

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Pipedog



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## One: Embers

Dawn. It always begins and ends with the sun, that great natural pendulum that swings overhead, marking the genesis and terminus of every human event; unchanging, unyielding, constant. Sea mist flees before the rising flame, scudding over a land half-choked by pale drifting ghosts, remnants of some ancient empire of night, fleeing from the bright invading armies of the day.

Susan Wendell put down her pen and squinted into the churning sea mist rolling over the lip of the rocks beyond and off into the still-dark woods behind her. She could feel the warm morning air whistling past the final chill of night, a miniature heat-exchange tornado whipping the sand and the marsh grass into life. The lonely cries of the terns diving into the surf drifted up with the retreating mist, along with the boom and rush of the waves below the Point. Susan screwed the cap back on the pen and tucked it away in the inside pocket of her dark blue pea-jacket. She closed the journal and smoothed the green leather cover. She genuinely enjoyed the brief half hour spent each morning at the Point, writing down whatever came into her head. The whole ritual fit in so well with her new life here, a life she loved, despite its rough edges.

Susan stood up, brushed the dew from the back of her coat and called for Sam. The golden retriever bounded out of the dune grass, his attention still half-focussed on the scolding gulls. Susan bent and rubbed his head affectionately, and he licked her hands with his rough, warm tongue. Sensing they were homeward bound, Sam remembered breakfast and he raced ahead, down the sandy path between the cold dunes. Susan followed, enjoying her crunching footsteps in the frosty sand and the still rustle of the dune grass replacing the rhythm of the surf. Fifteen minutes from now she would be in her small, rented cottage, kettle whistling on the stove for coffee and the smell of toast and local apple jelly filling her small kitchen. It was the perfect way to begin any day.

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The town of Howell's Point nestled around the thin curve of Howell's Bay, and the split of the estuary that snaked inland like a line of tiny mussels on the trailing edge of seaweed frond. It had a crusty, salt-thick charm that spoke of generations of seafaring families and their traditions. Each weathered clapboard house sparkled with fresh paint and newly cleaned windows. Despite the chill March air, the yards and streets were tidy and well-kept, muddy salty snow scraped carefully into sagging piles away from summer's flowerbeds. But modern prosperity came not from fishing or lobstering, not even from arts and crafts peddled to tourists, but from the dark shadow behind the estuary: Howell Bay Reactor.

"Almost everyone in Howell's Point works there now," grumbled Mr. Thorndike gloomily into his coffee mug.

Barb Webster rolled her eyes as she refilled the cup and swiped at a drip on the diner counter. "Yeah, Hank, and thank God, too." She leant on the counter and jerked a thumb in the direction of the bay. "I'm old enough to remember what it was like before they built that place – hardly anyone had enough money to feed themselves. Howell's Point was dying, Hank, and now..."

She left her sentence unfinished, instead gesturing to the smartly painted houses, DSL lines, satellite dishes, the pristine SUVs, the middle school with its new library, and the five upscale art galleries sitting primly on Main Street.

"You gotta move with the times, Hank," she said gently, "You can't live in the past."

Hank Thorndike snorted and glanced up at the 'Americano', 'Latté', and 'Healthy Eater' options on the Red Arrow Diner's menu.

"Some things weren't meant to be in Howell's Point - and some people, too."

As if on cue, the diner's bell chimed, and in strolled a smooth, neatly pressed khaki-and-cashmere-clad figure. Dr. Tyler Rockwell wore a long beige alpaca overcoat, a paisley scarf tucked into the collar parted to show off a silk grenadine tie and Brooks Brothers shirt. He pulled off his driving gloves and nodded at Hank.

"Good morning, Mr. Thorndike."

Hank grudgingly nodded back.

"Good morning, Barb. A large mocha latté and a double blueberry bagel with light cream cheese, I think." He patted his firm midriff and chuckled jovially. "Gotta watch that old middle-aged spread, eh?"

Barb laughed with him; Hank Thorndike slurped his coffee mournfully.

Barb trotted back into the kitchen to prepare the bagels, and Dr. Rockwell turned to survey the diner, leaning nonchalantly on the counter. The half-dozen patrons in the booths eagerly nodded and smiled sycophantic greetings.

"Weather appears to have turned, eh Thorndike?" Rockwell remarked. "I feel something warm just around the corner."

"Long as it's not a meltdown," Thorndike muttered darkly.

Rockwell laughed heartily. "Still playing that card, eh? I've told before, Hank ..." Rockwell turned to bring the assembled diners in their booths into the rebuke. "Nuclear power is perfectly safe, and in fact, one of the projects we're working on is to make it even safer." He struck his 'visionary' pose. "We stand on the brink of a revolution in nuclear physics

– a process to create nuclear *fusion*, not fission, that will eliminate the production of waste, and give us unlimited, cheap, *safe* energy."

"Huh. Doesn't mean it won't melt down. My brother worked at Three Mile Island, Mr. Rockwell."

Barb sharply slapped Rockwell's brown paper sack in Thorndike's eyeline.

Rockwell smiled. "Thank you, Barb. Put it on my tab, will you?" He smiled once more at the assembled company, then at Hank. "I always enjoy sparring with you, Hank – let's do this again some time." Flashing a patrician smile, he left.

"Hank Thorndike," Barb hissed as the door swung closed, "How dare you! Dr. Rockwell doesn't deserve your petty sniping!"

Hank scowled out the window at the town he no longer recognised. "One of these days," he said blackly, "That smart ass is going to trip up on his own fancy talk."

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"Ooh, look - fog!"

Tamara Scott opened one cautious eye, her grip tight on a humanoid statue in the TARDIS control room she hadn't recalled seeing before. The room had stopped shaking, and everything was still and quiet. Books, toys, curios and furniture were strewn around the darkened console room, while little lights flickered on and off in its gloomy distance.

Grae hauled herself off the floor, rubbing her backside and grumbling. The Doctor appeared to have suffered no ill effects from the battering the TARDIS had taken and was busy flicking switches and peering at instruments. On the scanner overhead, a swirling vista of mist roiled.

"Or is it?" the Doctor asked rhetorically. "Could it be the manifestation of the Great Intelligence? The Matrix-mists of Gallifrey's Death Zone, the chemical smogs of Skaro, the living gasses of Zeta Minor, Mistfall on Alzarius? Or just a common-or-garden Terran pea-souper." He tapped a readout dejectedly. "Hm. H<sub>2</sub>O in gaseous suspension, tainted by saline mineral traces. Sea mist, in other words."

"How is sea mist connected to the, uh, gravity string?" Tamara asked.

"Graviton thread," the Doctor corrected, "And it's not - this is just some point along the line of the thread."

"So where exactly are we?" Tamara asked.

Grae checked the readouts as the Doctor rummaged in the wreckage of the console room. "Earth – longitude 66 40 W, latitude 45 57, temporal reference 667.34.89, 1327 by your time-scale, Tamara. Possibly March, definitely a Tuesday."

Tamara spun a globe around in her head. "So... somewhere on the northeastern tip of North America in the fourteenth century. Is this where the graviton thread originated?"

Grae frowned. "Unlikely, I'd say. They're rarely natural phenomena – more often associated with the catastrophic collapse of transwarp or hyperspace technology. They were a shipping hazard along the fringes of Mutter's Spiral and the Andromeda Galaxy in the millennia following the Dalek wars in the thirty-seventh century. But I don't think that sort of technology exists on Earth at this point in time - does it?"

"Fourteenth century? I'm no historian myself, but my guess is not," Tamara said wryly.

The Doctor tutted as he marched across the room, shaking a boldly checked Ulster over his characteristic attire of stellar-patterned waistcoat and piratical white shirt. "Best not to try and make guesses about what this is all about – only clouds the mind to possibilities." He glanced at Grae and Tamara and patted the newly donned garment. "It's cold out there, you know. I'd wrap up warm if I were you."

"But the North American seaboard in the fourteenth century? What's there?"

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The TARDIS sat in the cold, damp well of a stunted pine forest. Mist rolled around twisted tree trunks in a heavy, curling blanket. The muted light filtering through the overhead canopy of pine needles conjured the feeling of a dying winter afternoon. The cold hacked through Tamara, despite the layers of shirts, jumpers and thick wool overcoat. The grimy sand and saline water squelched unpleasantly around her antique gumboots.

The Doctor rubbed his hands together with annoyingly childish enthusiasm. "Which way? North, south, east, west?" He spun around. "North it is."

Grae pulled out a well-worn brass compass. She flipped open the lid and consulted the swinging needle, "That's east, Doctor."

The Doctor shrugged. "East, then."

Grae and Tamara made their way after him. The soggy ground and the fog drowned their sense of direction. Tamara found the silence creepy and suggestive of all sorts of unpleasant horror-movie scenarios. She scolded herself, trying to focus her mind with combat meditation.

Ahead of her, Grae stopped, frowning at the compass. "That's odd."

Tamara peered over her shoulder to see the compass needle spinning. "Something tells me this is not a good sign." A chilly gust had seemed to accompany the compass, and she hitched the collar of her overcoat higher against it. "Now what?"

Grae looked down at the still-spinning compass. "I'm worried, Tamara. Magnetic disturbance would indicate a high degree of instability in the graviton thread. This could get dangerous ... very quickly."

Tamara rolled her eyes. "So it's business as usual, then." She headed off after the Doctor.

Grae looked around at the dark trees, then the compass, and shivered. This was not business as usual. At the back of her neck was the tingly feeling that they were being watched.

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The sun crept higher in the sky as Susan Wendell closed the gate and walked to the road leading over the estuary to the reactor station. It was a half-hour walk. Everywhere in Howell's Point was half an hour away from everywhere else. She felt the approach of Dr. Rockwell's Saturn Kursad slowing beside her.

"Morning, Susan."

"Ah, good morning Tyler - I mean, Dr. Rockwell."

"Let me offer you a lift."



