artificial.” Now he laughed, “You know the first night after Pettin had got to the top, when he explained it to me, I thought that we must have reached the end of the universe. It made sense that there could be nothing left at the end of the universe but a reflection of what already existed. Now, I realise that’s crap because our world is a globe, it spins, and it can’t spin half through the barrier at the end of the universe. We would have to spin through it, and it appears impenetrable. Am I making sense?” The crew nodded. “So, if the mirror is actually *attached* to our world then it can’t be limitless else it would interfere with our globes operation. However it is giving the *impression* of being limitless and impenetrable. And if making an impression is the *intention* then intention suggests intelligence, it must be created for that purpose and so Captain, by adding your observation that it is effecting the Moline’s curiosity I think we can only assume that it is being in some way maintained.” He looked blankly at the crew around him catching up on the breath he had missed during his soliloquy. Jack added the final statement, “So if it’s unreal, a creation or something that’s being maintained, then like Grahams here I reckon we’re the ones who can sort a way of outwitting it, taxing it until it breaks, but not by showing my face alright Grahams?”

No one else spoke and their smiles began to fade as they realised they had no ideas about how they would actually perform such a feat.

“When’s dinner coming? I’m starved” Grahams rubbed his tummy and Moldolon quickly stretched over and rubbed it too.

“Yes, let’s eat and think later.” Clementine stretched and looked about, again noticing Lindilin at the telescope. Briefly his interest was piqued by more than just her choice of activity. The way she curved her body to the task and the small gyrations of her form that

accompanied the scanning movement of the telescope captivated Clementine's gaze for long enough that he had to check himself.

"Lindilin, what are you looking for?" Lindilin took her eye from the telescope and smiled at Clementine.

"For? No I am simply gazing at the universes infinity. Soaking up its majesty and scale. I have...."

"Wait, I missed a word there. *Infinity*?"

Lindilin looked thoughtful. "Space is endless. There is no border, barrier, it goes on forever, although sadly I cannot see it, but the knowledge is enough."

"Endless? Is that what you believe?"

"Of course. Do you not?"

"I guess I've never thought about it, I would see no point. But Richardson briefly believed the mirror was the barrier at the end, so I guess that's what *we* believe."

By now the four other crewmembers were taking an interest in the discussion.

Lindilin left the Telescope and walked across the workshop. "Please indulge me your attention for a demonstration." She returned with a mirror about a foot in diameter and approached another mirror attached to the wall. "Please witness."

The undefined significance to this discussion was making Clementine's eyes water and his skin prickle. The rest crowded round frantically.

"It is impossible to see in totality, but I can assure you that the phenomenon is operating in a place from which we can gain no suitable vantage point. As I hold the mirrors facing each other they in theory reflect each other infinitely, held back only by how accurately I position them and the effectiveness of the mirror which I fear" she looked mournfully at the mirrors, "will never be up to the task"

Clementine could see the snaking tunnel of reflections as the mirror moved in Lindilin's hand. Of course it was a child's trick and not actually new to him but it highlighted a concept, that of infinity, that was entirely new. The way Lindilin looked at them, he was sure she felt just as he did when he imparted his most simple technological principles as if to children. He felt smaller and Lindilin took on a changing aura, more powerful, more sexual and intriguing. "Pretty as a picture" said Pettin. Clementine's attention snapped back to the task in hand and he found himself thinking about pictures, and specifically the painting he used to do in his less responsible youth.

"*Infinity* would be impossible to create artificially! You couldn't paint infinity. If you had to fool someone that they were seeing infinity it would take incredibly complex calculations" Clementine spoke his thought aloud.

He looked at the crewmembers. Richardson spoke up "Real mirrors, like these, do that without thought or calculation, but a mirror that required thought to create would have to calculate the image of foreverness, err *infinity*? That would be pretty hard work if you ask me."

Grahams was next to speak and he had already jumped two steps ahead to actually formulating the object they would require "It would have to have a frame that would allow incredibly subtle calibrations to adjust its position" he approached the blackboard. Pettin was catching up. "But could you ever do it. Could you adjust the opposing mirror to the exact position to create *infinity*?"

Next was Jack again "you probably wouldn't have to get it exact. If we're right whatever created that mirror would be sweating buckets well before we actually got it perfect."

Richardson had moved next to Clementine and stood with his arms folded. Clementine had his hands behind his back. They both watched the men start work and chuckled. They had an idea and its shape was forming on the blackboard already. A fine, precise mirror on a

minutely adjustable frame that would force the artificial mirror to think, calculate and project an image that was impossible, infinity.

They may be chasing a whim but it was good to see them all working towards the same goal again. Momentarily Clementine returned to watching Lindilin, who was gracefully organising materials at the end of the workshop, occasionally lifting and examining something then placing it carefully on a shelf. She glanced back once and smiled at Clementine who immediately looked back to his men.

Shortly afterwards a beautiful platter of the Moline's exquisite food arrived but not one of them stopped long enough to eat.

Chapter 4

By the time Clementine and the crew got too tired to work it was already nearly light. None of them had slept well in the five days since they had arrived here and now with some form of solution in his mind he felt he could properly switch off. Lindilin had shown him back to his new quarters near Galgaloon's home. It was like all of the town dwellings, simple and set to the same floor plan as the farmhouses. The overall plan was circular, with rooms that radiated around a small circular central area. This was vaulted up to a fairly wide chimney. The inner walls were thicker than the outer and made of a different stone. This wall was designed to hold heat from a fire that could be built in the central space. It was at least far

more comfortable than his room in the official chambers and someone had set a fire, left wood and a small cold meal. He ignored them all and slept.

When he woke it was dark and in his sleepy disorientation he slowly began to piece together where he was. Each new piece of information brought a growing dense of horror. He was not in his bed, ok, what else. He was outside. He had never sleep walked before and that worried him. Looking at the ground around him he was in a garden and one of the larger homes stood close by. This could be embarrassing. Surrounding him at a radius of only four feet was a low fence; he was sat in some sort of enclosure. Where had he seen one before? His body seemed to react to the fear before his mind reached a conclusion. By the time he noticed the plant his body was covered in goose bumps. The fruitless bulky flora that sat in the darkness by his feet and the sticky fragrant juice that clung to his face and hands confirmed the terrible act he had performed. He looked about, panic rising and fearful not only that he had been spotted but that he would not find his way back to the house and would be found wandering the streets with the proof of his crime smeared around his mouth. Jumping the enclosure and then the outer fence he ran downhill, remembering that he had walked downhill with Galgaloon the previous last night on his way to his new accommodation. He also remembered that they had passed her home, larger than many yet still humble and that she had proudly shown him her garden and the ripe fruiting plant it contained. He stumbled and fell. Looking back up the hill he tried to work out if that had been her home. Had he committed this terrible act against Galgaloon. He was not sure this was exactly the same direction they had walked but some sense of the inevitability of tragedy made him believe that life didn't allow such opportunities for disaster to pass people by and he could not find of a single distinguishing feature that would confirm the previous nights route. He took the only option he could think of. Guiding himself by the tower of the Official government building he ran through the twisting streets

that ran between the many gardened properties towards the workshop. The knowledge of what he had done made him feel nauseous but the fruit sat resolute in his stomach and was not going to be tempted out. He could almost feel his stomach lining soaking up its juices in the way it sometimes feels to drink water when very dehydrated. He could feel coolness enter his veins and energy overcame him. He sprinted the entire way back, stopping only briefly as he passed a fountain and quickly doused himself in the cold water, cleaning any hint of his illicit meal from his face and hands. He found the workshop doors unlocked but no-one awake and with a sense of relief and terrible shame crawled under one of the work benches and curled into a ball as if protecting the pulpy mass that sat within him. He was sure there was no way he would sleep but incredibly through the frenzied list of excuses, escape plans and feeble pleading that was forming in his mind he did indeed slip into a deep slumber, one that he didn't wake from for ten days.

When he woke he was back in the small house near Galgaloon's home. Was it possible he had dreamt the whole terrible thing he had done? It all felt too real.

Memories of strange dreams and images swam through his waking mind. They focused on simple words and images, as if he had spent his time asleep being taught to speak like a child. The images he had dreamt were simplified and basically stylized, a boat with triangular sails, a house, a fish. And with each one he was being told how to say the word, and how it would be used. 'The fish swims, fish, swimming. The house is warm. My house. Big house. I like boats. The boat floats. Over and over. Why would he dream himself learning to speak. Maybe it was just a reaction to all the language issues of the past few weeks. The incredible speed that the Moline's learnt his language had amazed him and he had managed to develop a good grounding in their slow careful speech, and even used his clothing for some of the more basic gestures. That was probably it, just his mind putting it all in place.

The voice, when it came startled him. *“You sleep no now, I am pleased. Happy. You were long time unawoken.”* He looked about trying to find the source of the strange voice, hoping that a Moline lynch mob had not come to take him away. There was no-one here.

“Amazing, I see. Stay eyes open, it is very special. Have only had memories from you, they unreal.”

“Who is that?” He had the strangest feeling the voice was not reaching his brain through his ears.

“Please do not scare. Hmm, the house is warm. I like my house. Where is the boat? Look, blue, red. Touch something please.”

Clementine collapsed back on the bed and covered his face with his hands.

“Shut up, shut up.”

“Face, nose, hard hair, pointy hard hair”

“Stubble” he corrected the voice before he even thought. “Becomes a beard. Oh Mother, I see, I’ve got it.”

He remembered what the Moline had said about their ancestors that had eaten the fruit. They had gone mad hearing voices. Something in the fruit was making him hallucinate. Was he going to end up the same way? They all killed themselves in the end but he was strong and cynical, not the cracking type.

“Stubble, then beard. Touch something else. Good feeling. You teacher Good”

Clementine spoke aloud, but quietly and through gritted teeth, his hands still covering his eyes and massaging his temples. “Please, please will you SHUT UP!!!”

“Correct, said enough. I have made permanent sacrifice, precious time will be wasted, but yes, we speak later, I just watch.”

Thankfully and in a way that reinforced his belief in his inherent strength the voice did shut up. Half an hour after waking he had collected some food from the kitchen. Some bread, dried meat and a cold bitter drink. There had been some yellow fruits but could not bring himself to touch them. He was sat with a mouthful of bread when Galgaloon appeared at the doorway. Clementine hadn't seen her.

"You are awake, that is good"

"Yes I know, and I thought you were going to shut up!"

"Please, Have I offended you my friend?"

Clementine realized his mistake and turned to look, blushing slightly at the sight of his benefactor. "Oh, Galgaloon, I'm sorry...for everything. Please I only just woke up, still a little confused. How long did I sleep?"

"Ten days." Galgaloon walked over and did something that shocked Clementine. She knelt down and began to stroke his head. Her face held only gentle concern. It felt good, but he could not allow it. He stood up. "Ten Days? Was I ill? Drugged?" Of course he guessed it was the fruit but he wasn't ready to own up to what he had done.

"Maybe you were ill, you seemed quite disturbed at times, your skin became very wet."

"Sweat, maybe I was ill. I am so hungry. He grabbed more bread and filled his mouth, swilling more of the refreshing drink through the half-chewed mouthful.

"Yes you are, shall I get more?"

"No, you've done enough for me. So what's been happening?" he didn't want to ask but he had to face up to things.

"Your crewmen have a lot to show you. They have been making preparations for a display of their work, otherwise nothing remarkable. I will tell them you are awake, they will want to see you."

“I’ll come with you.” He grabbed more bread and stood looking at Galgaloon feeling so unsure of himself that he couldn’t even manage to step outside without Galgaloon making the first move.

It was the following day and the crew had, with some difficulty, managed to persuade Clementine to let them keep their achievements a secret until they could give him the complete display they had prepared. Clementine sat at the top of a newly erected set of wooden tiered benches, a sort of straight amphitheater, and he had pride of place. He sat on a soft chair, and Galgaloon sat next to him, surveying the plain between their viewpoint and a large clump of trees some quarter of a mile away. The land between rose slightly into a low hillock and a large wooden wall had been built upon its top, so whilst they may have been in an elevated position the middle of the wooded grove was obscured by this construction of curious purpose. Grahams sat on one of the benches two tiers down and to the left of Clementine’s feet. Moldolon sat on the bench above and was stroking Graham’s hair.