Susan hesitated, looked up and down the road, took a deep breath and slid into the front passenger seat. She put on her seatbelt, stole a glance at Rockwell, then fixed her gaze firmly through the front windscreen.

Slowly, and deliberately, the SUV picked up speed on the straight and headed toward Howell Bay Reactor. Susan did not notice the moment during their ride when he reached out and put a gloved hand on her knee.

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Marie Rockwell let the Seiko binoculars drop from her heavily ringed fingers onto the lace-covered dresser top. The house she and Tyler had bought in Howell's Point four years ago belonged to an old whaler. It sat proudly on the crest of the jagged hill over the town. As with many maritime houses, it had around its Mansard roof a walkway known as a 'Widow's Walk'. Tradition held that from here, an anxious wife would watch for the return of her husband's whaling ship from the peril of the sea.

How times had changed! When they had bought the house, they had extended the master bedroom suite into the attic, turning the Widow's Walk into an enclosed balcony at the end of the bedroom. From here, Marie could watch her husband pick up one of the hussies crawling all over the reactor with him.

She fumbled for the glass of vodka on the table and brought it unsteadily to her lips, finishing the tumbler and letting the drink's harsh edge dull the humiliating pain. In broad daylight! On the main road!

Marie filled the tumbler and emptied it once more, then pressed the cold empty glass against her temples. She sagged against the dresser for support. Every year, they got more blatant. Every year, the pain got worse. Every year, they got younger.

Every year, Marie became increasingly helpless.

Something bubbled inside Marie. The glass shot out of her hand and whistled across the room, exploding against the full-length mirror.

Marie panted. Something else now blossomed inside her, replacing the sharp dagger of anger – a cool fountain just as sharp, but cold and focussed.

Marie stood up straight, tucking a stray lock of bleached hair behind her left ear. She unlocked and opened the drawer and looked inside until she found what she was looking for.

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The Doctor, Tamara, and Grae broke through the forest onto a rocky, miserable coastline. Thin grass hugged the stony soil, fading into gravelly sand, tumbled granite, and angry winter surf. It was lighter away from the depressing pine canopy, but colder – biting and wet cold that ate past their clothing to chill their bones.

"Ah - fresh!" The Doctor breathed in and out with a broad smile across his face.

"It's free- freezing!" Grae stammered.

"Bitter," Tamara agreed. She looked up and down the coastline. There was nothing but rocks, roaring water beyond, and the sea mist hissing over everything, blending the horizon to faded white.

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"Doctor," Tamara said, catching the Time Lord by the elbow, "what exactly are we doing? It's too cold to just wander around."

The Doctor glanced at Tamara and Grae, shivering despite their heavy coats, and sighed. "I'm sorry, my enthusiasm getting the better of me again." He peered down the coastline. "We're looking for any possible trace of the graviton thread." He pointed at Grae's troublesome compass. "The magnetic fluctuations are one possible indication of its presence, but we need to find the thread itself and see if we can't..."

"Can't what? Cut it?"

"What? No, no - heavens, no," the Doctor replied, snapping back to attention. "The graviton thread will be like a piece of elastic, stretched through the space-time envelope from tomorrow to yesterday. At the moment, it's vibrating with energy, but that effect is localized. Disturb the thread in any way and the thread will snap out of alignment and spin off through space-time, slicing and dicing the causal nexus and causing chaos. We have to find the thread, then gradually dissipate the energy safely."

Tamara shook her head. Despite the analogy, once again she was only barely with him.

"Yeah, yeah, right," she said hurriedly. "What are we looking for, though?"

The Doctor indicated Grae's compass. "May I?"

Grae slipped it over her head and handed it to the Doctor. He laid it flat in his palm and spun in a slow circle, watching the needle jump and weave.

"Hmm. Well ..." He looked into the fog-shrouded nothingness in the distance. "There appears to be an area of null magnetism in that direction. My guess is that would be where the graviton thread is intersecting baryonic space."

"Compressing the magnetic field?" Grae asked, through chattering teeth.

The Doctor nodded. "Indeed. Probably accounts for the absence of seabirds; disorientated and repelled by the fluctuating field."

"Well, if that's where we're going, we'd better get moving, otherwise Grae and I will freeze on our feet."

They followed a cleft in the rock shoreline, whose jagged chunks of granite were slick with a treacherous mix of sea spray, mist, gull droppings, lichen and seaweed. Tamara's hands were raw from the clambering; Grae was faring even worse, unusually affected by the cold. The Doctor, naturally, seemed not to suffer one jot, repelling both cold and damp like a penguin. For a pair allegedly of the same race, their reactions seemed entirely different, Tamara thought.

By the time they were out the other side, the sky was darkening, and she and Grae were freezing cold, soaking wet and clearly neither dressed nor equipped for the current expedition.

She felt something then. A crawling, energized sensation, like a build-up of static electricity before a lightning strike. It was oppressive, as if something were suddenly imposing a headache on her. She gasped.

Beside her, Grae slapped her hands to her temples, her face twisting in pain.

There was a sensation like a thunderclap – a silent but definite release of energy. The Doctor shouted in surprise and pain, and jerked his hand back. The compass, lit with a kind of St. Elmo's Fire, shot out of his grasp onto the ground.

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Tamara tried to jerk away, but the oppressive sensation gripped her, involuntarily contracting the muscles in her arms and legs. She turned her head, trying to physically move away from the pain.

And then she saw it.

Hovering in the darkness, legs galloping in slow motion although standing still. Its long tail lashed from side to side, an unholy red light arcing and shimmering across the surface planes of its body.

The thing appeared to be some monstrous hellish dog, burning from within. Its jaw was open and slavering. Its paws pounded fiercely. Then, like a projection against smoke, it rippled, faded, and was gone.

"What the hell was that?" Tamara whispered.

Grae pressed her fingers gingerly to her temples. "An energy release of some kind – psychic energy, by the feel of it?"

"No, no. I meant..." She looked at the Doctor and Grae. "Didn't you see it too?"

They shook their heads.

Tamara hesitated. Perhaps she had imagined it. It had been so indistinct, so fleeting. Perhaps it was just a hallucination caused by the gripping electric sensations, like the colours and lights of a migraine.

"Nothing – nothing."

The Doctor looked as if he didn't believe her, but his attention was quickly drawn by the compass. "Look at this, you two..."

The compass was flickering with a halo of faint purple electricity. It was also red-hot: the seaweed steamed and smoked around it, the painted rose inside was blackened and charred, and the iron needle melted into a thin red-hot smear.

"Not an energy release, I don't think..." the Doctor murmured.

"An energy inrush?" Grae suggested.

The Doctor nodded, picking up the compass and blowing on it until it was cool. He frowned at it one last time and popped it into his waistcoat pocket. "Come on, you two – time to get back to the TARDIS until morning."

Tamara took one more look around them as the Doctor and Grae moved on. There was no trace of her ghostly dog. Like the Hound of the Baskervilles, it had vanished into the moors without a trace.

They stepped cautiously down the winding natural ledge of the dunes down to the sandy, gravelly plain of the beach below. The high tide and granite outcrops cut the surf into pounding pockets of salty spume.

The Doctor hesitated, scanning the beach. Tamara glanced at the darkening sky. It was going to rain, too. Grae slipped through the sand to stand next to her.

Something against the distant sand had caught his eye. "Wait a minute - wait. What's that?"

Tamara and Grae followed his outstretched hand, pointing to something dark and twisted on the shore, faint wisps of smoke rising from it. The Doctor jogged towards it. Tamara and Grae followed.

It was a man, or at least, it had been. The body was twisted, hands clawing. The burning charred every inch of the body and the clothes, but left it all intact, so that every scrap

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of detail could be seen. Were it not for the stomach-churning stench and the wisps of smoke, one might have thought the person had simply been painted with a charcoal.

Tamara covered her nose and mouth and leant closer. The man had been in his late thirties or early forties, with a close-cropped beard and long hair braided at the temples and loose down his back. He wore a long tunic, leggings, and boots with crisscrossing laces up his calves. What once had been an iron-headed axe lay on the sand beside him, dissolved into a molten mass.

"It's horrible!" Grae exclaimed. "What could possibly have caused that?"

"The graviton thread?" Tamara suggested, but both Grae and the Doctor shook their heads.

"No. The thread isn't dangerous in that way," the Doctor said.

"What's happened to him?" Tamara asked, "It's something more than just plain burning, isn't it?"

The Doctor nodded. "It's as if every cell has been combusted individually, rather than collectively ... Hello..." He looked intently at something beneath a twist of the man's rough hessian cloak. Using a nearby salt-stained twig, he poked at the fold of cloth. It cracked at his touch. Something glinted bright and shiny beneath the charring.

"It's a brooch!" Grae exclaimed as the bright object caught the last glimmers of light.

"A *silver* brooch," the Doctor noted, staring intently at the pristine and undamaged object.

"Uh, Doctor..." Tamara said, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Ah," he said, looking at the dark figures emerging from the dusk on all sides, "We have company..."

## Two: Sparks

"And so you can see ..." Rockwell continued, tapping his laptop to display the next graph. The digital projector flashed, and a complex three-dimensional graph rotated onto the projection screen, "Our initial trials with boron and thaladium have proved extremely successful. The higher the rate of acceleration in the Cluster Acceleration Array, the greater and more stable the rate of fusion. By progressing to even higher levels with the CAA, I believe we can substantially increase that effect. My calculations show that it should be theoretically possible to generate a self-sustaining nuclear fusion reaction throughout almost one hundred per cent of the sample. Although..." Rockwell allowed himself a conspiratorial chuckle. "We may still have to deal with the objections of traditional physicists, who insist that the Second Law of Thermodynamics cannot be circumvented."

The assembled Board members chuckled appreciatively, though the reference went over the heads of most.

From the projection booth at the back of the lecture theatre, Susan watched Rockwell give his talk, along with Carol Weiz, the supervisor of B-Group.

"Boy," Carol said, shaking her head, "He sure knows how to win a crowd, doesn't he?"

Susan nodded. Carol watched her carefully.

"How are you two getting along in that little lab all by yourselves?" Carol asked carefully.

"Erm, fine. No problems. Uh, why do you ask?"

"Oh, I know Rockwell can be a little difficult to work with, that's all. Intense, you know? You don't find things in that lab getting a bit intense?"

Susan didn't reply. Beyond the glass of the projection booth, the lecture was breaking up. Board members were crowding to shake Doctor Rockwell's hand.

"Listen, Susan," Carol said, back to the glass, "I've been here at the station, and I worked with Rockwell at MIT for three years before this. I know him, and I know what he's like, particularly with impressionable young lab technicians."

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"I don't know what you're talking about, Carol," Susan said coldly, not looking at her.

"Yes you do," Carol said bluntly, "You're not stupid, Susan, but you're young. If you're smart you'll take my advice and be incredibly careful with Dr. Rockwell. He's handsome, he's charming, and he's a damn smooth talker, but he's also—"

She broke off as the door to the observation room opened up and Rockwell entered.

"Thank God that's all over!" Rockwell groaned.

Carol raised a single eyebrow. "Can't fool us, Tyler - we all know you love those P.R. events."

"How can you say such a thing, Carol?" Rockwell said in mock distress, "You know there's nothing I'd like better than spend the time going over circuit tolerances with you!"

"Hm. Speaking of which," Carol replied, handing him a thickly stacked clipboard, "These are B-Group's inspection results of the level four tolerances. You'll need to sign off on these before we move on to Phase Three tests."

Rockwell rolled his eyes and glanced at Susan. "If I sign off on them now, will you promise to leave me and Susan alone so we can get back to business?"

Carol fixed him with a direct look. "I'm not sure I trust you enough to leave you completely alone with her."

Susan blushed. Rockwell laughed good-naturedly and clapped Carol on the shoulder. "I tell you what, come down to the lab this evening, and I'll go through these results with you last thing before we close up shop. Susan and I have one final boron test to run this afternoon and then we'll be in good shape to compare results."

Carol nodded. "See you this evening then, Tyler," she said. She glanced at Susan. "And I'll be around if you need to talk."

Susan blushed, feeling some kind of judgement in Carol's words. Rockwell said some farewells and closed the door, turning to Susan with a calculated look of embarrassment.

"Ah, Susan ... I'm sorry if Carol said ... well, anything that might have upset you. And dammit ... I'm sorry if I did anything this morning when I picked you up that might have... well, upset you."

"No," Susan said, perhaps too quickly, "No. It didn't upset me."

"I understand. Perhaps we've been working too closely together. Maybe we need some time apart."

"No," Susan said quietly. "I don't think that's the answer at all...,"

"Does this mean you feel...?"

Susan looked up at him, her eyes filling with the vision of the man she had come to admire so much, to respect for his intelligence and commitment to his work, whom she had come to... to... to love!

"Oh, Tyler," she said, crumpling in his arms as he embraced her.

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Tamara woke with a start, an unfamiliar warm, woody, earthy smell heavy in her nostrils. She blinked and looked around the dark space. The longhouse. She closed her eyes and leaned into the cocoon of wool and fur that was the guest bed. Tamara suspected it belonged to

Bjaerni and his wife Eoryn, but that the rules of hospitality demanded they vacate it for unexpected guests.

Grae and the Doctor were nowhere to be seen. Tamara wondered what time it was, and then idly wondered whether Time Lords had special watches that automatically switched themselves onto local time. Useful, she told herself dozily.

Blinking again, she forced herself upright. She suspected it was already mid-morning. It never ceased to amaze her how surprising time travel could be. There the three of them were last night, anachronistic strangers in fourteenth century North America, bending over a charred body, and the Viking hunting party accepted their presence and their strangeness without even blinking. Perhaps, she thought as she searched around for her jumper and trousers, it was because the Vikings were strangers here themselves—colonists far from home.

Where were her clothes? Tamara looked up, suddenly aware of another presence in the room. It was Eoryn. She was a young, slim girl who didn't really look old enough to be a pioneering colonist, let alone a mother of four. She had long blonde hair tied in neat braids and wound into a bun that framed her pale, chiselled face. Her icy blue eyes pierced through the morning shadows. She had taken responsibility for the two women the night before, making sure they got a seat by the roaring hearth and were warmed through and through with plenty of hearty, meaty broth.

"Ah, you are awake!" Eoryn exclaimed. She set down the large iron pot she was carrying and stood, hands on hips, staring at Tamara.

"Um, where are my clothes?" Tamara asked, a little impatiently. Out beyond the bedclothes, the morning air was fresh and decidedly cold.

"Forgive me," Eoryn stuttered, still staring, "I have never seen... that is - "

Tamara looked at her arms, dark and glossy, and then at Eoryn's pale, wraith-like skin. She grinned.

"You've never seen anyone who's black, you mean?"

Eoryn shook her head and then bent to hide her embarrassment and rummaged in a deep wooden chest. "Erik's grandfather, who served in the Royal Guard in Byzantium, said that he encountered many of your people in that city. He told us stories as children, that you came from a land where it was hotter than summer all year round, where the sun rose high in the sky each day, baking the land to barren sand, and even burning the skin of the people that lived there to a colour like yours." She looked up at Tamara, folded clothes in her hands, "Is that true?"

Tamara shrugged. "Almost. Our skin is dark because it protects us from the sun - if it was as pale as yours, it would burn and we could get sick. On the continent my ancestors came from - Africa - everyone is this colour."

Eoryn marvelled at the vision. "I would like to see such a place - so strange..." She looked down at the bundle of clothes in her hands and set them on the bed next to Tamara. "You may wear these. I told the Lady Grae earlier that your own clothes are still soaked."

"Thank you," Tamara said, running a finger along the folds of the heavy green wool dress, leggings, a sort of apron of white linen secured with two plain round brooches at the shoulders, and pale grey cloak. Fortunately, her gumboots were dry and warmed by the fire, and so she slipped those on underneath.

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Eoryn blinked, holding back laughter.

"What?" Tamara asked.

"You look normal, to here ..." Eoryn ran her hand at her throat, indicating where Tamara's dark skin began.

They stepped outside the longhouse together. Tamara looked around, able to appreciate its size for the first time. The settlement consisted of six longhouses of timber and buried in a covering of sod, giving the whole a camouflaged, organic appearance. The largest belonged to Erik the Bold, and housed beds enough for eight families – mostly those related to him. The other, smaller houses belonged to the remaining seven families. Smoke rose faintly from the centre of each. The space between was trampled mud and gravel, a communal work area edged by circles of net and fish drying racks. A few hobbled goats mooched around, nibbling grass, and a knot of dogs patrolled, their ears pricked up and alert. Beyond the huddle of buildings, a weave of paths led to the shore. A single boat sat bound by rope and protected by a sheath of skins. The fresh-hewn skeleton of a second boat sat beside, surrounded by a wide skirt of wood chips, pine logs, and half a dozen bare-chested men.

It was still bitterly cold. Overhead, thick thunderclouds rolled and churned. Out at sea, they melted and fused with the foamy waves. Beneath the clouds, the sea-mist had retreated. The rocky shore where they had stumbled the previous night bent and folded by the settlement into a narrow bay. On the far side, Tamara could see a tumbling river that opened onto the sea in a knot of salt flats.

Old survival training guidelines flicked across her mind. From what she could see, they had everything here: a relatively calm bay to fish, gather shellfish and beach ships in, a river for a good supply of running water, salt flats for birds and eggs, and the forest behind filled with game. She turned to Eoryn.

"It's impressive - you could live well here."

Eoryn nodded. "Vinland has proven rich and fertile. Erik says we must encourage the settlers on the barren island of Greenland to move here, where their chances of survival would be much greater." She nodded in the direction of the new boat emerging from the clutter of fresh-hewn wood. "They are building a second boat to journey to Greenland and make the case before the Althing."

Tamara nodded. It seemed strange that this colony should be doing so well; she was fairly sure they were all doomed. She didn't know much about the whole Viking controversy, but she believed most scholars agreed that the Viking colonies in North America had been small and had all vanished long before the main wave of European settlement in about four hundred years. She sighed. If you weren't careful, time travel could be a very depressing enterprise.

"Ah - here is the lady Grae," Eoryn said, hitching up her skirt and trotting to the square.

Tamara followed. Sure enough, there was Grae, dressed much as she herself was, carrying two wooden buckets.

"Milk?" Tamara asked. Grae laughed and handed the heavy buckets to Eoryn, who headed back to the longhouse. The older, plumper woman beside Grae – Gudrid, Erik the Bold's wife – smiled approvingly as she followed Eoryn.

"If it is true that she has never milked before, she is a fine learner!"

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Tamara raised an eyebrow at Grae. "You were milking the goats? I didn't know you had it in you!"

Grae rolled down the sleeves of her dress and ran a cuff over her forehead. "Neither did I, to be honest. It's remarkably similar to feeding diachronic relay cable through an Artron-pulse capacitor junction."

"Trust you to secretly be a farm girl," Tamara laughed. "By the way, where's the Doctor?"

"He's down on the shore with Erik - he appears to be the chief. I believe he mentioned something about breakfast."

"Breakfast? You've convinced me - let's go find him."

As they headed down to the beach, something made Tamara stop. A quick glance from Gudrid, filled with unmistakable, venomous hatred, directed at Eoryn's retreating back.

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Marie Rockwell spun the wheel of her Jeep and the tires spat gravel. She gunned the engine, and the Jeep responded, roaring out of the drive onto the main road to Halifax.

Hank Thorndike watched her go, a scowl on his face. That woman represented everything wrong with Howell's Point. He grouched and grumbled as he crested the summit of the little knoll. Beyond the road's terminus was an alleyway of sea grass and sand between two gardens that led out to rocks overlooking the southern end of the bay.