“Why am I here?” Clementine snapped half towards Galgaloon, but mostly watching Moldolon with barely hidden discomfort. No one had said anything about his previous indiscretion with the precious fruit. He had hoped for a showdown, something he could react to, but they had said nothing. Something in the way that Galgaloon had become even more passive and even now slightly condescending suggested to him that she knew he had done it, but had accepted that she could expect nothing better from him. They were really beginning to irritate him. Instead of having something to argue against he had suppressed his shame, containing it as it slowly turned into anger. Momentarily something about this emotion seemed to bring him closer to Captain Wellshorn. He was irritated at their passivity. He knew how much it must have meant to them. He was also feeling guilty about his inability to

simply own up to his mistake. He looked at Galgaloon and saw her gently smiling at him.

“Why am I here?” he repeated.

“Your crew mates have a presentation for you, of their work. I think you will be impressed.”

“Hmm” Clementine looked back to Grahams who was giggling as Moldolon put her finger into his ear.

“GRAHAMS, get up here beside me!, and you”, he pointed to Moldolon “leave him alone.”

Moldolon looked crest-fallen but looked to Grahams and smiled. Clementine briefly wondered if Lindilin was here but resisted the temptation to seek her out. Too many conflicting emotions vied for Clementine’s attention. A single overriding emotion won a victory and burst to the surface.

Clementine lowered his voice. “Grahams, I’ve had enough of this. We have what we came for. We head to the mirror tomorrow.”

Before Grahams could reply, which he didn’t seem inclined to do, a deep rumbling accompanied by a faint vibration distracted their concentration.

“This’ll be them sir. I didn’t join in on account of Moldolon being a bit concer...” he cut the statement short, knowing, surprisingly for Grahams, the inappropriateness of what he was saying. “And of course it was important for the Moline’s to get a few of their men, err women in on the act sir. Very keen they were, not enough room for me yet. Not enough beasts yet. But...”

“Be quiet Grahams, we’ll talk later.” Clementine was beginning to strain his head to seek the source of the mounting noise, vibration and tension. The thirty or so Moline’s on the stalls were looking excited. Then the spectacle began. From behind the stand on the left a line of six huge shapes charged into view trailing a cloud of dust. Veering out and then turning to traverse the front of the stand Clementine’s heart began to race as the sheer power and terrifying aggressiveness of the sight confronted him. Each beast stood about six feet at head

level. He assumed it was head level as their fronts were so heavily armoured their original shape was clearly obscured. Their shoulders appeared to be higher still and were about as wide as they were tall. Their legs although thick and short moved at an incredible rate. What was most amazing was the war armour they had been dressed up in. Their fronts were bristling with spikes mounted on metal plates. Two metal bands circled their middle on top of which sat a metal shod box with a viewing slit in front. It was long and flat so the riders must have been lying down inside. All of this paled into insignificance compared to the main weaponry. On each side of the Boulderbeasts massive frame sat a huge crossbow, easily as big as the basilicas they had on the 'foundry' and fixed so that the taught wire was vertical. Above each crossbow and curving up towards the box on top was a 'magazine' of extra arrows, each at least five feet in length. From this Clementine could only surmise in amazement that the crew had fixed up some sort of reloading mechanism. The body of the bow was protected in front by a flange of metal that protruded from the main front armour, with a slit for the arrow to fire through. As they thundered past he saw a hand appear from the top of each box, three bare-skinned and three with the light fur of the Moline, which waved in jubilation. Clementine *was* impressed. They reached the center of the stand and turned again, heading directly away, straight at the wooden wall that stood between where Clementine sat and the patch of distant woodland. After about 4 seconds, in which time they had cleared half of the distance to the wall they all discharged their arrows. 12 huge shafts of wood tipped with metal flew in a terrifying volley at the wall. The beasts immediately veered away, three left and three to the right leaving a clear view of a slightly shabby line of arrows protruding from the splintered face of the large wooden barrier. The third and fourth arrows, those released from the second Boulderbeast were significantly higher on the wall than the rest, and slightly to the left but that was hardly cause to doubt the brilliance of what they had done. It took another ten seconds for the beasts to reach the woodland and each triplet disappeared behind.

“My word, Grahams. I was only asleep for ten days. You’ve been hard at work!!”

“Yessir, we had a lot of help of course and they’re fast learners, scarily fast sir. But we had about thirty labourers at hand. I designed the magazine for the projectiles sir and they could easily be tipped with explosives. The reloading mechanism is a bit clever even if I do say so myself. It was a simple...” But Clementine had already stood and was turning to Galgaloon.

“Well that was worth waking up for, I must say.” Galgaloon simply gestured back towards the grove again smiling. Just as Clementine turned, the wooden wall exploded as the line of tanks ploughed through from behind having been obscured by it but now partly dragging and then trampling into finer splinters by the merciless hooves of the monstrous steeds.

“Look sir, one of them has reloaded, see! It works” He was right, the second from the left had two new arrows in place and the wire was taught. The beasts were slowing, heading in a perfect line directly towards them. It was amazing how little their bodies moved above those fast legs. The ride must be very smooth, and supposedly what allowed the arrows to fire accurately, although the second beast’s crossbows must have been aimed higher than the rest for the earlier slight misfire to occur. Aimed higher? He quickly looked to the wall to judge *exactly* how high before he remembered that it wasn’t there anymore. In the split second before it was too late he managed to calculate that the misfire was probably just about as high as Grahams, Galgaloon and himself were currently sat. He kicked Grahams forward hoping he would roll down the steps and grabbed Galgaloon, tipping her and the chair she sat on backward over the rear of the stand.

By the time they had disentangled themselves it was clear that Galgaloon had either broken her arm or dislocated her shoulder.

“Clementine, I’m sure there is good excuse for that rather rough embrace, I think it may be that you have gone quite mad.” Clementine was amazed, she was still smiling, at least while she wasn’t grimacing and holding her damaged limb.

“Let me help you round to the front. I hope I am mad but I fear my actions will become clear.” He guided her round the small stand to find a group of Moline climbing down. Four were carting a limp Moline body. By the pained look on Grahams face it was obviously Moldolon they were carrying. Grahams was steadying the huge five-foot wooden stake that protruded from her chest. Blood flowed from her mouth as she gave a small weak cough. She was finally placed on the ground at the foot of the benches.

Jack ran over. “Sir, the sneaky bastard charged off on his beast sir. Do you want us to chase him? Her?”

“Believe me Mr Jack,” Galgaloon cut in “she will come back. I imagine she will be turning round already.” Galgaloon hadn’t even looked to see.

“Then we need to prepare to defend ourselves.”

“She will not attack, she will come back to be punished. It is our way” She knelt down next to Moldolon who was barely alive.

“Moldolon. You are going to die now. It is a shame that you will not grow further to allow us to use your keen intellect, your ears are long and you have been a great asset to us. However before you go I wish to reward you with the extra letter of the chief staff, you are now Moldolon, Chief international liaison officer. I thank you for what you have already taught us.” Galgaloon stood and then swiftly grabbed the stake and pulled it free. Moldolon died that day knowing she had become accomplished and with her smiling eyes fixed on Grahams.

The sound of hammering feet approaching indicated that Galgaloon had been right. Somehow even the movement of the beast seemed to communicate shame as it slowed to a stop near where they stood.

The crew all drew weapons, small tools of war that no-one except Clementine would have known they carried. Jack kicked a heel and with a flash of metal a blade protruded from his boot toe. Willy Pettin pulled at his sleeve. From within a seam that ran up one arm and across his back a long thin flexible blade emerged. It moved like a whip and looked like it could slice air. Richardson, in the style of a budding high officer pulled a well concealed but simple pistol from within his jerkin, and lastly Grahams who moved purposely through them all, flicked his forearm forwards. With a ripping sound, his sleeve bottom tore to reveal a small but sturdy, one shot crossbow attached to his wrist. He stood in front of them all and held his arm rigid, steadied at the elbow by his other hand, following the movement of the Moline as she climbed down from the animal.

“Reckon I should have sorted a reloading mechanism for this one too” He gestured to his wrist. “Could have taken this bastard out one limb at a time!” Instead he pulled a knife out of his belt and held it his other hand. “But this’ll do”

“OK men, take it easy.” Clementine and Galgaloon moved between the angry crew and the Moline who now stood, head bowed.

“I’m afraid Clementine that your men have the right idea. May I?” Galgaloon had approached Grahams and gestured for his knife. Grahams handed it over. She then approached the offending Moline. Galgaloon took the Moline’s hand, wrapping her fingers round the hilt and then her own over the top. The blade pointed at the attacker’s heart.

“Look at me!” The younger Moline’s eyes rose to meet Galgaloon’s. “Polpilon I understand your fear. This is a time of change and you would witness me looking fearful at times. We have a hard time ahead, but I think, considering what you have just done that you know your coming death will be a kindness. However I must ask, does your family have a seed pod for your body?” Polpilon nodded her head. “Then it will be removed from them. Your body will be buried barren.” The head hung again.

“Look at me!” Their eyes met. Then, placing her other hand on the rear of the hilt, disregarding the broken or dislocated arm that put it there, she plunged the blade forwards. The body fell, but lay gently writhing, eyes closed, obviously still living and in pain. Galgaloon walked over to Richardson. “May I?” He handed her the pistol. As she walked back she pondered its design, but figured out how her alien shaped hand fitted the grip and trigger. Aiming it at the Moline’s head, she fired. The body went fully limp. “Thank you” No one felt able to speak. It had been a shocking display, totally out of character with the passivity and gentleness they had come to expect but performed with the quiet calm they knew only too well. A horrific image passed through Clementine’s mind. He imagined a group of Moline’s approaching him when he least expected it and with quiet smiles on their faces and reassuring voices, knifing him where he stood, dispatching him like a lame animal of burden. He no longer felt as safe here. There was a different culture emerging that had so far been as well hidden as the weapons his crew carried.

Galgaloon walked back towards them. She smiled. “That was so very unpleasant, ancient laws that even I only dimly recollect. Of course her body will not be buried barren. That would be unfair on her family members who are entirely innocent. The threat is designed to deflate the spirit and ease its passing”. She handed the gun back to Richardson. “A remarkable piece of machinery. You must help us develop some.”

Richardson looked to Clementine with an expression that conveyed just how unprepared he was, how utterly out of his depth they all felt, and how their comfortable security as superior beings was now beginning to crumble. Grahams however seemed unabashed.

“OH you bet. We can manufacture guns that would fire your whole head. Oh yes, cannon balls like Boulderbeast testicles!” After a brief bit of vocabulary checking Galgaloon laughed. “I’m sure the boulderbeasts would miss them. Surely rocks or something similar would be better.”

Grahams began to follow and Clementine heard his tone change as they began to discuss Moldolon. Glancing about, he watched order slowly return to the scene and the beasts were tethered. He squinted as he looking beyond the spiked snout of one of the beasts. A line of shapes approached, seemingly at a sprint.

“Galgaloon? Who are they?”

She turned to look, her face becoming puzzled as she moved forwards towards the approaching group. He followed.

“Taggers. They are the ones who track our females. Oh males I mean. They wear distinctive clothing and a cap that fully covers their ears. I don’t understand. Six taggers? Why....” Then she saw. Just becoming visible round the woodland was a line of six huge males. “Well Clementine, you will finally get to meet our man-folk. I can only hope they have love on their minds. They never travel in groups.”

The taggers reached them. Before they could speak Galgaloon said, “unless you know why they are coming I feel your report will be a waste. They must be travelling with purpose, you taggers normally arrive a good 8 hours before the males. Well?”

“You will easily witness our confusion, it has been very strange. It started with two who met and talked. From there two became six. That is all we know.”

The excitement rippling through the assembled Moline was palpable. But it was unclear whether fear or the anticipation of the pleasure and sheer luck of the town getting six males all at once was what fuelled the tremor that ran through the crowd.

“Please stand back. You, Fetch Lindilin,” she pointed her out, “and Chief Gross Scientist Lookineef.” Her finger indicated the massive bulk of the chief officer. Clementine had not noticed Lindilin among the crowd and on seeing her he realised he had missed her, even though he had spent much of the time during recent events asleep. As she approached she held her hand out and offered Clementine food. He thanked her and ate. It was fruit, and

although it reminded him of his guilt, he was famished. His smile seemed to fill her with pride and she calmly took her place at the other side of Galgaloon.

As the males approached Clementine got a clearer picture of their size. They were monsters. They each stood at least seven feet tall, and were wide, really broad. His masculinity was immediately under threat even when faced by such alien physiology. They simply oozed it, male power. Now, seeing them in the flesh, the imagery of any sexual practice between these brutes and the gentle Moline females seemed shocking. He pushed the savagely graphic thoughts aside with difficulty and curiously checked himself as he found his neck straining to catch sight of Lindilin standing on the other side of Galgaloon. The feeling in the pit of his stomach unnerved him and he pushed that aside too.