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Erik the Bold was as big as Grae described. It was easy to guess how he had come by his epithet. There was no doubt that this man was a leader – a man who would not shy from leading his warriors into combat.

He was fairly handsome, too. His long blond hair fell in tousled waves over his broad back, held by a leather headband studded with copper rivets. Two thick plaits ran from his temples, framing his masculine, bearded face. Like the other workers, he had shed his tunic, and his muscles rippled across defined chest as he helped his men lift the last of the new boat's ribs into place. As he lifted, he bellowed orders and his men moved at his direction.

"So he's the colony's leader?" Tamara asked.

The Doctor nodded. Unlike his two companions, he still wore his Ulster over that stellar-patterned silk waistcoat and flowing white shirt. The salty air fluttered at the cape of his Ulster, which combined with his tousled hair to give him the look of a Romantic poet. "Erik Thorvaldsson, to give his full name," the Doctor answered. "Dispatched westwards with fifteen families from the Viking colony of Hvalsey on Greenland to determine whether the tales of the Skraelings were true."

"Skraelings?"

"The Norse name for the Indigenous tribes."

"Hm. And the tales were true – there is more fertile land to the west," Grae commented. "And now Erik is building a second ship to return to Greenland and tell the colonists the good news."

The Doctor nodded. "He's returning with a shipload of surplus food, too: venison, fruit, dried greens." He watched Erik and his men at work on the ship. "There were many such Viking colonies here, but none of them lasted very long."

"Why not? It seems perfect."

"In many ways, it is," the Doctor agreed. "But colonization requires more than just the spirit of discovery. There needs to be constant social, cultural and economic pressure from the homeland to acquire new land and new resources. The Vikings don't have any of that pressure. If they fail here, they can always return home. Three hundred years from now, those missing pressures will be at the backs of the European settlers who will land here, and their colonization of this continent will be successful. Now, I managed to take some readings from the morning constellations, and I think I've fixed our position a little more accurately—around forty-four north sixty-three west, a bit north and east of Halifax, Nova Scotia."

"Oh. So?"

A rumble of thunder echoed across the dark sky, and a faint flash of lightning shivered behind.

"Any more thoughts on the body from last night, Doctor?" Grae asked.

"Yes indeed. How does gravitationally distorted thermal compression sound to you?"

Grae snapped her fingers. "Of course - that would explain the energy inrush!"

"Which means we're not looking for the thread so much as we're looking for a focus - a nexus."

"A focus? Something active?"

"Wait until you hear Erik's version of recent events, too."

Tamara scowled and folded her arms. "Are you two going to talk in your secret language for the whole morning, or are you going to let me in on this?"

The Doctor patted Tamara's shoulder. "Sorry. The short of it is that I think I know what we're looking for."

"Doctor!" A big booming voice rolled across the beach. The trio looked to see Erik the Bold waving them down to the half-complete boat. The settlement's women had arrived with what appeared to be breakfast. Tamara's stomach rumbled.

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Erik gestured at Gudrid, who hurried forward and refilled the Doctor's wooden drinking bowl with the warm milk.

"Oh no, really, I couldn't ..." the Doctor began, but with a wave, Erik the Bold silenced him.

"We insist that you share our hospitality, Doctor, humble though it is," the huge man rumbled, stroking his long blond beard. "To do any less would be to insult us."

They sat in the shelter of the incomplete longship, the smell of pine rising from its fresh ribs along with the salt tang of the sea. Erik, the Doctor, Grae and Tamara sat apart from the rest of the men, who chatted and laughed in low voices among themselves. A small fire of waste wood chips and discarded scraps of lumber crackled. An iron pot filled with goat's milk sat next to it, keeping warm. Breakfast consisted of dried venison softened in warm milk and

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heavy bread made partly with local grains, topped with a jam-like paste of blackberries and soft goat cheese. Communal wooden cups of warm, frothy goat's milk were passed around.

"But tell me, Doctor," Erik asked, "By what route did you come from Byzantium?"

"Oh, er - a circuitous one, to be sure," the Doctor bluffed. "Our last certain point of call was the island of Britannia."

"Ah," nodded Erik, "I have been there. A soft land once, but now the people are well armed and better able to defend themselves than they were in the time of my grandfather."

"The same grandfather who served in the Imperial guard in Byzantium?"

Erik nodded. "He was a man who travelled as much of the known world as he could find, Doctor. He led raids to Britannia as a youth, then journeyed east and south, through the Kingdoms of the Russ and the Muscovites to the golden city of Byzantium itself, there to serve in the Royal Guard for many years. When he returned to the Northlands, he brought riches and wealth, but most treasured of all, he brought stories. Those stories I learned by heart as a child, and I vowed on his knee to be as great a traveller as he had once been."

"And you have done just that," the Doctor suggested.

Erik frowned. "That will be for my grandchildren to decide, Doctor, but unless we determine what magic now assails us, I may have none!"

More thunder pealed overhead. Erik glanced up and muttered something under his breath.

"You say that Sven's was the third such death?" Tamara asked.

"Aye, my dark lady - the third in a month. Now, the uncommon nature of these deaths has ceased to surprise us. But we are still no clearer as to their cause."

"And in each case the silver jewellery or ornament they carried was untouched?" Grae asked.

Erik nodded, his face darkened with worry. "It is the unmistakable mark of sorcery." His voice dropped to make sure no one could hear. "My grandfather once told me the tale of the Firedog..."

The word struck a chord with Tamara - the fleeting vision from the previous evening flashed in her head.

"For several nights now, in the mists we have seen a ghostly hound, burning with a strange, silent hellfire. Last night my brother Bjaerni saw it near the boat, and we feared lest it set the vessels ablaze. Snorrir went with us to check the boats, and then..." Erik paused, sweat beading on his brow. "Doctor, I am a practical man - a man of things I can see and hear. I have no time for sorcery or superstition, but this... this is different. Some evil now stalks us like a plague, a curse that can burn and kill."

The Doctor stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Your apparition and the strange power that melted my compass - my lodestone - and drew my vessel off course must surely be linked. Now, in my opinion, it's got something to do with this." He held up Snorrir's brooch, a broad plate of silver with a filigree cross-worked into the surface. He turned it over in his hands. Its iron fastening had melted to an indistinct blob, but the silver was untouched.

Erik Thorvaldsson stood up. "My grandfather spoke of men such as yourself, Doctor - men of Scientia: wisdom and knowledge that derived neither from sorcery nor religion. If you can find answers, then you will have my gratitude. But these things are far beyond my ken. I am a warrior, a craftsman, a leader of my people. I have no talents for unravelling mysteries

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or hunting strange powers." He sighed. "This is a good land, and we could make it a bountiful home, but I can sense the hands of both God and man against us."

With a nod, Erik returned to his men and set them back to work on the ship. The women gathered up the breakfast dishes and bowls. The Doctor watched as Erik bent to have a close word with Eoryn.

"There's something we're missing here. A part of the puzzle hasn't clicked yet."

"Just one part?" Tamara asked sarcastically.

The Doctor glanced over at her. "Tell me - what did you see last night? You asked us if we had seen it."

Tamara shrugged and sipped her milk. "Nothing. It was probably just a hallucination caused by - well, caused by whatever that energy inrush thing was."

The Doctor nodded. "But that hallucination was a dog, wasn't it? It was Erik's Firedog."

Tamara shifted uneasily. "Well, yes - yes, I did think I saw a dog. And it was hellish, like Erik described - a sort of Hound of the Baskervilles on steroids."

"Hound of the what?" Grae asked, puzzled.

The Doctor leaned back against the unfinished hull of the second ship, weaving his fingers together in a contemplative basket.

Grae took a deep breath. "Could something have travelled along the graviton thread that consumes energy by thermal compression? Something that killed those three Vikings?"

The Doctor grinned. "Very good Grae. But what about the silver?"

That stumped Grae.

"Wait - wait," Tamara suddenly interjected, "you said before that it was a psychic energy inrush, yes? And Erik Thorvaldsson mentioned sorcery. Well, silver is traditionally supposed to protect against magic - and, er..."

The Doctor nodded approvingly. "Indeed. What if the thing that travelled along the thread was a creature capable of creating thermal compression of a specific modulation, absorbing it on psychic wavelengths and in the process *creating* the inrush? The tradition of silver's protective qualities may partly be based on the fact that its molecular lattice reflects most psychic wavelengths. This reflection would presumably shield the silver objects from the initial thermal compression."

"But what kind of creature would absorb energy in that way?"

"Well, I can tell you they're not local boys," Tamara said. "There's nothing on Earth that behaves like that... er, is there?"

"There is now. But although this is all fascinating, it doesn't solve our main problem, which is to find the source of the graviton thread and shut it down." He rummaged in his waistcoat pocket for a small notepad and pencil. "I have an idea about how to trap our energy-absorbing friend, but we'll need some equipment from the TARDIS." He scribbled down a list on the notepad and handed it to Grae. "Think you can find all that before the storm starts?"

Thunder rumbled in the clouds again; lightning flashed ominously over the headland.

Grae scanned the list. "Seems fairly straightforward. Do you want me to bring it here?"

"Yes, but I want both of you to go to the TARDIS. Tamara..."

"Security detail, I get it."

The Doctor nodded. "I suspect that solar radiation will keep this creature at bay during daylight, but there are other just as dangerous things out here, if slightly more mundane."

"Mountain lions, wolves and bears, oh my," Tamara joked.  
"What are you going to do?" Grae asked.  
The Doctor smiled. "What else? I'm going graviton hunting!"

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The bulky triple torus of the CAA squatted in the darkness of the laboratory hanger like a giant toad, backlit by flashing warning lights. Situated next to the reactor, it was the jewel in the Station's research crown, the centre of Rockwell's fusion experiments. Above the torus, an access gantry crossed the dark space to the windowed control booth, projecting dramatically from the hanger wall.

Susan peered down at the shadowy reactor. She could never escape the sensation that it was somehow alive. The energy generated inside its three parallel rings was enormous, enough to rip apart the reactor station like a cardboard box. In the torus' centre was a large lead sphere into which the exotic particles thrown off by the accelerators were captured. The gantry stretched right past this dome, and a monitoring computer extended from its fragile surface to the edge of the walkway, connected by a thick umbilical cord of power cables.

The monitor screen flickered as the readout changed. Rockwell's voice crackled in her earpiece.

"Susan, what have we got now?"

Susan checked the readout, "Gamma seven three one nine, Alpha six four five five. Fusion sixty-eight per cent, exotic containment one one three."

"Excellent. Correlates here. We're right on target." Susan could hear the excitement in his voice. The test had run perfectly. She glanced up at the control booth to see Rockwell grinning and giving her a thumbs-up signal. A moment later Rockwell trotted down the stairs, hurried along the gantry towards her, and grabbed her in a warm hug.

"We did it, Susan - we did it! We broke the sixty-seven per cent fusion barrier with no exotic overspill and gamma and alpha radiation output exactly as predicted. We did it!" He bent and gave her a rough, passionate kiss.

"You did it, Tyler," Susan breathed, "Not we - you."

Rockwell looked deep into her eyes. "I couldn't have done it without you. You are what sustains me, Susan - you've given my life meaning again."

"Oh, Tyler," Susan sighed, yielding to another kiss.

"Listen," Rockwell said carefully. "What say you and I celebrate this evening? I happen to know the directors keep a bottle of rather nice champagne in the Board Room. We can wait until everyone's gone and then treat ourselves to a well-deserved toast."

Carol's warning flickered through her mind, "I don't know, Tyler...,"

"Come on, Susan. It's the least I can do to show how much I appreciate the person who has made all this possible. You, Susan Wendell, are the most important woman in my life, and I don't care who knows it."

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The waves pounded under the gathering storm. Erik called work on the boat to a halt, and sent the men up to the settlement for spare wood. They could not move the boat, so they would build a protective wall between it and the rising sea. Over their heads, clouds rolled like twisting snakes.

Bjaerni Haraldson broke from the main group. He had to see Eoryn, to warn her what she was doing. He saw her carrying a load of blankets back to the longhouse he and Eoryn shared with Erik and Gudrid. Bjaerni entered the longhouse, pushing the heavy skin over its doorway aside. He turned in the half-light from the doorway and stared hard at his wife. The chill blowing across the settlement stirred his long hair. He tried his hardest to look older and stronger, more like a man.

"We spoke of Snorrir's death down at the beach. They say it is the work of the Firedog. You know the tale of the Firedog, Eoryn. You know why the stories say it comes, and for whom."

Eoryn didn't look up from folding blankets. "Are you threatening me, Bjaerni? If so, it is the first time I have seen you behave like a real man."

Bjaerni flushed, anger suffusing his pale, boyish features.

"I *am* a man, Eoryn - you wrong me with your mockery."

Eoryn looked him square in the eyes. "Then punish me, Bjaerni the Man." Her beautiful voice lilted in mockery. "Treat me like a man would... like your brother Erik does."

Bjaerni clenched his fists, his jaw tightening in frustration. He was small and slight, and Eoryn was undeniably stronger and faster. If he made to strike her, she would tumble him into the dust. Bjaerni's face reddened and wordlessly, he turned and left. Eoryn's humiliating laughter followed him out into the cold, curling around him up in the rumbling darkness.

Grae had come back for her gloves. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but by the time she realised Eoryn and Bjaerni were engaged in a private conversation, it was too late. She held her breath as she heard Eoryn humming tunelessly to herself, pleased with her little triumph. The young woman finished folding the blankets, dropped the wooden chest shut, and left the longhouse. Grae waited until it was silent in the low-roofed building and then stood up.

Lightning flashed up in the storm clouds, sending flickering echoes of pale light down the smoke hole into the longhouse. They scattered across Grae's frown.

What had all that meant?

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Oscar Boez chewed the unlit stub of his cigar and kicked the side of the electric heater. The goddamn thing was on its last legs. The fan inside hiccupped and buzzed back to life, and hot air blew into the chilly counter. Oscar scratched his balding head and turned back to the funnies.

"Goddamn world is going to hell in a handbasket, Louie," he muttered. On the counter, a rabid-looking tomcat with one cruel eye and one empty socket regarded him balefully. "Know how you can tell? Even the goddamn funnies aren't funny. He slapped the crumpled page with one pudgy hand. "*Beatle Bailey* was funny. *Heathcliff* was funny. *Dennis the Menace*

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was funny. *Mallard Filmore? Garfield?* Who finds that crap funny? Brainwashed yuppie lackeys of government fascists, that's who."

Louie hissed quietly and wrapped his tail around his nose. The heater shuddered and the fan stopped again. The cold, dimly lit pawn and gun shop grew colder.

"Goddamn thing," Oscar muttered. He looked up as the door buzzed loudly and opened, letting in a shaft of afternoon light and a gust of chilly air that fluttered the price tags on the shotguns and pistols on the shelf behind him. The heater guttered into life again as Oscar regarded the customer. She was old, but well-preserved, rich – well dressed and with expensively blond hair and a hint of costly perfume. The high collar of her fur coat didn't quite hide the glint of what Oscar was sure was diamonds. Louie hissed disrespectfully and bared his teeth. Oscar thumped his rear, and the spitting tomcat shot off the counter and scuttled under the shelves.

"Afternoon, Ma'am," Oscar said, uncertainly. The woman looked coldly through the wire grille that separated them, and tipped a pistol onto the counter.

"I want ammunition for this," she said.

Oscar looked at the piece. A nice one: .45. Hardly used, well kept. He wiped his hands on his plaid flannel shirt.

"Sure thing, lady," he said. "I'll just need to see some ID."

A sizable stack of three-figure bills landed on the counter. "Is that enough?" the woman asked.

Oscar looked at the stack - a hundred times the price of a box of bullets. He looked up at her. She couldn't possibly be a cop: too unsubtle, even for them. He snatched the money through to his side of the screen and slipped it into a drawer. He got a box of bullets from the shelf behind and passed them through the hatch. The woman put them and the pistol in a smooth leather handbag.

"There you go, Ma'am, that should do you." He watched her latch up the handbag. "Looks like you're preparing for something fun," he lied. "What are you hunting?"

"Vermin," she answered bitterly.

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Tamara and Grae scrambled over the seaweed-draped rocks and through waving stands of tall salt grass with the casual air of Jane Austen heroines crossing the moors. But the landscape was more Charlotte Brontë than Austen. It was still unnaturally silent – no gulls cried and soared overhead. The only sight that did fill the skies were thick, dark clouds rolling and clashing, lightning flashing at their edges. The air was thick with the anticipated storm. They were at least warm, with their borrowed wool clothes far more effective than their modern synthetic fibres had been. Tamara briefly and whimsically pondered the sweater and heavy padded coat likely still drying in the longhouse, and the implications for the space/time continuum if they remained here centuries too early. But she thought no more of this when Grae related the conversation between Eoryn and Bjaerni she had overheard.

"So, what did it all mean?"

"The oldest and strongest of human emotions, Grae: jealousy."

"Jealousy? Is Bjaerni jealous of Eoryn?"

"No. Bjaerni is jealous of Erik, and Gudrid of Eoryn."

"Erik? Gudrid? I really don't understand."

Tamara sat on an outcrop of granite to catch her breath. "How many people are in this Viking settlement, Grae?"

"Forty? Forty-five?"

"About fifteen couples plus their children, right? Living in close proximity under stressful circumstances. I guess Erik, being the chief, is an attractive prospect for any woman here. He's strong, powerful, a leader – some women like that sort of thing."

Grae waved away Tamara's editorialising impatiently. "And Bjaerni?"

"Young, submissive, not as physically impressive ... so it sounds like for Eoryn, not as attractive a prospect. But the problem is, it's Bjaerni she's married to, not Erik."

"So?"

"So, it's pretty clear to me that Erik and Eoryn have been carrying on in a not-very-subtle kind of way, and that both Gudrid and Bjaerni are fairly unhappy. However, because Erik's the leader here, and because the success of this colony depends on him, I don't think they've challenged him."

Grae shook her head mournfully. "I don't think it's much of an exaggeration to say that human beings are probably one of the most emotionally complex races the universe has ever produced."

"Oh come on," Tamara insisted. "Are you trying to tell me that Time Lords don't feel jealousy?"

"Not at all." Grae wrinkled her nose. "Though to be fair, none of the pressures that give rise to these passions exist on Gallifrey. The thought of competing for a mate, of prizing strength and hunting prowess ..." She burst out laughing.

"Is that a fact?" Tamara asked wryly. "So when the Doctor acts selfishly or immaturely..."

"Ah-ah!" Grae tutted. "The Doctor's about the least typical Time Lord you're ever likely to meet. Most of us prefer the slow approach. It can take years for a Time Lord to come out of a sulk, for example..."

The thought of the Doctor's moody periods lasting that long made Tamara smirk.

"The Doctor is something of an enigma in that he seems to actually prefer those kind of emotions."

"And you?"

Her eyes darted left and right. "Come on - we've got a way to go, and finding all the junk on the Doctor's list isn't going to be easy."

They reached the woods and Grae frowned, trying to scent the TARDIS.

"Can you tell where it is?" Tamara asked.

"The TARDIS has a very particular time signature. As a time-sensitive, I can make myself aware of that signature, but I suspect the Doctor can always find it due to his much closer link. I'm just a passenger; he's the captain."

"Does that bother you?" Tamara asked as she followed Grae into the woods, the darkness closing in around them. "Would you like to be your own captain, do you think? Have your own TARDIS, follow your own nose?"



"Get myself into my own troubles?" Grae shrugged. "I'm not sure the renegade lifestyle suits me. I don't know if I could—"

Something caught her eye. She caught Tamara's arm and pointed at the shape huddled at the base of one of the trees.