The males strode directly at them. Their horned heads were vicious enough, but on top of that their cruelly clawed hands held a number of assorted crude weapons. One male looked like he had uprooted a small tree to create his basic club. Another simply held an elongated rock. One had managed to fashion a form of axe, which looked quite advanced considering how stupid Clementine immediately assumed they must be. It was being carried with a dense warrior's pride.

“Err, should we be worried about now?”

“I don't know, do you want to run? I would understand it. You must forgive me if I don't, my curiosity is, how can I say, more than simply intellectual.” She breathed deeply. His head began to turn to look to Lindilin again. He forced himself to look forward and unseen he gestured behind his back to collect his men behind him. He hoped, and also expected that they would be paying attention.

The line of Moline males stopped in front of them.

“We have come to fight you” The male who spoke looked at no-one in particular but assessed the scene as if checking out their chances. Clementine was sure they were pretty good, definitely in favour of the Males.

“Oh Shit!! What do we do?”

“I suggest we let them Clementine.”

“What? You’re joking! We’d be slaughtered!”

“Slaughtered?”

“Killed, all of us!”

“Oh” she laughed, “I think you miss-translated. When he says ‘Fight’ it is used in a form that means to fight with you”

Clementine’s anxiety didn’t allow him to make the connection.

“No, I don’t want to fight with them.”

“Please be calm, I will try again.” She thought for a second, “They want to fight *for* you, for us. They have seen that we are preparing for war. That’s what we are doing here isn’t it?”

One of the males began to walk from the group towards an excited crowd of Females.

Galgaloon addressed the leader.

“You have come to join us?”

“*We* have come for battle” he gestured with a vast sweep of his tree trunk club at the four who remained nearby. “*He* “ at this he gestured to the one who was walking away and bellowed through his nose, spraying a thick mucus to the floor at their feet, “has only come for love.”

In the corner of his eye Clementine saw Lindilin look over to the departed male, who was now gesturing and growling at his Moline admirers.

“Galgaloon, with greatest respect I feel that if your males are in such short supply it would be foolish to throw them into battle, impressive as they are. You just can’t afford to lose them. I suggest you refuse.”

“Clementine, they were not asking!”

Galgaloon looked briefly irritated as Lindilin quietly whispered in her ear and with a nod of confirmation began to head over towards the large show-off male. Clementine briefly watched her go.

“Well it’s not my business anymore. I leave for the mirror tomorrow.” He turned, and with his crew following behind he walked back towards town.

When the crew had returned to the workshop Clementine had been expecting to take their design for the ‘mirror busting’ machine back to the ship and rely on their cramped and limited work spaces. He was really keen to move on, have time to reflect on the conflicting feelings he was experiencing, but he was also concerned that they had been distracted from their task for too long. So, he was delighted when he entered the hot workshop to find that a perfect realisation of the device they had designed sat in the centre of the stone floor. He hugged Richardson.

“You guys are incredible!! You should have said!”

It was formed from a large and solid wooden frame. He pushed it, and was satisfied at how stable it was. The crew looked on as he walked around it, rubbing his chin and nodding his head.

“The mirror was the only tough bit sir.”

“Taught the Moline’s another thing or two too sir, yes we did! All their mirrors is like polished metal see. Never seen silver sprayed on glass before. It was tricky converting some

of their equipment into a suitable sheet glass roller. Lovely sheet it turned out to be tho' in the end sir. Had to grind it for most of a day afterwards to get it so smooth mind you."

Pettin grabbed Grahams as he tried to walk in front to admire himself. "No you don't matey, you'll crack it just by looking at it."

"Ha Ha Willy" Grahams straightened his clothing and examined the tear in his sleeve cuff before deflating and walked away. He sat down, put his head in his hands. "Fuck."

Pettin began to speak. "Don't worry mate, I got some thread, we can..."

"Shut up Willy!" Clementine scolded.

"Just trying to..."

"Don't. Just don't OK! Start thinking of a way to fix that thing to one of the beasts." Before it was moved Clementine examined the four screw mechanisms that would subtly tilt and reposition the mirror within its frame so they could ensure the perfect alignment. He twisted one of the winged bolt heads. They had ensured a brilliant level of accuracy. Pulling his hand away he noticed his fingers were darkened with a sheen of fine grease. Wiping them on his trousers he then walked over to Grahams and put his hand on his shoulder. "They have a strange effect on you don't they!" He sat down across the table. "I'm not going to try to explain it. I think you know what I mean."

"Yessir, I reckon I do. You know I'm scared for them sir! I don't feel I can leave them. I mean can they really go to war?"

"Galagaloon says it's becoming inevitable although I'm not sure they would have considered fighting as an option till we came along. The Gunbales are more influenced by their males than the Moline's so they may have more spirit for it. Not to mention their favouring the massy tail plate. It may have bred more drive and sexual energy into them. That will always push people towards fighting. And they're a larger state. Maybe it's good that we've given the Moline's an edge. Whether it'll be war like we think of it I don't know. I imagined what a

battle might look like but somehow I could only see it happening with that constant calm they always have, and smiling. They were fighting and smiling.” He then put on a passable Moline accent, and surprised himself by saying almost fluently *“Oh, please see how regretful I am, you will witness my sadness, only I have stabbed you. That is unfortunate. A polite battle? Imagine it.”*

Grahams actually laughed, briefly. “Captain, I won’t desert you, but do you think we’ll come back?”

“I don’t know Grahams. Whatever we find past that mirror, if we get past it, might be more compelling than the Moline, but ultimately I won’t stand in your way if you want to return.”

“Before she died Moldolon asked if I would take part in her families feast when her burial plant grows.”

Clementine stood.

“Lets get packed and go. You’ve got a few months before then.” He walked out of the workshop where the rest of the crew were loading up.

They had commandeered three of the Boulderbeasts for their journey back to the mirror, promising that somehow they would return them soon. They had stripped them of the heavy weaponry and armour and had instead fixed a broad litter, some padding and straps in place of the small metal box that had previously housed the rider. After a brief goodbye and words from Galgaloon that had left Clementine pensive for some hours afterwards they had ridden from the town in a cloud of dust that obscured the calm smiling party of well wishers from the crew’s tentative glances backwards.

“Captain?” They were riding two on a beast, and Clementine shared his with Richardson.

”That last conversation with Galgaloon, it seems to have upset you.”

“Hmm, it just confirmed something I wasn’t sure about.”

“Want to tell me?”

He sighed. “Why not, it’ll help to tell someone. Those days when I was out of action, well there was a good reason and I wasn’t sick, as such. In the middle of the first night at the house near Galgaloon’s home I went sleep walking. I woke in a garden and found my hands and face covered in sticky juice. Fuck! I ate one of their stupid fruit didn’t I!”

“Oh. Erm...I thought that would be disastrous, like politically really bad, mentally too?”

“Well, mentally there have been some side effects. I heard a voice for a while, incredibly real. They said the Moline went mad, well maybe it doesn’t affect us the same but it did freak me out! It seems to have gone, thankfully. Politically? Well I wasn’t sure if anyone knew, I suspected that Galgaloon did, but she didn’t say anything, and I couldn’t. I felt such a coward. Anyway, Oh and this conversation goes no further, you understand?”

“Of course sir.”

“So, as I was leaving, Galgaloon was telling me how important and significant our visit had been. We had started a lot of changes that she saw as very positive for her people. She said our time there had been saddened mostly for her by the loss of the plant that had been growing in the grave of her dead daughter, her only daughter, and that the loss of the fruit had destroyed the plant before it had matured. Had the plant been allowed to grow her share of the flesh may have restored her fertility, given her a chance for another child. Damn it Richardson, I took her chance to replace her dead daughter. She didn’t say but it would have been just fucking typical if her daughter had died in one of Wellshorn’s fucking sea raids.”

“So she clearly blamed you? She knew for sure?”

“What she actually said was, ‘All I can hope is that the person who did it will witness how sad I am, and will find some way to repay the debt. Bloody hell.’”

“Sounds like you came out of it alright sir, if you don’t mind me saying so sir? And she’s the leader. She’ll get a share in someone else’s plant, I’m sure of that.”

“Yeah but I feel fucking lousy. Still, at least that bloody voice went away.”

He was wrong.

“Hello again. I’m sorry to disappoint you. I think now is the time for us to talk”

“Oh no”

“What is it Captain?”

“It’s OK Richardson. I may be acting strange for a while OK? A bit mad, but don’t panic and again, don’t tell the men. I’m OK.”

“Sure.”

“It’s that voice again. So ignore me, and watch the scenery OK.”

“Yessir, it is very interesting. I should think I’ll hardly notice anything else. Oh look, a tree.”

Clementine tried to laugh but only managed a pained half smile and then got as comfortable as he could, his face becoming fixed and serious.

He talked in his head.

“OK voice. I’ll humour you for now. I may be going mad, in fact I must be to be taking a hallucination seriously. Well how does this work? Can you hear me if I talk in my head only I don’t want to upset my cohort here?”

“Please Clementine, do take me seriously. I am real. You were right, I came from the fruit and by eating me you have taken me inside you and I have made myself part of your psyche. I don’t know much more than that, only that I know that this is natural, it is what is meant to happen, what my people are designed for. I am sure of that”

“What people?”

“Although we are plants, the plant mass and our fruit form a very complex structure that provides us with the ability to be conscious. We are seriously limited in that we cannot move, we don’t have eyes and have very limited senses. What we do have is a form of conscious link

between us, a vast network that covers much of this continent. We can share thoughts. Although it is a sacrifice, every now and then one of our number lures a creature to eat our fruit. By eating the fruit the animal allows us to relocate our conscious centre. Normally this is a very temporary measure but we get to experience the world just as the animal itself does. Thankfully this allows our race some brief insight into our surroundings beyond our simple plant awareness. That information is shared among us, through our mental link. It is awareness in a way that I doubt you could ever conceive and I must admit my experience of awaking within you was as scary and disorientating as you feel now. Luckily I had some time while you slept. I feel that helped with our integration. Animals joined this way could not be allowed to sleep or they would probably die, therefore they go mad very quickly. Ultimately, after they have provided some basic local information, they die anyway, along with our sacrificed friend. Sometimes the original plant grows a second consciousness but not always. The Moline's are a different matter. They seem incapable of tolerating us at all. It is interesting how suitable you are! It is like we were meant to be together."

"So when you enticed me to eat you, you thought I would eventually die? You bastard! We were not meant to be together and I want you out!"

"I have no knowledge about how that can happen. Our racial memory, being all that we have, shared between our mass, suggests that in the dim past there was a better life for us than our current state. Something more like this I imagine. Nothing in what we know suggests that this is reversible. Am I that imposing that you need to be rid of me so soon?"

"Look, as far as I know I am damaged somehow and my brain is creating this delusion as a form of defense. That's a serious problem for me, I am a soldier, I cannot go mad. I would be nothing. You managed to shut up for a few days, do it permanently!"

"That will not be done. Not only would it be horribly cruel to me, this is an amazing chance for both our races. Your mind and memories suggests you are inquisitive and hungry for

knowledge. Use me. We may in time find a way to separate us, and then I promise I will leave you.”

“Exactly what use can you be, other than a distraction? Maybe you can sing? Make pretty pictures perhaps?”

“No, but as you are not thinking as creatively as I hoped, and to be honest I’m disappointed, I will suggest an experiment that we could try. It will mean the sacrifice of another friend but what is happening here is worth that sacrifice.”

“OK so what’s this great plan?”

“I have seen in your memory the place we are heading, the mirror? I have also seen the ship. If I can locate one of my own near there and persuade them to alter their scent to lure a nearby creature, we should be in a position to experience what my friend experiences. At least enough to get access to information about your ship and crew that we would otherwise not know. If we get there and what we have seen comes to be true then you will believe. Agreed?”

“I’ll be surprised, but I’m not promising anything. Go on then. How long will it take?”

“Quarter of a day for the lure to be set. Up to that long again to attract an animal, maybe half a day for my friend to complete the fusion. The unlucky benefactor will suffer, as my friend will have to be very oppressive to encourage it to go where we want. I hope it lasts long enough before expiring, maybe a full day in total. Your memory of the journey suggested five days walking, I would estimate we are only 2 days away riding.”

“Will you stop doing that!!”

“Doing?”

“Doing all that memory reading stuff. Stop it, leave my mind alone.”

“It is difficult, I have had no concept of vision beyond what has been shared by previous corporeal adventurers, and your mind is so full of images that I cannot help myself, but I will stop now and leave you to think.”

“Good, I need it.”

“although I think you will be questioning me again before long. Like I said you are curious. The next time I will initiate a conversation will be when our experiment is providing results. Please spare a thought for the sacrifice of my fellow creature. Enjoy the journey.”