"Something tells me this is not good..." murmured Tamara.

## Three: Flames

"We couldn't just leave her, Doctor," Tamara protested.

When Tamara and Grae first saw her in the woods, they couldn't believe their eyes. There, crumpled underneath the pine trees, was a woman. Not a Viking, not a Skraeling: a woman from Tamara's time, her hair long and blonde, wearing a short skirt, court shoes and a white lab coat. Tamara almost pinched herself to check she wasn't dreaming. There were some burnt patches on her lab coat, and general bruising, but for a woman who appeared to have just fallen through a hole in time, she seemed remarkably whole. Tamara and Grae hoisted her onto their shoulders and struggled for an hour - with many stops - back to the settlement.

The Doctor nodded through his frown. "No, no—of course not," he said hollowly. "But we still need those things from the TARDIS. I don't think we should risk spending another night defenceless."

Grae indicated the shape prostrate underneath the blankets. "But doesn't she change everything?"

The Doctor fingered the rectangle of plastic – the woman's nametag.

"Susan Wendell, Howell's Point Reactor Station," he read. "At least we have a better idea now of what's behind all this."

"We do? What?" asked Tamara.

"Oh, the usual: mad scientists, experiments getting out of control ..."

"There's more to it than that, surely," Grae said, reproachfully.

"Perhaps. But this reactor must almost certainly be the source of the graviton thread - the turn of the millennium was never one of humanity's most careful time periods."

Erik Thorvaldsson shifted uncomfortably, voicing the uneasy feeling in the settlement. "Doctor, I do not entirely understand. This woman is not a member of your crew - she is a stowaway, then?"

"Stowaway?" The Doctor considered, then nodded. "In a manner of speaking: yes."

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"She is the cause of the deaths?" The Doctor, foolishly, paused to consider the question, which Erik took as an admission of guilt. The powerful man took a heavy stride forward, his hand on the hilt of his dagger, "Then she must die!"

The Doctor stepped in front of the huge Viking. "Forgive me, Erik. This woman is *not* the cause of the killings, something else is – a creature, an entity, stalking us. She may be able to tell us something about that creature."

"What of the amulet she wears?" Erik's eyes flicked towards the nametag.

"Oh this is no amulet, Erik. It's a nametag, and it tells us that she worked with scientists. Men of Scientia, like myself."

"And something they have done has gone wrong?" Erik asked, suspiciously.

"Well, possibly..." the Doctor replied carefully, his eyes on Erik's dagger.

Erik nodded thoughtfully, "My grandfather told a story from Byzantium—about a mixture of various elements that made a fire that would burn on water. *Energia*."

"Greek Fire."

"Aye. He told me of an accident in a workshop where such fire was made. He described the horror of men whose clothes burned with a fire that could not be extinguished." Erik shook his head. "He told me that men who invented such things could not always guarantee the outcome of their work, that when such things as Greek Fire were used, mistakes could happen."

The Doctor nodded. "Erik, I think these scientists have invented some new kind of *energía*. Something like that terrible fire burns without light, perhaps. This is acting as a beacon to the creature you call the Firedog, bringing it here. I believe this woman will be able to tell us more. And with *that* information, we can learn how to extinguish it and dispatch the Firedog back to wherever it came from."

Erik skulked away from the woman and sat in a broad wooden chair. Around the longhouse, the small assembly listened, understanding only the deaths that came brutally and savagely out of the darkness. In the silence, thunder rumbled and shook. There was precious little daylight left, and while it was not the best use of the little remaining time, the Doctor decided it was better to keep these impulsive Vikings on his side while he could.

"I'm going to go back to my vessel to retrieve some things that might protect us against the creature's attacks. In the meantime, I think it would be best if everyone stayed indoors. So far, the creature has only attacked people outside in the dark."

Tamara could sense something of a whispered subtext to their murmurings. The whole assembly seemed to know something about this whole episode that they weren't mentioning.

"Grae, can you stay here and look after Susan? If she regains consciousness while we're away, you know what to ask her."

"What do you ask a woman who's been dragged one and a half thousand years into the past?" Tamara murmured, looking down at the sleeping woman. "Like what do you buy the man who has everything?"

"Silver," the Doctor answered. "Erik, as a stopgap until we get back, gather as much silver as you can—rings, dagger handles, necklaces. Hang it on the walls, over the doors. This may afford some protection."

Erik frowned. "Superstition?"

"Science!" The Doctor pulled his Ulster over his clothes and clapped the Viking leader on the shoulder. "Remember, Erik, there are scientific explanations for everything. You just have to look a bit harder to find some of them, that's all."

After they left, Erik muttered to himself, "I shall remember that when I'm face to face with this devil."

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"Come on, come on," muttered the Doctor, leaping from one granite outcrop to the next.

"Hang on!" Tamara called after him. He must have eyes like an owl, Tamara decided. She could hardly see anything, and the rising wind and spattering rain didn't help. One final clamber up a slick granite boulder and they were up in the sand and tall grass once more. Ahead loomed the dark curtain of the pine forest. Tamara groaned and rubbed her scraped knees before pelting after the disappearing shadow of the Doctor.

"They'll be back any moment now!"

"They? Wait a minute - they?"

The Doctor slipped between two straggly tree trunks and pushed through the dead twigs that girdled the bottoms of the tall pine trees. Tamara wrapped her cloak around her arms for protection.

"These creatures have evolved at a dark sideways angle to our reality. It's not a physical realm, so energy in its raw state flows through them, stimulates and sustains them. When they end up in our reality, they don't know any different, they suck up the energy in the same way, oblivious to the murder and mayhem it causes for the poor innocents who cross their paths. Oblivious too to the scale of their devastation if they keep feasting."

Tamara burst through a final cluster of dead branches to find the shallow dell with the TARDIS sitting calmly in its centre.

"But how did they get here?" asked Tamara, following the Doctor into the TARDIS.

Inside, the Doctor shook off his Ulster and ran a cursory glance over the console. "How did we get here?"

"The graviton thread?"

"Exactly," came the Doctor's muffled voice as he rolled up his shirtsleeves and rummaged in a locker. "But whereas we were dragged along by chance, like so much flotsam and jetsam, these creatures travelled along the thread deliberately."

"Survival! You mean they sensed the presence of the thread and recognised it as a way out?"

"Precisely," the Doctor agreed, pulling out a big garishly coloured box labelled 'Uncle Frankenstein's Junior Chemistry Set'. "They must have scented the graviton thread and may have even detected the space-time collapse. It piqued their curiosity perhaps, and they must have been entangled in it for some time before they figured out how to travel along it." He stroked his beard as he pondered more. "Yes, I'd wager they're entangled in it still, and using it as a convenient refuge from the solar radiation. That one you saw, and the one that has hunted the Vikings in the settlement, may well be merely the first. If more of them discover the rich and easy pickings scattered along the length of the graviton thread, they will pour out of the future in their thousands, millions, even billions ... and devastate every corner of Earth's

history." The Doctor fixed Tamara with a desperate look. "Defeating this 'Firedog' here is only the first step. I'm almost certain Susan Wendell is part of whatever has created this thread. We need to find out when she comes from so we can get there and shut down the thread."

"She wasn't in very good shape, you know."

"I know," the Doctor agreed glumly. "And without her it'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Tamara pointed to the chemistry set. "So what's in there?"

"Our secret weapon." The Doctor opened the lid and pulled out a jar of liquid. "I knew I had some: silver nitrate. The molecular lattice of the silver seems to disrupt these creatures' energy gathering abilities. I'm hoping that a squirt will actually hurt them and make them think twice about attacking us."

"Sounds like a long shot."

"Well of course it is," replied the Doctor defensively. "But unless your needle-spotting skills are better than mine—"

Pain. Tamara balled her hands into fists as the pain washed over her. The searing intensity in her head roared suddenly out of nowhere. Panic gripped her. She knew what this was.

It materialized on the far side of the console. It stood on four crooked legs and taloned feet, about eight feet at the fore-shoulder, its body a patchwork of darkness crossed with veins of glowing energy, as if it were a living, walking ripple of lava. Its long whip-like tail arced over its back and shimmered with red-hot electricity. It had something like a head, too: long and thin, breaking into a quadripartite mouth lined with hooked blades. A ridged tentacular tongue drooled hot and flashing. On either side of the narrow head burned two large blazing pools of energy sunk into deep, dark sockets. The crest of its head was studded with glassy, obsidian orbs like the eyes of a spider. It howled as it shimmered into solidity, baying like a hound catching a scent.

Tamara sank to her knees, unable to move, unable to think or see. Thus, she felt the waves of energy rippling the air, roaring from within her to it. She felt a terrible squeezing pressure, she felt exhilarated and exhausted at once, pushed and pulled, the presence of the monstrous creature filled every sense, and—

With a cry and a smash, an explosion threw her across the room. Fire and light poured outwards, carrying hot blades of shrapnel. The pain vanished in time for her to feel her head slam against something hard. She fell in a crumpled heap to the soft, inviting coolness of the TARDIS floor. As she sank into a dark abyss, she thought she heard two distinct sounds.

The first was the Doctor shouting, "No!"

The second was the rhythmic trumpet of the TARDIS engines dematerializing.

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As he left the gardens and the sound of the pounding surf grew louder, Hank felt his mood lift. He had grown to hate Howell's Point. He hated the loud, flashy prissiness of its new inhabitants. He hated seeing the waving yellow heads of Shore-Thistles pressed flat and for sale in their dried flower shops; he hated seeing the floats and oars used by fishermen of his father's generation on display in their antique stores; he hated the characterless, artificial

"Olde Worlde" charm they'd imported to the Main Street. Most of all, he hated what it had done to people he thought had more sense. There wasn't a person in Howell's Point who hadn't rolled over and let Tyler Rockwell and his reactor buddies tickle their bellies. No one had time to sit on their porches and jaw late into the night now; they were all too busy running 24-hour coffee shops, DVD rental counters, and designer boutiques. No one had time for the enveloping beauty of nature anymore; they were all too busy prancing around in art galleries and print shoppes to spend any time in the real world.

Hank sank onto a thick chunk of granite, worn smooth and deeply pitted by the remorseless effort of the sea and the wind. He closed his eyes and let his hands soak up the salty cold from the surface of the stone. He wasn't about to get all airy-fairy, but there was something deeply restorative about getting close to the sea. Its pounding rhythm calmed his fiercely beating heart, and the cool scent of salt and seaweed washed the frustration out of his mind. He could feel his jaw unclenching, his teeth un-grinding, the knots in his neck soften. All around, the sea thrummed like nature's heartbeat, punctuated by the keening gulls overhead.

Hank snapped his eyes open. That wasn't a sound he recognised. He peered around in confusion. It was a roaring, trumpeting sound, like a compressed rushing of wind - the whistling sound of a distressed steam organ.

He stared at the shadow gaining substance on the sand a hundred yards down the shore. Before his very eyes, the gathering echo of the wheezing, groaning sound was accompanied by the materialization out of thin air of a tall blue box with little windows, black signboards and a flashing light.

## Four: Blaze

Hank stared at the two people in front of him. Part of him wanted to panic and run away, while part of him observed calmly that there was nothing unusual about the situation. After all, here we had a respectable-looking couple asking the way to the Howell's Point reactor station. The fact that they just stepped out of a blue box that had appeared out of thin air on the beach seemed somehow irrelevant. Their odd clothes—the bearded man wearing no coat, a loose white shirt and an intricately patterned silk waistcoat, and the woman in pre-medieval hessian—seemed even less relevant. And the fact that they were dazed and glassy-eyed, as if they had walked from a plane crash rather than a phone box, was least relevant of all.

Hank found himself nodding, unable to do more. His hand flapped in the vague direction of town.

The just-appeared man stared hard at Hank for a second, then grabbed the woman by the elbow.

"Come on, Tamara, let's see how we do on our own."

Hank listened absently as they said things that didn't really make much sense at all. He heard something about being dragged along a thread, and how damage had made them sink like a stone to the thread's origins. Hank watched them jog up the beach with a kind of detachment.

The gulls cried overhead, and the sound brushed away Hank's confusion. Letting them go off without directions? Where had his manners gone? That wasn't how one treated strangers in Howell's Point, thought Hank - not in *his* Howell's Point, anyway.

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Jerry Borth shook his head with a long sigh and folded over his *Halifax Post* to the racing page, sliding the security booth's small window closed to keep out the billowing dust skirting from the wake of the SUV.

He spared a quick glance through the dust cloud at the vehicle heading back on the circuit road to the little concrete sprawl that was C-block. Jerry shrugged. Sure, it wasn't company policy to admit non-personnel unaccompanied into the base, but he wasn't going to stand in that woman's way.

Boy, he thought, Mrs. Rockwell was sure pissed off about something. Didn't pay to aggravate a dame, he mused. Dr. Rockwell should be careful - Hell hath no fury and so on...

\*\*\*\*\*

Grae turned to the assembled Vikings in Erik's longhouse. She felt out of her depth at being suddenly left alone with a crowd of frightened, nervous strangers. She faced them all with what she hoped was determination in her eyes as she set them to collecting all the silver they could find.

"It's a long shot, but it might just deter the creature—the Firedog."

"With a weapon to use against it," rumbled Erik.

"Er, yes." *I hope*, Grae finished to herself. "Also, it might help if people gathered here, in the main longhouse."

Erik peered at her thoughtfully from under his bushy eyebrows, "Why?" he asked bluntly.

Grae wilted a little under the force of his gaze. "Well, it makes sense to concentrate the only means of defence we have—the silver—into as few locations as possible. "

Amusement glinted in Erik's eyes. "Your logic is sound, Lady Grae. So be it!"

With the assembly scurrying from the longhouse, Erik returned his focus to Grae. "You speak of defence and tactics with ease, and analyse our unseen enemy with the confidence of an seasoned warrior." He stroked his beard and ran his eyes up and down her. "Truly, they cast their women from a different mould in Byzantium. I am... impressed." He nodded almost bashfully as he left the longhouse.

Grae slumped onto the bed, shaking. This primitive man intimidated her. A fire burnt inside that man, a dominating presence that made him a natural leader. No wonder Eoryn and Gudrid fought over him...

Something made her look up. Oh no, she thought. From the far side of the room, pausing in their collection of silver, Gudrid and Eoryn stared at her with uncomfortably harsh, dark looks.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I can't let you in, Hank - you know that," Jerry insisted, stepping out of the guard booth. He peered suspiciously at the two strangers behind his friend Hank Thorndike. "The place is restricted. Only station personnel inside the compound."

"What about Marie Rockwell? I saw her drive by!" Hank insisted.



“Look Hank, don't push it, okay? It's been a long day and you know as well as I that rules are rules. Last thing I want is for you to barge in and make trouble ... like you *always* do.”

"But Jerry, he says it's important."

Jerry looked past Hank again at the oddball pair, wondering what tale they'd spun to Hank to get him to cooperate.

“Listen to yourself, Hank. You picked up these two on the beach, then ‘borrowed’ Doc Wohler’s truck and drove them up here because they told you there were ‘dangerous experiments’ going on at the reactor? You honestly think I'm going to let you waltz in here on a story like that?”

The male stranger stepped forward, proffering a plastic card. “We found Susan Wendell, an employee here, injured some distance from here. It's clear that whatever she's working on is at least partially responsible. We have to get inside the complex and find out what's going on.”

“Dr. Wendell? You found Dr. Wendell?” He hesitated, looking from the card, to the stranger, and back to Hank. Then he made up his mind and shook his head to clear the stranger's voice from his head. “Look, I'm going to call the police - you can explain everything to them!”

The Doctor spread his arms in a gesture of apparent surrender. “Ah, perhaps you're right. What's a little graviton thread among friends? You win some, you lose some, eh?” Then his left hand settled on the guard's neck, and two fingers prodded the vein lightly. The guard's eyes fluttered shut and he slowly dropped to the ground.

Tamara exclaimed. Hank too looked startled. The Doctor leapt past the control booth and punched the button that opened the chain-link gate. "He'll be fine, don't worry about him, but we really don't have time for that."

The gate swung open, and he hustled Tamara and the protesting Hank Thorndike into the idling pickup.

"Right, Mr. Thorndike," the Doctor said, gunning the engine and popping the clutch. "Which way?"

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The champagne cork popped with a sound like a gunshot, and a foamy trickle of bubbles dripped erotically down the long neck of the bottle. Rockwell smiled seductively and poured two glasses.

Susan's heart fluttered as she took her glass and clinked it against Rockwell's. They drank, then set the glasses down on his office desk as they moved inevitably into each other's arms.

\*\*\*\*\*

"C-block! Here it is!" shouted the Doctor, pulling the wheel of the pickup hard to the left and screeching with a bump against the kerb beside Marie Rockwell's SUV.

"Mrs. Rockwell's car," Hank said as the three jumped out. "She must be here visiting Rockwell in the lab."

"I hope she doesn't get caught up in whatever's about to happen!" called the Doctor as he raced for the doors to C-block. "There's been more than enough innocent life lost already."

\*\*\*\*\*

Marie strode down the hallway towards the CAA reactor lab. The tiled floor echoed to the sharp reports of her high heels. The small windows above the illuminated radiation hazard warning signs were dark, save for the reflected glint of light coming from the windows that let into Rockwell's office.

She pushed the doors open and marched into the darkness. The CAA hummed in a deep bass to itself, radiation spinning through myriad states of matter within the triple centrifuges.

Marie climbed unwaveringly up the metal stairs to the gantry that led to Rockwell's office.

Marie stood at the top of the stairs at the end of the gantry. The heavy rhythm of the CAA's radioactive heart thrummed as she stared down the walkway towards the windows that joined her husband's office to the open area of the main lab. She stared blankly at the moving shadows and the half-visible shapes behind the glass. Two figures, their limbs intertwined and moving with a single corrupt purpose. Her mind went numb. She had known for years, known that he had taken woman after woman, secretary after secretary, laboratory assistant after laboratory assistant. How could he hide it from her? She had known, and her impotence drove her to self-loathing and self-abuse. But suddenly, somehow, through the fog of anti-depressants and vodka, had come a moment of clarity and a single, steel-cold intent.

She stared up at the shapes in the window, at her husband bending, grasping, fondling without passion, with nothing more than clinical and cold precision. Then she looked sidelong at the woman *du jour*: so pliant, so naive. Whoever she was, she was as faceless, unimportant and meaningless to Marie as she doubtless was to him. But she felt something for the man, for the man who had humiliated her for over a decade. Tyler Rockwell. Her husband.

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"Oh shit - it's my wife..."

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The Doctor, Hank and Tamara careened down the corridor in an untidy trio, weaving their desperate way via intermittent signs. They rounded another corner and narrowly avoided slamming into the Doctor standing in the centre of a cross-junction.

The Doctor pointed left. "Gas storage..." He pointed right. "... Centrifuge assembly..." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Main reactor. That's more like it!" He pelted down the dim corridor.

"What exactly are we looking for?" shouted Tamara.

"A CAA assembly: Cluster Acceleration Array. It's the most likely source of the graviton thread!" the Doctor shouted back. He skidded to a halt in front of a set of double doors with illuminated warning signs on them. "Bingo!"

## Five: Inferno

The settlers had come to Vinland with axes and shovels, not jewellery and riches, but still they managed about three or four items of silver per family. Grae supervised the nailing of brooches, silver-inlaid daggers, rings, earrings, and bracelets to the walls of the main longhouse. Grae refused to acknowledge the futility of it.