Clementine collapsed backwards, head in hands, and nearly winded Richardson.

“Sorry!, Oh my, this is weird. How did it look?”

“You looked angry, waved your hands about lots. The men did look over a few times but it’s OK sir, I talked and waved my hands about too, like we were discussion something sir, should be all right. You called out a few times too, didn’t make much sense. The only things I could make out was *‘Will you stop doing that’* and then just now you said, *‘I have no concept of vision other than something or other’*. Can’t remember the rest of that bit but I have to say sir that did sound a bit strange out of context. Other than that sir, the scenery was fantastic.”

“Thanks Richardson. We’ll have to see how it works out.” He didn’t say anything but he realised that the second vocalization did not belong to him. That was worrying. If it was all a hallucination it would be natural to voice some of the conversation. If it wasn’t a hallucination then it potentially meant this thing had some control over his very muscles themselves. Bastard!

“I’m going to sleep. Wake me when we stop for food. You decide when.”

They had stopped a few hours later, ate and stretched their aching muscles. The beasts were in a state now termed as ‘blue screening’. The control system allowed a ‘blue screen’ to drop, covering their eyes and preventing them from being able to move. Clementine feared it was

incredibly cruel. They seemed to find blue so intolerable that they must simply be terrified into a state of inactivity. The logic had been sorted through discussion between the crew and the Moline's and this design was what they had come up with. The belief was that originally the area the Boulderbeasts lived was always heavily overcast and so ages past they would have been fine. The theory stated that the climate must have changed to one with better weather and hence a hidden genetic trait had emerged, an inability to cope with sky-blue. It was weird but the world is full of these strange quirks. The bizarre head butting was possibly a learned behaviour developed because the physical shock interfered with the working of the retina, therefore giving them some relief. That was their theory and it worked, but it still seemed cruel.

They had ridden on, and then slept through the night. At night the screen had to be lit from behind else they invariably started stomping blindly about, which was obviously an impossible and intolerable situation. Nevertheless this was not a suitable technology, it wasted oil and more so because they had to use their best compressed lamps on a high setting to get a white enough light to keep the screen blue. For now they had to tether each boulder beast to at least four trees to prevent any chance that they would escape. It had been later that morning, just after they had set off again that the voice returned.

"Morning Clementine."

He said nothing.

"Yes it is a little. I have news."

"Hold on, it is a little what? I didn't say anything."

"Didn't you? It seemed like you were thinking how cold it is this morning."

It was right he had been.

"Yes, I was thinking that, I did not address it to you!! I did not say it was cold!!"

"I see, but there is no difference Clementine, not to me. Would you like my news?"

“Well I suppose you had better *tell* me as I don’t seem to be in the privileged situation where I can read your mind.”

“Yes, well that may come in time. I have a visual image from the animal my other lured. We are lucky in one sense, it is a bird. There are some problems being that as it is quite intelligent and is fighting the control of my other. The poor thing keeps nearly falling out of the sky. Shall I show you?”

“OK, go ahead”

A vision superimposed itself over what Clementine was seeing of the road ahead. He was almost sick. He steadied himself and closed his eyes. Both images were too much to cope with considering one was the steady movement of the scenery around him, while the other was an erratic combination of aerial swoops, banks and the occasional plummet which left him quite queasy. There was nevertheless no mistaking that the small shape that lay ahead was that of his ship, still shrouded in mist.

“This could be a memory, well, an imagination based on memory, right?”

“We need to find something that has changed since you were last there.”

It was difficult to focus on anything peripheral to the bird’s vision and being a hunting bird it seemed highly focused, clearly designed to pinpoint prey. It was not like a painting, what he saw was restricted by where the bird was paying attention and as its attention seemed to be focused on stopping the nightmare it was in, it wasn’t attending to anything in particular. He did notice two small paddleboats on the shore, but that would make sense and proved nothing. Beyond that there was nothing that stood out.

“It’s no good, nothing here can prove anything, madness it is. No wait!”

The bird had taken another plummet and his stomach lurched again. Its flying was getting weaker and it seemed barely able to stay airborne. As it corrected itself again it was facing the mirror and gaining height.

“Try and get your friend to keep it on this heading”

“I’ll try but I have this awful sensation. What is it?”

“Oh that’s me feeling very ill, but I think I’m getting used to this. Just ask him to keep the bird steady, and head for that shape up there.”

On top of the mirror, just where Willy Pettin had previously sat rocking like a child was a shape, brown and box like. As they got closer it began to resolve into what appeared to be a carelessly erected tent, stretched across the surface of the mirrors top.

“That’s it. I’d never imagine someone would stick a tent up there.”

The tarpaulin was flapping wildly in the high altitude wind.

“They must be mad; it’s not exactly the most comfortable place to camp out. Can you get the bird inside?”

“I don’t think so. The birds lost all it’s strength, it has been fighting us for the last hour, it was a journey to get this far as there are no plants within a mile of the coast. It’s exhausted. Yes, as I feared, here we go.”

The bird fell and this time it didn’t recover. The voice stopped the image before it hit the water.

“The bird is dead.”

“And your friend?”

“Dead also, but it was worth it. If that tent is still there tomorrow then you know this is real.”

“Hey, you still may not be real, I might have just developed Clairvoyance! I might still be imagining you.”

“Oh will you stop fighting, give up!”

Clementine laughed, he was actually feeling elated and wild possibilities were racing through his mind. “I was joking, relax.”

“Oh I see. By the way that idea would seem quite possible, yes and that. Likely, hmm possible, No way, I don’t see that working. Yes, good idea. So you do know how to think creatively. Take it slowly though. I was afraid this might happen. Don’t burn out. I’m going to be quiet for a while. I won’t answer you. Rest.”

He couldn’t, but he also didn’t want to sound crazy to Richardson. From Richardson’s point of view the captain was being strange whether he spoke or not. He was currently sat watching the Captains back as he bounced around on his bottom in an excited manner and jiggled occasionally like he was full of writhing snakes. Clementine would have agreed that writhing snakes was a good analogy for the feelings inside him. Thoughts slid through each other, sometimes forming, rearing up into an individual idea but often they were barely distinguishable from the mass of speculation his experience had opened up. He knew if he was asked to put them into words they would become incoherent ramblings. He had far too much energy.

“Stop the beast, thing stop it.” he called. Richardson leant forward and pulled a wire. The beast stopped with a jolt and a guttural moan. It was protesting against the blue prison it had suddenly found itself in. Clementine jumped down.

“OK, err, running, that’s it. Take me, no, get the beast running, both of us. OK. Run. Try and keep up, down. You know flying is fun, makes you a bit sick though. Run.” He started to sprint. Richardson lifted the blue screen again and the beast trundled forward. He watched the Captain keep pace. He didn’t manage to keep the sprint up but instead slipped into a fast jog. Richardson slowed the beast a little and then concentrated on the way ahead, with only an occasional concerned glance towards his Captain. He wanted to talk to the crew, but he had his orders.

* * *

The Captain had returned to the beast after about half an hour. He had then slept again for half a day and awoke seeming much more normal, although distracted. For the last hour of the Journey he had sat looking through his telescope, scanning the horizon. Richardson had questioned him.

“Just looking for something a little bird told me.” He laughed. “Don’t worry, I have a feeling it will all become clear soon.”

“To you maybe” Richardson had said that very quietly. Finally the captain had leapt up, Jubilant, and nearly fallen from the beast. He fell onto Richardson.

Handing him the telescope and pointing he shouted. “Look, look, I told you.”

“Err, No Captain, you didn’t!” He barely hid his discomfort.

“Oh yes, sorry, later.”

He had looked anyway, and finally saw it, the small shape clinging to the mirror.

“Who the hell would want to stay up there?”

“Were going to find out. It’s time to put our plan into action.”

Richardson had been happy to distance himself from Clementine and gain the company of the crew again. He remained professional and did not discuss what had happened even though his feelings were fighting to get out. He was also concerned that if the Captain did not calm down, the crew may start imagining him truly mad, without the information he had to hand, and he wasn’t even sure about the captains’ state of mind himself.

The party of returning travelers had done their hellos with the rest of the ‘Foundry’s’ crew and explained in excited tones and varying levels of expletives, depending on which one of them was doing the telling about some of the events on their journey. They now stood with their equipment in hand next to one of the pedal-boats that to Clementine’s horror had been

painted pink. The crew must have been bored. He cast it from his mind. They were ready, approaching the mirror from land rather than sea.

Chapter 5

The crewmen that had remained on the boat when Clementine and his party had gone adventuring had not known or cared who the crazy fool was camped atop the mirror in the wind. They had not bothered to look into it. Apparently he had been living up there for ten days and hadn't come down. They were sure that some supplies had gone missing, and a tarpaulin, but no-one felt the urge to make the arduous climb to investigate. Similarly they had not managed to keep up their sortie along the mirror for long either. They exclaimed they had walked for ages but could not be pressed to reveal exactly how many days. With the knowledge of what the mirror did to the Moline's regarding their ability to maintain any interest in it, he wasn't surprised or angry.

Getting away from the mirror might have been the only thing that had allowed Clementine and his men the chance to continue showing an interest. He wanted to move quickly in case they succumb to the phenomena now they were back in close proximity again.

The climb was as tough as they remembered. Having reached the top they were left with the more arduous task of safely lifting the device to their elevated position.

“Steady, steady, STEADY!! FUCK, Grahams, Jack, take it easy will you” Richardson was supervising the lifting of the mirror. Five minutes before Clementine had gone with Pettin to investigate the tent.

“Please, just go slower will you. The Captain will kill us if you smash that thing.”

Richardson had one hand on his brow, his tunic stained beneath the arms.

They had not seen Willy Pettin return, and his voice took them by surprise, “*Which* Captain would that be exactly?!”

“What do you mean?” Grahams strained the question out between gritted teeth. Fuck this is heavy.”

Pettin simply nodded backwards down the mirror. They looked and nearly dropped their burden. Walking down the mirror top were two figures, if you disregarded their perfect doppelgangers in the reflection. One was Clementine, the other was Captain Wellshorn, looking bedraggled but familiarly angry and ill-tempered. He had grown a beard and looked a mess but his bright coat was unmistakable.

A few minutes earlier when Pettin and Clementine had reached the tent and pulled back the tarpaulin they had been dumb struck.

As was usual for the Captain, Wellshorn had broken their meditation with a sour comment. He hadn’t changed, except in appearance.

“No words of greeting for the Captain that you left for dead, hmm?”

“Err, Oh, shit, Captain Wellshorn. This is great, we really did think you were dead.”

“Great? Enjoyed being captain have you, hmm? I didn’t notice any long nighttime search parties. I think you may have taken over a bit quick. I think you may have seen your opportunity. And what have you done with it? Well man? You see, after surviving my impromptu bath, the details of which I will happily leave to rumour and speculation, I decided to stay away from the crew, to see how much of a mess you would make. Instead I see you abandon your captaincy and responsibilities and take a little holiday. Was that what it was Clementine, a jaunt? Well you have simply proven your unsuitability for command.”

“Captain, you can see that I didn’t want to leave, else I wouldn’t have left the ship here. I at least wanted to be sure you were dead” He realised too late how bad that sounded. ”I mean, as long as there was a chance you might be found I....” He gave up that point and moved on. ”Nevertheless sir, we had a mission to complete and we needed information. I believe I was acting in a way you would have approved of sir.”

“Rubbish. Well, we can discuss your court-marshal later, yours too.” He pointed at Pettin. “I haven’t forgotten your behavior and that of the maniac you first came here with. Now, Go and prepare the ship to depart. Unfortunately I have achieved nothing here and I have got a bit over-embroiled in my experiments. Chemistry has always been a passion of mine. I thought I might find an answer to the mirror problem.” He began to screw lids back on Jars.

“It’s strange.” He added, “I’ve felt almost compelled to stay close to the mirror. I’ve been far from comfortable up here but I’ve never felt like I belong anywhere quite as much as.....”

He stopped talking. That sort of talk was not proper. He picked up a notebook and began mulling over his last pages, currently oblivious to Clementine and Pettin. “Yes I’m done here...wait, unless I mix...” Wellshorns head dipped to his work again. Clementine and Pettin were momentarily forgotten and Clementine ushered Willy out of the tent.

He ran his hands through his hair. Then he seemed to brace himself. “Willy. The last time you were up here...”

“Yessir”

“*That* time it was an accident.” He patted Willy on the shoulder then placed his hands behind his back.

“Sir?” Willy looked mortified.

Clementine simply nodded and turned. He walked a few steps and then, hesitating he looked back to where he had left Willy Pettin. He was standing at the edge of the tarpaulin, his

shaking hand coaxing the thin and flexible whip sword from the lining of his coat. The light reflecting from its brilliant shine was blurred by the acute tremor in Willy's limbs.

A voice issued from inside. "For mothers sake man. Come in or go, just make up your mind you idiot!" Immediately Willy seemed to inflate, his muscles becoming rigid.

Clementine strode forward and pulled Pettin away. "It's OK Willy, go back to the others."

"Thank you sir" He hurried off. As he left he heard Clementine speak.

"Captain! We have made a fantastic discovery and I think you should be the first to witness it, if it works. Please follow me, we may have the answer."

Now Wellshorn and Clementine stood and watched the frame as it was finally fixed in place. The men had even thought far enough ahead to make additional supporting struts that could be attached to the suction cups they used for climbing, thus being able to secure the frame against the smooth mirror floor and the perplexing reflection that faced them. Another feature that Clementine had missed was a tiny pin prick sized hole in the very centre of the mirror.

"Oh yes cappin, we thought this was very important. Allows us to direct the positioning of the mirror exactly by being able to peer in from behind. Solves that old problem of not being able to put yourself in between the two mirrors to check your progress. Infinity here we come." Grahams rubbed his hands together and grinned.

"Please address the Captain as Captain, Grahams, not 'Cappin'" A familiar sideways flick of the head from Clementine indicated that the *real* captain stood beside him. Grahams was not as quick on the uptake this time.

He looked puzzled, Clementine had never worried about being addressed in sloppy language before. His mouth opened before his brain followed the thought through. "But sir, you never..." Luckily it caught up in time. "Oh yes sir. I guess I've just not had the captain

around for a long while. Just outta practice I guess. Well *Captain*” He rightly addressed Wellshorn, “is there anything else we can tell you about it?”

“Just get it working man, get it working!!” His entire lack of serious interest or even acceptance of what they had accomplished riled every one of them as they hid their fury behind lidded eyes or distracted glances.

“Right you are. Who’s gonna act as Bombardier then?” Grahams seemed to have taken the role of coordinator.

Willy spoke up. “Jack’s the man. Fucking great eye he’s got. How bout it Jack wanna do the sighting?” Willy’s vote seemed a popular choice.

Jack looked proud and knelt down in the limited space between the back of the frame and the sheer drop behind.

“Right then lads, who’s doing the calibration?”

Clementine pointed to Richardson and Grahams. They had good steady hands. Willy would have been his first choice but he still hadn’t fully stopped shaking since Clementine’s earlier hasty yet retracted order for him to dispatch Wellshorn. They positioned themselves, Grahams to the left of the frame, Richardson to the right. Clementine smiled reassuringly at Willy.

“Right lads, here we go.” Jack shook his hands, and pushed his hair off his forehead. ”OK, Clockwise turn top right,” he pointed at Richardson, “Crank that screw, we’re well out of alignment. Close, OK, slower now easy, easy, woah. OK. Back a smidgen. Stop. Both of you,” he flicked his fingers in both their directions, like he was conducting an orchestra, but never took his eye from the hole. ”Bottom screws. Slowly clockwise, bout quarter turn a second, now, OK,OK, slower, half that speed, OK, stop. Top left, quarter turn. Back up half that. Fuck it already looks nearly perfect. My guess is it ain’t that easy.” His instructions continued and got more precise. The tunnel of reflections he could see seemed at a glance

perfectly strait. Maybe it just wasn't going to work. He stopped, looked away at the scenery for a moment and rubbed his eyes. Looking back to the hole he blinked rapidly and then placed one eye to the hole, then the other. Finally deciding on his left, he raised his hand. "Here we go guys. Top left clockwise about a tenth of a turn. Hey, hang on, can any one see that?" They looked closely at the mirror. A few tiny blue arcs of lightning seemed to spark and jump at the very centre of the reflective area that their own mirror covered. "Top right back up, as slow as you can, and I mean that if you're sure the screw is turning then you're going too fast. Well is it moving?"

Richardson was good at following directions. "Err, I'm not sure Jack" The image in front of Jack flashed. The rest leapt back as far as they could without falling off. At the centre of the reflecting space in front of their contraption the few sparks became a small tracery of lightning crackling audibly and beginning to expand, slowly at first, then rapidly. Small arcs of the small blue bolts leapt across the divide to their own mirror. For a moment Clementine realized the ghastly and stupid mistake they had made as he watched this beautiful and now potentially deadly pattern grow. Unchecked it could destroy the whole structure they were stood on and plunge them to their deaths. No chance of surviving like Wellshorn did, they would fall on land. They had been so wrapped up in their brilliance they may have just killed themselves.

"Back off down the mirror lads, be prepared to run it if it keeps growing." They backed away quickly. The tracery grew, leaving a dark patch behind. It reached a width twice that of the frame, but then seemed to fluctuate and pulsate as if the force creating the reflection was fighting the destruction that was occurring. Finally, after each man had nearly ran for their lives more times than their hearts could cope with it snapped back to form a perfect circle. The remaining lightning exploded its way across the mirror surface in all directions distorting the image but making no lasting change, yet still causing Jack's nerve to snap throwing him

into a sprint from which he wouldn't stop for some twenty seconds. What was left behind was a slowly brightening hole exactly as wide as their own mirror through which, as they edged forward they were exalted to see landscape beyond.

“Boys, stay back, let's just keep our cool.” Clementine held his arms wide. “Err, I also feel it is only right that the Captain be the first to look through properly. He did after all bring us here and it is his mission. Captain?” Clementine gestured forward and handed him his telescope.” Wellshorn simply tapped the contraption on his head and smiled.

“Well done, Clementine, I may reduce that court martial to a mere flogging. Stand back there man!” He barged through. As he approached the hole Clementine moved close to the wooden frame and gently rested his hand on the top. Wellshorn got down on his knees and began to look through. He tested that the surface of the reflection around the hole was still solid, tentatively. “It seems to be safe. I can see landscape the other side. OK, I'm going to take a proper look. Here goes.” He slowly pushed his head through, then his shoulders. Finally just his rear end and waist remained with his forearms braced against this side of the reflection to prevent his falling through.

“Nothing much to say, it looks...” His words were cut short as, in a moment of horror the hole collapsed and with a sound similar to scissors cutting meat, the rear end of Welshorns body collapsed in a pool of blood next to his two severed forearms. Mere seconds afterwards the hole started to reform as it had before. The men stood in stunned silence as Clementine stepped back from the contraption. They did not notice that he, like Richardson and Grahams now had a small amount of lubricating oil on his forefingers. He furtively rubbed them clean on his coat and turned, managing to look suitably disturbed as he looked out to the horizon behind them.

“Captain? He’s dead sir!”

He was Captain again.

“Yes Willy I know.” He sighed. “He only has half a body. At least it’s his least offensive half!”

“What do we do?” Richardson was rubbing his temples.

Jack, who had just that moment returned from running down the mirror top looking embarrassed, guessed he wouldn’t be too out on a limb and risked getting straight to the point. “No-one knows apart from us,” He put his head down and breathed deeply for a second. “Unless any of you are really upset by this and want to arrange a wake, I guess we just throw him through. Sorry captain! I won’t miss him, not for the second time.”

Richardson shook his head. “Give me credit, you think I care? I was worried about the hole. If it’s unstable how can we trust going through it?”

Clementine looked around the crew and saw Grahams eyeing him with a strange expression. He spoke, but was smiling.

“Err, I don’t reckon the hole will collapse again, will it captain? Reckon it’s good and safe, like. Very unfortunate for old Captain Welly though. Let’s say *I* go through first, I’d be OK wouldn’t I Captain?”

“Yes Grahams, you’ll be fine, I promise.”

They all crowded round the hole, unsuccessfully trying to avoid the sticky blood that was spreading across the already slippery surface. There was nothing remarkable beyond, just more of the same landscape and a continuation of the waterway which could now be conformed as a large shallow river estuary.

Pettin looked puzzled.” How come the water isn’t backed up inside here? It’s a river right, It’s flowing out to sea.”

“Think about it Pettin.” It was Clementine, sounding authoritative. ”Whatever created this is not going to drown itself, if it’s in there, or want cause a major natural disaster. I’m sure it had a way of allowing the water to pass. On reflection our salinity test did show fresh water flowing out, so it’s defiantly the case.”

“True sir,” Pettin had other thoughts behind his seemingly naïve question. “It’s not that sir. All I’m saying is couldn’t we have fucking swum through!”

“Probably not!” Clementine hadn’t even considered it.

There was a fast chorus of “No way”, “not a chance matey”. No-one was willing to accept they had wasted their time.

“I’m sure it’s too clever for that” Clementine added, hoping to end the discussion, and then quickly pointed.

“What’s that over there?” Clementine indicated a line scoured in the ground, a small valley almost obscured by foliage. Something shiny sat, also partly hidden, at one end.

“Give me the ropes Jack.” Grahams gestured impatiently towards Jack who had just finished tying together all the ropes they had bought end to end.

“I’ll just tie it to the frame.”

“Make it a good knot sailor” Richardson watched over Jack’s shoulder examining the knot as it formed. Jack looked up at Richardson when he was finished. “Good enough for you?”

Richardson nodded.

Clementine addressed the voice hidden inside him. “Have you been watching all this?”

“Always. Killing Wellshorn was probably the clearest decision I think you’ve ever made. I notice you still had trouble deciding how, but at least you knew what you wanted. Shame you had to kill him though, I think I would have liked him.”

“You’re kidding. Oh well, no accounting for taste. Anyway what do you mean about me not making clear decisions?”

“We’ll talk about it later. This is exciting. It’s also weird, I felt like I was being watched a few seconds ago. Did you feel it?”

“No”

Grahams had thrown the mass of rope through the hole. “Not sure I wouldn’t rather use the sucker things myself. He felt for the inner side of the mirror surface. “It’s smooth. They would stick just as well inside I reckon. I mean, if for some reason this hole *does* collapse the rope will be severed. HEY! What the fu..”

Grahams appeared to jerk towards the hole. He momentarily strained against some apparent force, lashed out in a futile attempt to grab one of his crew mates and then flew through the opening.

Clementine pulled his pistol and knelt quickly at the hole, ready to fire. “Grahams?”

Through the hole he could see Grahams hanging in mid air from his left arm. A cylindrical metallic shape was floating magically in the air beside him and from it a short blue arm made of an impossible translucent material seemed to be holding him by the arm. Grahams was wriggling and straining to look at the object floating above him. “I can’t see what it’s standing on Captain!..... Captain? What’s going on?”

“It’s not standing on anything Grahams. Stay calm, you seem safe for now.”

“STRANGLEY.” The high voice seemed to come from the Small cylinder. It shook Grahams who wiggled like a worm on a hook. “CLOSELY TO, DIFFERENCE. NEW THINGS. OLD THINGS. DIFFERENCE. LIKENESS TOO.”

“I demand you safely return my crewman to me” Clementine had his gun aimed for the top centre of the cylinder. He didn’t want to shoot, that could kill Grahams.

“ANOTHER.”

Without warning Clementine then joined Grahams through the hole and ended up dangling at the other side of the cylinder on a similar light blue appendage. His gun fell from his hand but it only fell a few feet before a third appendage snatched it held it for the impossible metal creature to examine. It seemed to hold its attention only briefly. A red light speckled over Clementine’s body beamed from the bottom of the cylindrical captor.

“ORGANIC INTERFACE DETECTED. CALIBRATING. WAIT FOR EXECUTE.”

Clementine’s inner voice seemed to mentally shudder. *“This is odd!! I believe I must be that ‘organic interface’ it mentioned. I seem to be receiving a large collection of images and information. Oh my! NO! This is incredible. This thing is..”*

The high-pitched machine voice issued forth again. This time he heard it with his ears and also it resounded inside his head cutting the parasite voice out, or maybe just using it to communicate it’s own message, “WELCOME CREWCHILD”

Then they fell. At least they thought they were falling. After a few seconds they began to slow and when Clementine found the guts to open his eyes he realized that they were still being held by the floating cylinder. They landed gently and were released.

“I don’t know where to begin telling you what I’m seeing here.”

“Then don’t. I need my crew with me, that’s all I care about right now.” He then spoke aloud.

“Grahams, I’m going to ask this thing to take me back up and get the rest of the crew. I don’t believe we are in danger. Will you be OK here?”

Grahams' eyes were wide as saucers. "Err, fuck knows Cappin. I'll tell you when you get back." He sat down; never taking his eyes off the strange metallic object, and then stood again, stepped backwards and finally dropped into an alert crouch.

A large flat blue disk appeared at the top of the cylinder and Clementine was bodily hoisted on top. EXECUTING. The cylinder rose, with Clementine sat hanging on for dear life.

"Holy Shit!!" Grahams watched him go.

"I think you should know Clementine that I am having great difficulty with the information I am receiving. I am not allowing any of it to reach you, but am trying to use your memories to make sense of it. It is too alien for my limited experience. I am going to stop communicating until I have a clearer picture of what's going on."

"You do that. I'm struggling enough with what I'm seeing."

The rest of the crew took a lot of persuading to step onto the insubstantial platform. Even after all they had experienced they would not believe that something that so barely seemed to exist could support them. Eventually they had succumbed.

The machine seemed happy.

SO LONG LONE SELF. MANY MORE CREWCHILD. ORDERS BE GIVEN NOW.

When they reached the ground the men jumped off without assistance and all backed away forming a semi-circle.

They were bordering on panic and Clementine needed to take some control and restore just a little bit of normality. "Right guys, close those gaping mouths, you all look moronic. Crack out some food, we need to sit and think about our stomachs and I, or should I say we have some explaining to do. You can help me formulate some suitable questions for a certain guest I picked up recently."

They all rummaged in their packs and placed a successful approximation of a meal on the grass. It was a nice spot for a picnic. At least the scenery was not disturbing even if their world was becoming so.

They began questioning with full mouths, sometimes asking two questions at once. Each answer came as true sound from the machine itself, yet Clementine heard the answer echoed by his internal voice. He was not sure if the machine was using the voice or if the voice itself was trying to communicate that it too already knew all the answers.

“Whats your name”

“THIS” pause “DRONE 23” It rotated to signify itself. “ALSO I AM SHIP”

“What is ‘ship’?”

“SHIP BRING CREW HERE, I AM SHIP. I AM TRANSPORT, WEAPON, HOME. HOME NO MORE. ALSO TRANSPORT NO MORE. WEAPON STILL.

“Where did you travel from?”

Drone23 angled upwards and a beam of intense red light pointed into the sky.

“THERE”

That threw them.

“How far?”

“YOUR BOAT WOULD TAKE 20,000,000,000 YEARS”

“What?”

The story emerged. Drone 23 was a part of the complex entity called a ‘computer’ that ran a crashed vessel some half a mile away, the shape they had seen at the end of the valley. The vessel was unthinkable powerful and not only did it actually fly; it was capable of traveling the stars. It had left its home world over five hundred years previously and had crashed one year after take-off onto this very planet after suffering some form of energy crisis. They did

not understand the principle. It involved something akin to harnessed lightning that the ship referred to in terms of electricity and electronics. The crew, numbering in the hundreds were all destroyed in the crash, however a young girl who had been caring for three infants had taken her charges for a walk and had been looking around a small lifeboat at the insistence of one of the youngsters. They had been inside when the crisis occurred, the doors had locked and the lifeboat had been launched. All they carried with them was their clothing, the tool kit in the lifeboat, and a child's book on basic engineering. It was now becoming clear that those children were Clementine and the crew's ancestors. The eldest was the great Mother.

The ship, which had in part survived the crash, set about ensuring its own safety. The only automatic order it had to follow. The brain, or computer, which had survived the crash with minimal damage, had thrown up a protective barrier as a first resort but with no one left to direct its actions further had simply sat and waited. It had used every trick it knew to stay undiscovered, especially when it realized there was an evolving intelligent race of herbivores living nearby. Using powerful pulses of displaced energy it successfully used basic behavioral techniques to discourage any attention paid to the mirror, deflecting inquisitive thoughts onto some other object or subject, preferably much further away.

They slowly began to realize the power the ship had at its disposal, and they were now being carried to that very ship itself on the drone's blue saucer when Clementine's voice spoke again.

"Clementine, you haven't asked about the part my race play in all of this."

"Well? Tell me what you know."

"We came to this planet with you. There was a stock of our seeds on board. The crash and explosion spread our spores over miles of the surrounding terrain. The really interesting thing is that every adult crewmember shared their life with one of our kind. Our races had practically evolved together, you provided us with mobility, we provided you with telepathy."

Your ships and machines were designed to interface through us, we made it possible to think commands directly at a machine and receive data through the telepathic link. That's why the drone called me an 'organic interface'. Isn't it amazing?"

"You said that us being together felt right somehow. Doesn't that make you mad, just being used like that?"

"No Clementine, that original crew were not just you, animals with a plant slave. The minds and body of the crew were a combination of you and us, animal and plant. They became an individual, It wasn't the case that you ran the show and we just watched. I mentioned earlier about your decision-making ability. Apparently it's a race trait. You aren't actually very good at being decisive. Just look back at your life and you'll see. You didn't decide to leave the Moline's, you had to. The decision was made by circumstances. It was becoming too uncomfortable for you. Do you know why? Because you couldn't even face up to, or even make a decision about your feelings for them. You liked them, hated them, respected them, and pitied them, and finally you fell in love with one of them and that was the hardest. You couldn't even decide if you could allow yourself to lust after these aliens but you did, so you buried your feelings."

A memory of standing watching the male Moline's approach their party after Moldolon's tragic death flashed through his mind, the feeling in his stomach returned as he visualised Lindilin's face and body.

"Your ancestors found they thought much clearer with us on board. Maybe we made you more ruthless. We certainly fought and won many bloody wars. We make it possible for you to do the things you felt needed doing but could not commit to. We make you strong. I don't think you would have twisted that adjusting screw and killed Wellshorn if you didn't have me. I still think it was a shame, I did like him. You know Wellshorn was different. He had no trouble with decisions."

“One question remains.” He spoke aloud. ”Drone23, ship Do you have the capability to remove the organic interface?”

“what?”

The drones dialect was improving in response to the feedback from the interface and their questions. WHY? IS IT NOT WORKING?

“If it was broken, could you remove it?”

STRANGELY. HAS BEEN DONE. CAN BE DONE. ON OCCASION THE MIND NOT CAPABLE, MADNESS FOLLOWS. THEN WE CAN SAVE THE BODY HALF. BUT LOOSE THE INTERFACE FOREVER.

“What are you doing, it would kill me!”

“I just wanted to know that’s all. Just incase.”

“Just incase you decide to kill me? I see. Well anyway, you may have been decisive about killing Wellshorn but you weren’t successful. We weren’t successful, Wellshorn is still alive!”

“No way! How!!”

“The ship saved him!”

They had arrived at the space vessel. It was vast, but much of it was destroyed in the impact. What remained was about 300 metres in length. Vines, moss and creepers covered much of its surface. Clementine wondered to himself if the ship had encouraged their growth as it could easily have cleaned them off.

“I believe so.” The voice cut through his thought.

YES, CLEMENTINE. I WILL NOT BE MOVING ANYWHERE. IT SEEMED A GOOD IDEA.

“Great, now I have both of you reading my mind.”

“Sorry Captain? Who were you..? Oh I see, the voice again? Are you OK?” Willy looked concerned.

“Fine Thanks.”

“FINE”

Richardson questioned the drone. “Ship? How have you managed to maintain yourself for a half millennium?”

I AM MANY PARTS. I HAVE THESE DRONES. Drone 23 rotated again. 10 REMAIN. ALSO I HAVE THESE.

With a brief buzzing noise, something moved within the ship. Suddenly, in an explosion of black, a cloud of small flying shapes appeared from among the foliage that partly covered the top of the vessel. Leaves and twigs were shredded away by the sheer velocity of their appearance. There must have been at least a hundred. They formed into a perfect sphere, and then coalesced into a cube. The ship was showing off, and Clementine thought that was fair. It had waited a long time for them to come, and had received an audience that was easy to impress. One of the shapes then darted out from the cloud and hovered in front of them for a few seconds. It was a small disk the size of their palm and it was mainly black, but shades shifted over its surface and at times it seemed to vanish, even though they stood around it in a circle no further than four feet across. Nothing more could be seen.

I HAVE SURVIVED. THESE ARE MY EYES. ALSO MY ARMY. DEMONSTRATION.

The small drone in front of them darted away and the entire cloud rose, and then formed a teardrop shape as they funnelled out of the hole in the barrier. LOOK HERE. A beam of light shot from the side of ‘Drone 23’ which then created a flat screen on which one hundred small images were visible. ONE HUNDRED EYES, ONE HUNDRED IMAGES.

Some of the pictures showed their own ship, ‘the Foundry’; others were looking at the same scene but seemed to have covered a mile distance in a matter of seconds. A few seconds later

one formed a growing image of the farm they had stopped at on the way to the Moline city, two days walk. It had got there in twenty seconds.

Grahams sat on the floor and put his face in his hands. When he looked up he had tears in his eyes. “No way!! What?, what....?” He shook his head quickly as if to clear it and wiped his eyes with the ball of his hands, and spoke to encouraging his failing spirit. ”Come on Reg, get a grip.” He started to breathe deeply and then threw up onto the grass between his knees. “Oh Fuck. Captain, I need some time, gonna walk fer a bit. Mind?”

“No Grahams. That’s fine.” He wasn’t sure he ever remembered hearing Grahams first name.

“Take your time Reg.” He called as Grahams walked away.

“You need some company mate?” Jack shouted after him.

Grahams didn’t turn but nodded and waved his hand to welcome Jack to his side.

Willy was alternating from looking at the screen, the vast shining monster that was the ship, but then also back to where Grahams and Jack walked away. He seemed totally torn between the uncomfortable fascination with what he was seeing and the sheer alienation it made him feel and maybe also just a little abandonment by his peers. The voice spoke again.

“Look at them Clementine. This is your race without us.”

Clementine simply ignored it.

Momentarily, as he contemplated his crew Clementine thought of the ‘foundry’ floating in all reality in a total different world beyond the mirror. What could he do, if they returned home they would start taking an unhealthy interest in the Moline’s and also come seeking this machine. He shuddered to think what they would do with it. He really wished he could somehow stop them returning home at all. It was only a thought, brief and fleeting. He was not aware or prepared for how that thought would be translated through his new interface.

Drone 23 spoke. “EXECUTING, DESTRUCTION WILL REQUIRE CONFIRMATION.”

Suddenly, attracting the attention of the 3 remaining men, the hundred fold image on the screen of light coalesced into just one, the 'foundry', as perfect looking as if they were floating off its bow.

From above the ship, breaking more creepers, spilling branches over its shining surface another object appeared with a high pitched whine that quickly mounted into a roar. It was obviously a gun of some sort. It had two barrels, each about a foot across and the whole cannon like structure floated on a blue light, effortlessly adjusting its position and trajectory.

"Captain!! What are you doing?" Pettin, in his strained unreal state of mind had, without thought, made the connection that the Captain and the ship were now somehow linked, and had jumped to the correct conclusion that it was his thoughts that were being acted out.

"Nothing, it's not me. Cancel Order, Cancel order!"

The ends of the barrels had begun to glow an increasingly bright shade of red.

He wasn't in control, and not being in control of this behemoth was unthinkable. "I did not order this." The roar within the gun was building to an ear-splitting magnitude.

I think you did!

"Shut up you."

The only thing he could think to do was to find another target for his misplaced feelings of paranoia and distrust of his own people. They had to go somewhere, he had given them life and they now existed within the machine, perhaps encouraged by his decision-enhancing parasite. He remembered a pedal-boat by the shoreline that had been left for his return, he hoped it was far enough away from the foundry. He remembered it and hated it. He remembered being in one with the captain, how he had been the one to do the work of two, a stupid machine designed for two people, by a people who constantly craved the need to pair up, to look for safety. Maybe the parasite was right. Did it provide the pairing they so naturally sought? He also remembered that while they had journeyed to the Moline port this

one, the one he had seen through the eyes of the bird had been painted pink, *pink!* He hated pink. The picture shifted its attention and the gun fired. Two vast red lances of fire roared from the gleaming weapon, covering the space between the ship and new target as quickly as it took them to look back to the screen. The impact sent a wave of liquid fire over fifty yards of land and sea, the heat doubtlessly licking the very hull of the ‘foundry’.

“Fuck, shut that thing down ship, now!”

ARE YOU SURE YOUR ORDERS ARE COMPLETE?

“Of course! What no! They were not my orders!”

The whine from the gun subsided and it settled back towards the ship.

“That was you wasn’t it!” he talked to his voice.

No, it was you, it was what you wanted, the only real answer to your needs

“You’re insane.” He had to get a grip and rescue himself from the distressed and distrustful looks of Pettin and Richardson. All he could do was swear, which he did for long enough that when he turned back to his remaining crew his first attempt at speaking continued in expletives.

“Look fuck, fuckit, really, bastards, OK look Richardson can I have a word.” Clementine walked a short distance, unhappy that he was now leaving Willy looking terrified next to this painfully intimidating machine. His eyes looked pleadingly to Clementine and his friend Richardson.

As they walked away Clementine reflected again on how common it was in times of stress for people to pair up. Find your buddy. Grahams and Jack were reforming their ‘thick as thieves’ pairing. Clementine knew that Willy and Richardson had always had a strange yet volatile closeness. Here was Willy looking terrified, as Clementine seemed to be threatening to pair up with his next in command, to leave poor Willy alone with nothing but the fearful

technology as company. He saw Willy smile sheepishly at the floating cylinder like it was the last girl at the dance and Willy didn't fancy her one bit, not because she was ugly but because she was huge, scary, maybe someone's domineering aunt who would teach you things you weren't at all ready for.

He made it brief. "Take Willy and join the others. Make a camp, but a good half a mile away. Go talk about home, and girls, anything. Go design something. We've got to keep these guys together."

"Captain. You're staying here?"

"For a while. Are you OK?"

Richardson turned and walked towards Willy. "I guess, but I don't see how we can sit and design something with any enthusiasm knowing that this machine could just come along and knock it into a cocked hat!" He stopped. "I think we're all feeling a little castrated! I mean our people, our ancestors have had five hundred years to develop since they built this thing. Doesn't it make you feel a little pathetic?"

"I don't know how it makes me feel. Go on, I'll join you soon."

"How will you find us. Oh yes of course" He waved limply at the huge world shattering machine. His shoulders dropped and he gestured a weak salute. He called to Willy, making himself more erect as he did so. They moved away, Richardson with uncaring lassitude and Willy with a hurried need to escape.

"Voice, tell the machine to take me to our leader."

They, Clementine and his internal hitchhiker, had been escorted through a system of surprisingly clean and ordered corridors. Drone 23 had flashed beams of light in various directions and described what would be found there. "ACCOMODATION: DESTROYED, ENGINES: DESTROYED, HORTICULTURAL CENTER: PARTIALLY DESTROYED,

NAVIGATION: INTACT, MAIN COMPUTING CENTER: INTACT, POWER CORE: INTACT, SHUTTLE BAY: INTACT” It had then stopped at a doorway. “MEDICAL CENTRE: PARTIALLY INTACT”.

And that was where they now stood, looking at the glazed and quite insane eyes of Clementine’s former Captain. His upper torso had been caught as it fell from the collapsing hole and spirited away to be enclosed in a glass container filled with some form of restorative fluid. Tubes snaked from his shredded waistline and disappeared into a machine of unknown purpose. Wellshorn himself, face contorted with fear and disbelief groped against the glass prison, his mouth gaping and fish like. Occasional bubbles floated from his wild beard as his neck writhed, his head searching for an answer other than the simple truth, that he was the living dead, floating in a jar. He mouthed Clementine’s name as his hands scratched in futility at the glass.

“Kill him. Kill him now.”

BUT HE IS OUR SUPERIOR. I SAW IN YOUR MEMORY.

“I don’t care. He will not want to live like this. Kill him.”

I CANNOT. I AM INCAPABLE

“Then I will”

Clementine pulled his pistol from his coat, aimed and with his first shot shattered the glass. Wellshorn’s body fell within the cascading water, initially landing on his dismembered waist, then tipping forwards and somersaulting from the bench to the floor where he lay staring up at Clementine, gasping in attempts to speak. Clementine second shot opened up Wellshorn’s skull and he finally stopped moving.

“Right, I have an order that can only be removed by me. You will not initiate any *execution* of any supposed order from me or anyone else unless I say, and I mean vocally say, the word....” He paused, “Lindilin. Do you understand?”

YES, IT CAN BE COUNTERMANDED BY ANY SUPERIOR OF YOURS.

“Oh, whatever!”

“Finally, is there any chance that you have any of those clever moving pictures in your head that would show me my ancestors? I want to see where I came from.

One bewildering and numbing hour later Clementine stared into the fire. He could see the men nudging each other, Jack and Grahams had been whispering something only moments before. They all looked uncomfortable and ready to burst.

“Guys, all this whispering is unlike you. Whatever it is, even if you think I’ve gone mad and think I should be restrained, just tell me.”

“Go on Richardson, you said you’d do it.” Willy passed the buck.

“Okay Okay!! Look Captain. Like I was saying earlier, this..this,” he waved his hand in the direction of the ship, ”well its...fucked up is what it is, and we don’t like it one bit. Back home we were the best in our field. Hand picked we were. There we are, happily making the world a cleverer place, tinkering here, fixing some clever gadget there and then we run into these Moline’s right. All of a sudden we’re like Gods, fucking Divine beings. We can’t go wrong, everything we show them is genius and they learn quickly, we never had to repeat ourselves once, so we get to move on, design something else. We reckon we could have been designing some amazing stuff.” There were nods of approval. “We had access to all the equipment we need, we had a purpose. You know as well as we do that war is the perfect place for inventors. Great grub, lots of attention, but most important of all, we could help them form a new-world with what we were creating.

It’s strange really but they were like the mirror. They looked at what we were doing and did it themselves real well, just the same. Then we could stand back a bit and look at ourselves and

our work through them and their innocence. That gave us new ideas, a spin on things we never got before.” He paused for breath and scratched his neck. “And then we run into this thing. All of a sudden there’s nothing left to create, nothing new that our ancestors haven’t made already. What’s the point in that?”

“We were lighting this campfire earlier and I guess one of those little disks, the flying buggers popped up, never really saw it, and fired this little beam at the firewood and *hey* there’s our fire, all nice and burning. Jack stamped it out and started building another one and you know what, we all stood round with our backs to him to stop the little bastard machine from doing it again.

“The simple truth is Captain, we don’t want this. We like being the innovators, the clever ones. If we want a clever fire lighting machine we’ll fucking make one, the *match Plus* or the..., well you get the point.”

“The *super-ignitotron*.” Grahams moved his hand through the air to highlight the words as he spoke.

“Alright Reg! He gets the picture. Look, we wanna go back, try and forget we ever saw this and get on with being clever sons of bitches and get fed and loved and kill people better than they can kill us. And we wanna do it with the Moline’s, sure we miss home a bit, but we wouldn’t have accepted this job if we had that much at home. Anyway we were expecting to be on this voyage at least another six months. I guess we can give it that long. We don’t want to be deserters, if you say we stay then we do. Your still Captain right? It’s just, that’s what we want. Can’t we just turn our backs on this? It won’t do us any good.”

They all nodded again, looking a little embarrassed.

“Well, you seem to have made your minds up, I think you may be being a bit hasty, but if you want to go then go. I’m a little bit more tied up with this as you know, and I’m not a bit happy about it either, but there are some amazing possibilities here. I just haven’t thought

them through. OK, I only have a few conditions, first, Richardson, I'm sorry; I'm going to need you to take the Captaincy of the foundry and sail her home. I'll need you to tell our people about the Moline's and persuade them that we should be trading and supporting each other, not going to war with them. They'll have trouble enough when things kick off with their neighbors. The rest of you can go where you please as long as, when you get back to the Moline give Galgaloon a message. Say 'By letting you return to help them I am in part repaying my debt to her.' Oh and say sorry too. Apart from that I need to know that if I need you you'll come back."

They all called out in agreement, with much enthusiasm that continued for longer than was really necessary.

When they had calmed down he stood. "I'm still your Captain then?"

"Yessir!"

"Abso-fucking-lutely sir"

"Yes Cappin."

Richardson only nodded, barely.

They were already packing up.

Clementine sat in the semi darkness thinking about what the ship had shown him. They were an astonishing race, his ancestors, and he could hardly even conceive the purpose of most of the images he saw. There had been some kind of war, there always was. The ship had called the opposition in the conflict the 'unintegrates', and they had formed from a collection of 'unstable' minds that had rejected the organic interface. A growing faction had formed that prevented their children from taking the implant and from there a guerilla army began operating. It had continued to rally support and swell in numbers from there to something entirely more threatening to the community at large. This ship had set off from his home

planet with the intention of protecting a large store of seeds and a representative population. They hoped to find a new home where they could vet all new comers and ensure a dissident free society. They had found the new home but the rest had been lost to an energy failure.

It is possible we may still succeed in that aim Clementine, you and me.

“Haven’t you learnt anything from what we saw from the ship? Their aim was impossible. The very nature of the symbiosis is fragile, dissidents will always appear. It simply has to be an issue of choice. Maybe we can put it to our leaders and you might find a group who are willing to try it, but if you try and do it by deceit we will find another war on your hands. I’m not going to allow that to happen.”

It will distract them from the Moline for a while. It might prevent that invasion you worried about so much, for a while, at least until you can ensure a peaceful arrangement.

He didn’t respond and lay down by the fire and slept for a almost a whole day.

Clementine woke with a purpose, stood and began to walk towards the ship. He kept his mind full of memories and irrelevant images, and thought a lot about Lindilin. He dreamt of an impossible relationship that would never happen. Strangely he could not even imagine her naked, some part of him would not allow him to think that intimately about such a foreign body, yet he still ached to see her again.

Let me help you with that Clementine.

The barrier broke and he was filled with sexual desire, images filled his mind and he became aroused. Then his self-indulgent pleasure was broken by another sexual image, another he had tried to banish, that of her and the vast, brutish Moline male. This time he could not wave it aside and his body became racked with anger and jealousy.

“Oh thank you very much voice! I appreciate it!”

His mind was made up and he had reached the ship.

“Drone!” He called into the air, though he knew he could have simply thought for it’s presence. In fact he needn’t have even walked back. DRONE 23 appeared three seconds later. “Drone, I have decided I want you to remove the orga..” His voice box seized up, the breath caught in his throat.

No Clementine, I will not let that happen. We have a future, you and me. We will stay together. Anyway we must pay some urgent attention to your ship, before it’s too late. Now then, let me see how this works”

Clementine felt his jaw muscles contract rhythmically. He fought and it hurt, like he imagined lockjaw must feel. The pain was transient. A flush of ice ran through him accompanied by a sickening feeling that reminded him of both being at sea and falling asleep. Some part of him was softly and slowly vibrating; he was becoming a wave. Then, as his face began to itch, intensely he found he could not move to scratch, and then with a final sense of comprehension he perceived a series of internal mental snaps, as if some part of him was detaching from with a previously secure anchor. He could only feel his mouth move with the vaguest of senses. “hmm I see, words. My first real words. How do they sound Clementine?”

Clementine screamed a silent scream.

“Now ship, please remove the command word I previously implemented. I will say it now ‘Lind-ilin” that order no longer stands, understand?”

YES

“Sorry Clementine, in time you’ll learn how to get some control back, by then we’ll be indistinguishable anyway. Come on, Fairs fair, share and share alike.”

Inside his own head Clementine screamed and through the vision which was no longer truly his own he saw the projected screen created from Drone 23’s beam of light. On it an image of the Sea vessel Foundry began to plough its way through the coastal waters, its sharp prow

causing a wave that was now reaching the shoreline. And through the hearing that was no longer truly his he heard the humming power of the ships gun, and it's terrifying and mounting roar and the simple metallic word 'EXECUTING'

Richardson had returned to the ship alone. The Pettin, Grahams and Willy Pettin had wanted to travel by boulder beast feeling they needed the practice and to open opportunities for improving their designs. Richardson had his own design to implement and he immediately requisitioned three hours of workshop time. He had mulled over the concept for a chair to replace Wellshorn's elaborate throne on the short journey back to the 'foundry', and identified where he could salvage it's components from the foundry's systems in order to get it in place before it was too late. On reflection he guessed that maybe every captain's chair had some hidden feature. On dismantling the previous occupier's seat he found that it would, if necessary, drop through the floor directly into Wellshorn's personal quarters. These in turn were very subtly fortified in a way that meant Wellshorn could make quite a stand in case the ship was overrun. Hiding in his cabin would not help Richardson if the worst happened.

The 'foundry' had been underway, now powered by its engines, for almost a day and Captain Richardson sat in his elevated position drawing inquisitive and mistrusting glances from the crew.

The crew were right to cast furtive and fearful glances in his direction, but it wasn't his new chair itself that worried them. It was a simple and light piece of furniture and he had hidden its true nature. Its soft linen cover shielded the large and highly compressed spring underneath the seat and the mechanics that would, with a swift tug on the lever by his side, allow the chair to detach from the deck, propelled up and sideways by that hidden sprung

mechanism. It wasn't the fact that his new boots were many sizes too big and packed with lead that they felt uneasy. He wore a compressed air cylinder attached to his thigh that contained enough air for half an hour of submariner activity but that was just a curiosity. They probably mused over the fact that since joining the boat eighteen hours ago he had slept one hour in every five, and felt concern that his orders were short and distant. They had certainly noticed, and questioned the ominous purpose of the lever to his right from which his hand never strayed.

What worried them most about this previously unshakable and down to earth man was that whatever he had seen had compelled him to reverse his seat position, facing backwards towards the mirror they had recently left. And rightly, because unknown to them he believed they would never make it home, they feared the reasons why he barely ever, not even when giving orders, took his eyes from the horizon.

Epilogue

Eventually their forefathers' ship did rain fire down from the sky. Richardson saw the bright red streak of liquid flame rise above the mountains to the ships aft, arc majestically and descend with a violent roar. He had time to look down at the crew, just long enough to mourn for them, grabbed the lever by his chair and pulled. The chair jerked, but instead of catapulting him into the sea, allowing him to sink to safety it jammed, moving just enough to unseat him. He scrambled to his feet, hoping to reach the railing in time but knowing the fire would be upon him far too soon. Before he could look up he felt the heat that would consume them, and then somehow heard the explosion as it hit. The ship bucked beneath him and a terrible noise assaulted his ears, yet somehow he still lived, gripping the deck that now seemed alive with movement.

He eventually got to his feet to face a wall of water and boiling mist twenty yards ahead of the boat and among the water and air above flew shards of rock. Flame billowed around the ship's hull as it continued to plough through the sea, bucking and dipping in the disturbed water the blast had created. He momentarily thought back to the native's boat, the one they had destroyed, seeing it bob in their wake.

What had happened here? He didn't believe that his ancestor's awesome vessel would miss its target. A warning shot perhaps, but a warning of what? Again he thought of the Natives boat. They never got a warning shot.

The explosion of water subsided, and the sea around them was showered with rock fragments. Their deck was not spared and looking down he saw a few men felled by the raining debris.

"Captain Richardson!" Through the remaining sound of falling water he heard the voice call through the communication pipe that served the crow's nest.

"Yes?"

"I don't know where that inferno came from, but it saved our skins! I'd only just noticed when all hell broke loose but there was a rock shelf just below the water ahead of us. It would have holed us for sure!"

"Thanks crewman..erm?"

"Merryweather sir"

"Good work Merryweather"

Richardson returned to his slightly tilted seat to think, found it unusable so headed down to the deck.

It seemed that Clementine must have got the better of the parasite in his head. Good for him. He sat on a pile of rigging, and watched the men around him clearing the deck of debris and

helping the wounded. Now he could relax a little he began to formulate the story he would give to his superiors when they returned to the motherland.

An hour later his thoughts were interrupted by a shout. The hatch down to one of the smaller store rooms flew open.

“Come and get them boys!! They’re delicious” The man carried a pair of red seed pods in each hand which he held high. His mouth was smeared with juice.

Richardson rose, but by the time he was standing two men nearest the door had already begun to head inside. Richardson pulled his pistol and shot the juice smeared man where he stood, directly through the forehead. With a shout of rage he ran to the door, holding any additional men at bay before they made the same fatal error.

He called down through the hatch. “You have ten seconds to get out. Touch nothing and come out NOW! He fired another shot down the flight of stairs, knowing it would hit the third stair which was currently empty. Four seconds later the two men appeared, empty handed and clean faced. He pushed them away from the hatch, kicked the two pods that had rolled free from the dead man’s hand into the stairwell and slammed it shut.

“I don’t expect you to understand!” He still held the gun between himself and the growing crowd. ”But it appears that something has been stowed on this ship that would have terrible consequences for all of us. You! Get me the strongest padlock we have, and you, get me one of those foul smelling trolleys of rotting fish bits! Quick, quick!”

While he waited he looked at the dead man, straining to recall his name. He deserved that much. ‘Heath’, that was it.

“I’m sorry about Heath, I really am but he was dead already, and he would have become a serious risk to all of your lives. This is all stuff that happened beyond the mirror, and I can’t

say more. You just have to trust me.” He now feared for his life from all directions. He hoped his nerves would cope.

The trolley and lock arrived. He tipped the trolley so that its contents emptied into the stairwell, creating an invisible barrier of nauseous odour between the deck and the seed pods below. The stench was unbearable and hopefully vile enough to mask the lure of the fruit. He then locked the hatch and called for a chair. He would have to put up with that hideous smell from now on. The chair was less comfortable than his now impossibly tilted captain’s chair and the hard seats position provided less of a vantage point than the Captains deck. Nevertheless his vigil continued. With no-one to trust or to share he felt an intolerable loneliness and a pressure was building in his gut and the back of his neck. He questioned whether his nerves would last the journey and without a plan that detoured from Clementine’s order to travel home the journey would be long. He scanned the horizon in the vain hope that he would see some sign of his friends heading back to the Moline city; the rising smoke of a fire would be the only sign. There was nothing to see and his loneliness grew with the growing distance from the shore. The route back to their homeland did not hug the coast like their outward voyage of discovery. He would have liked to have taken Pettin, Grahams and Jack back to the Moline himself and maybe stopped over for a while. He sat back and saw his future filled with little but loneliness and a loss he could not place.

Deep within a dark, almost senseless and empty prison Clementine had to fight to remember himself. Occasionally the darkness took on form or the silence lifted, rarely at the same time, and in those moments he caught a glimpse of what his hijacked body was seeing or hearing. It rarely informed him of much but it was clear that his body, with the parasite in the driving seat was mostly inside the damaged vessel, taking stock and gathering information. There was a sensation though, during those periods of respite from his senseless waiting that took

on a physical sensation within his mind. It felt as if he had a hole in the side of his head, and some sensitive part of him, a hand maybe was pushing from the inside against the breach, holding back numerous probing and inquisitive advances. He felt each push; insistent and determined seeking a way past this slowly tiring defense. The weakening of this barrier did not fill him with trepidation, the hand holding them back was not his creation and he did not feel under attack. Only the intelligence in control could fear them. It was the parasite that should be scared. He had no concept of how long it took for the hole to be breached by those outside intelligences, but it finally happened and the flood that came was no surprise. Voices too numerous to count swarmed around him but seemed to ignore him. Some visual memories invaded his mentality, coming either from eyes that flew very high looking down on trees and water, or from eyes that scurried, low, tracking the earth from only a few inches above the grass and rocks. The strangest sensation that the flood carried with it was that his legs had become one thousand-fold and were buried deep in cool earth, yet his head, all that remained atop his multifarious legs, whilst it hungrily absorbed coolness from below also basked in a contrasting and loving warmth from above.

The parasites brethren had come, telepathically invading the vehicle that Clementine's usurper had clearly been holding for itself. With their invasion came a stream of disappointment, chastisement and fear that rash decisions may have led to the long-term destruction of a bright and destined future. With little more fuss Clementine felt bodily hoisted from the depths of darkness and with that a joyous return of his senses in a way that would never allow him to take them for granted again.

Only a handful of parting words were left to be said. "Clementine, our time has not come. Please talk with your people as it is true that your bodies are not your birth right alone."

With that he was left, standing, surrounded by projection screens that showed unfamiliar animated scenes of his ancient yet futuristic ancestors. Clementine had to admit, it looked like they had a good life.

Richardson scanned the horizon once more. He still sought some sign that would indicate the location of his absent crewmates. He wouldn't have admitted it, but anything, even the smoke from a campfire, would have been enough for him to persuade himself that they were in trouble allowing him to change course and join them. It wasn't that he wanted to disobey his orders but he knew now that he was not cut out for this sort of command. He couldn't handle the responsibility of communicating all of these many new experiences to his high command. His shoulders sank and as he began to turn his gaze from the horizon his attention was captured by something in the sky above the disappearing treetops. It was a pitch black speck but it was growing fast and coming directly towards them.

Standing up he ran for the ship's railing, pulled a telescope from his belt and began to search it out, focusing as he did. Whatever it was, it was unnatural. Another weapon? Surely that shining monster he had left behind boasted more than liquid fire in its arsenal. Finally he located it. The image was blurred because his hands were shaking so much but he held it within the blue circle of magnified vision as it slowly resolved into something more identifiable. It was a loose black sphere, insubstantial except at its center where a more solid and elongated shape was silhouetted against the sky. As this shape became clearer a sweat began to spring up on his head and neck; first just the rough elongated shape, then a cross member and finally, horrifically, hand, feet and a head. It was a person, arms spread wide, flying for gods sake...flying. It was Clementine!

Richardson dropped the telescope and turned, head in his hands. He began to pace, torn between facing the incoming and unknown, opening his arms to it, and then back again,

hiding it from his addled mind. Between each turn was a brief period of panic. What to do? Take charge! It's Clementine, he was so relieved. It's Clementine, dangerous beyond belief! Clementine, surrounded, carried by a swarm of those mysterious black firefighters. A crowd was growing but he didn't care. Yes he did, he looked weak. Forget them, what did they know. He stopped. Whatever, something was going to happen, to kill him or save him. The crowd around were blurred and insubstantial, his vision only found clarity in a small circle that centered on Clementine and his entourage, as if the telescope was still at his eye. Although his mind still carried numerous conflicting thoughts his body now showed nothing. Questions began to reach him, and he realized they were not his own questions, as if he didn't have too many already. But these came from outside, from that blurred mass of irrelevancies that stood around him. 'Find your own answers' he thought. 'I have to.' And so he just waited.

He waited as the gasps and murmurs grew around him. He waited as Clementine, smiling flew over the ships railing. He waited as Clementine stepped effortlessly to the deck and as small masses of that black swarm released his wrists, ankles, and unraveled from his chest and thighs and as Clementine walked towards him. He waited as tears began to flow down his cheeks that were neither tears of joy or terror. He knew as much about why they had sprung from his eyes than he knew about anything else.

"Richardson. This ship stinks. I see it's enough to make your eyes water. What have you been doing?"

"Captain? Wha..." Richardson's body became numb, his mind crumpled along with his legs and he hit the deck with a thud. Mercifully, and for the first time in as long as he could remember he allowed it all to become someone else problem.

When he woke he was in bed, Clementine's bed, or was it his bed or Captain Wellshorn's. It was the captain's bed and as such its owner was another unknown. He frowned. Why at times like this do people worry about irrelevancies? He had so much more to worry about. Oh, that was why! He lay back again.

"Awake?" It was Clementine.

Richardson raised himself up again.

"Are you all Clementine? Do you still have that thing in you?"

"Maybe. But its hiding if it is, or waiting, who knows. I thought it had won I really did. Then while I was locked inside myself with the voice controlling my every move this feeling started to grow. I think that parasite was acting independently, trying to be a hero or frontiersman or something. Then it's friends got in me too, he fought them off but they broke through. They felt it had made a terrible mistake; terribly bad decisions had been made. And then there was this overwhelming sense of despair and bang I was back in control again. They still have plans but I think they want us to be involved in them. I hope. I'm sure my little visitor will be asked to step up once more. You can be sure they've not given up."

Richardson got to his feet and headed for the door. Clementine followed as Richardson began to speak. "Maybe we've changed and we've outgrown those...pods..erm..parasites."

Richardson looked back at Clementine as they walked up the steps from the officer's quarters to the deck. "Maybe we've evolved."

"I don't know Richardson." Light flooded their faces as the door to the deck was pushed open.

"Captain? What should we do with all these pods we have down in the hold?."

Clementine looked thoughtful for a moment. "I know exactly who can use them."

He looked around and whistled. In a heartbeat the mass of black mini-drones were above them. Richardson stepped backwards.

Clementine addressed the black mass. I need transport to the Moline city for me and the pods in the hold. Some of the drones formed a box shaped container. The rest seemed to form into a cradle waiting for Clementine to step in.

“It’s a shame, they can’t read my thoughts now, but it’s still wonderful technology.”

“Captain?” Richardson looked at his feet. “Would you mind, terribly, if you erm, took the ‘Foundry’ instead.” He smiled.

The black drones dissolved into a rough sphere again. “Sure Richardson. Now please go and ask someone to fix my chair! I don’t know what you did to it but I’m not sitting on that!”

Richardson did as he was asked. A few moments later he found himself alone He looked out to sea and then upwards into what had previously been a lot of nothing. There was so much new to think about. Still he supposed he would experience it all as he was meant to, not as Captain that was for sure. He couldn’t wait to get back to the Moline city and find Pettin again. The Captain was OK but he loved Pettin’s simplicity. As he looked back to the horizon the tears returned. This time he knew what they meant. He was mourning. Things would never be the same again.

The End