Susan Wendell staggered from the longhouse, clutching her temples. Grae went to her.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm remembering ... how ..."

"How you got here?" Grae finished for her. "It's a long story and when the Doctor gets back he'll tell it."

"No ..." Susan shook her head, an action that seemed painful to her. "I'm remembering things that haven't happened ... I shouldn't be here ... I never *was* here ... things happening and not happening, never happened ..." She sank into the Time Lady's arms, confused and gently sobbing.

Grae's time-sensitivity tingled, and she suddenly knew a deep and unshakeable truth behind Susan's words, that made her all the more worried about the Doctor and Tamara.

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"Marie!" Tyler shouted, clattering down the steps to his office control area. "What brings you here?" As he came down the stairs, he hurriedly shoved the flaps of his shirt into his trousers.

His wife stared at him, her angry eyes made redder by her furious tears. She seemed small and insignificant in the big scientific complex, her faux-fur coat, makeup, perm and high-heels discordantly mundane against the magnificent CAA array. The heavy pulse of the centrifuges competed with the shrill note of hatred singing through her skull.

"I came to see you, Tyler."

"I can explain everything, Marie." Behind him, Susan Wendell appeared at the top of the stairs. "She means nothing to me, Marie," he said, soothingly. "Honestly - nothing."

"I know," whispered Marie, "That's the problem."

Susan raced down the stairs, "How can you say that, Tyler?"

Tyler ignored Susan and kept his eyes imploringly on his wife. "Look, Marie, I'll tell you everything. We can work things out. There's nothing to be gained by doing anything here and now."

Marie pulled her hand out from her coat pocket and raised the gun to Tyler's forehead.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor, Tamara and Hank burst into the lab, blinking as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. They immediately fixed on the unfolding drama on the catwalk above them.

"Look!" hissed Tamara, pointing, "It's Susan Wendell! We've arrived *before* she got taken into the past?"

"Jeez, Doc," Hank exclaimed, tugging on the Doctor's sleeve. "Marie! She's got a gun!"

The Doctor looked up at the human drama with passing sorrow, but turned his view toward his objective. "There's the array. Whatever it is that causes the creation of the thread is going to happen any minute now. Come on!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Overhead, the three other players paid the intruders no heed. Tyler felt cold sweat run down his back.

"Don't say one more dishonest word, Tyler." Marie said quietly, "You deserve this. For all the humiliation, for all the pain, for the way you shredded me and my life. It's over, Tyler - over."

"Please, Marie -"

Marie's grip on the pistol tightened.

"Don't!" cried Susan, "Please - it's not his fault, it's mine! Don't do anything stupid - it's my fault. I'll leave the Station immediately! He'll never see me again!"

"Why the hell would you put your life on the line for him?" Marie uttered a short, humourless laugh. "How can you not see? You mean nothing to him. None of you ever have. You, me ... we're all the same to him, just so much meat. Year in, year out, he picks us up and throws us away. Symptoms of a sick man, who uses these conquests, replays the same pattern, over and over because he feels nothing inside. You're meaningless, just like me." Marie looked back at Tyler. "

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The Doctor clattered up the stairs and burst through the door. "Don't!" he bellowed over the hum of the CAA. "Don't do it!"

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Marie half-turned, and Susan, with a panicked scream, leapt at Marie, grabbing her arm. The two women grappled as the Doctor ran towards them. Tyler recovered his wits and turned to run towards the control room stairs.

A shot rang out. Tyler shuddered and stumbled, a huge red blossom of blood spreading rapidly over his back. Susan and Marie both screamed—Susan in horror, Marie in bloodletting fury. The reality of that first shot took her by surprise, but now that she saw its effect something barbarous awakened within her. She pulled the trigger repeatedly. Tyler twisted and turned, jolting and jumping like an out-of-control marionette as each bullet hit. He jerked forward and fell against the gantry's low railing, pitched over the railing and fell, lifeless, down towards the CAA's central dome.

The thin lead-padded balloon crumpled as Tyler's body hit it, tearing and folding inwards. A strange ripple surged upwards; a blinding spiral of electrical arcing that sizzled and hissed. The entire coruscating wave leached static power. As the energy intersected parts of the CAA, relays short-circuited, and cables erupted into flame. Explosions punched through the walls of the centrifuges, starting fires as insulating foam and lubricating oil caught light. The released energy shrieked with an unearthly sound that mingled with the screams of the two women.

The Doctor bounded back from the middle of the gantry.

"Get out of here!" he shouted to Tamara and Hank. "If the graviton thread catches, you you'll be dragged along it!" He threw up his arms as a shower of sparks flared out of an exploding junction box.

Tamara stared at the billowing energy spiral. "Is that the thread?"

"That's its core," the Doctor shouted above the din, "We've got to shut the reactor down. I'll have to get up there to the control booth!"

"That's crazy - you'll have to go right past the thread!" Tamara cried. The middle of the gantry was virtually enveloped in the blazing, twisting light.

The Doctor had already pushed past them and sprinted to the control booth, darting left and right to dodge the energy bolts.

Tamara looked past him to Susan and the woman with the gun. "Come on," she shouted to Hank, clutching the gantry railing in terror. "Let's grab them and get going!"

Tamara raced for Marie and Susan. Hank, scared out of his wits, stumbled after her. They got to Marie and hauled her to her feet. Hank grabbed Marie's arm and stumbled back towards the stairs. Tamara dodged an arc of energy and caught Susan by the arm. It felt strange to take hold of this woman, so soon after seeing her burnt and unconscious in the past. The chronological past, but her future ... Tamara shook away her experience and focused on the present. "Let's go, Susan - move!"

Glancing up, she could see the Doctor inside the control booth, desperately wrestling with the controls. She pushed Susan in front of her towards the stairs. Then everything changed. That familiar oppression Tamara felt in the TARDIS now filled the air, crowding through the howling sound of the released graviton energy and the blinding flashes. Everything compressed into slow motion. Through the rippling distortion of the graviton wave, Tamara made out a black, sparking shape. The ravenous bulk of the Firedog shimmered and shifted into being, manifesting in a slow-motion gallop. It bounded in a fractured leap towards her.

Her brooch! Tamara's hands went to the Viking cloak around her shoulder, held in place by a silver clasp. She undid it and held it out in front of her, like Professor Van Helsing against Dracula, sheltering Susan and herself with her outstretched talisman. The hound bayed, and shied away. It was working! The reflective properties of the silver made the creature shift direction.

Through the chaotic haze, Tamara shouted wordlessly to Hank. He turned, his hands on his temples, his eyes widening in sheer terror at the unholy thing bearing down on him. Marie turned with him, and her gaze locked in on the Firedog. It howled and roared, an alien cacophony that retched and spewed from its maw. Marie screamed and raised her useless pistol. Tamara shouted, Hank shouted, the Doctor shouted in desperate warning, but Marie heard none of them. She pressed the trigger repeatedly, the bullets disappearing into the deathless body of the Firedog.

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That foolish woman with the gun was going to kill them all. The Doctor was sure of it.

His arms screamed in pain as he wrenched the non-responsive controls. Nothing happened. Why was nothing working? Was the creature, the 'Firedog', sucking up the energy too fast for the functions?

Then, though, the Doctor had a moment of crystal, calm clarity. He saw the events that sucked Susan Wendell into the past, he saw Marie dying in a futile blaze. His actions would not stop the graviton thread, they would merely exacerbate it! He could not do it—he must not!

He thought of the lust and revenge that had played out here, the man she had shot because she was so blinded by her hatred. The same pattern was playing out among the Vikings ... the childish love triangle between Eoryn, Bjaerni, and the mighty Erik ...

Like a flame, the critical spark was in that ugly, death-dealing lump of metal she was blasting away at that creature.

And in those events, in the infinite mercy and mystery of time itself, the Doctor saw a new and better pattern forming. So for once, he was happy to see a human firing a gun.

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Marie's gun blasts accelerated within the CAA and the graviton thread. The power build-up was immense. The Firedog must never have sample such a feast.

Then, with a lurch, the graviton thread itself, flashed out of existence. The web of gyrating energy flickered, faded and was gone. The Firedog, too, was gone.

Marie and Susan stood on the spot, the daze of standing so close to such immense and dangerous energy leaving them punch-drunk.

The Doctor came rushing down the stairs and along the gantry. He helped Tamara to her feet. She felt weak and faintly nauseous. Hank, too, looked like he was going to be sick at any moment.

Tamara looked at the blank-eyed Susan. "She's ... she's still here!"  
The Doctor looked to her and grinned. "Yes ... I think it just might have worked itself out."

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Grae felt the heat and the fury too, and then just as quickly as it had washed over her soul, it was gone. The air in the Viking settlement was crisp and cold.

Erik and his people looked to the stranger. Susan, who had been standing right next to her, was gone now. As Grae thought back, she now saw the events of a new timeline juggle with her memories. Susan Wendell had never been here. The graviton thread's path had been undone. The Firedog would trouble them no more.

"I think ... it'll be all right ..." she informed them, wondering if the Vikings could tell she was bluffing.

Erik's memories, already altering with the Doctor's changes in the future, now turned to more earthy matters. His eyes narrowed hatefully on Eoryn and Bjaerni.



## Six: Embers

*And Erik the Bold beat and struck down Gudrid his wife, who knew he had lain with his brother Bjaerni's wife. And as Gudrid fell, she cursed him, that she had been wronged, and that his sin would summon to him dogs from the depths of Hell itself, and that they would tear and burn him. Then Erik the Bold grew afraid, for he knew the dogs would not rest until they had found him.*

-The Skovadsold Saga, Book 4

"Coffee, Tamara?" Grae asked as Tamara came into the small cottage's kitchen.

Tamara nodded and wearily took one of the chairs at the kitchen. She absent-mindedly dusted at the sleeve of her black jacket and picked lint off the knee of her black trousers.

"How's Susan?" Grae asked, pouring hot water from the kettle into a mug and stirring the instant coffee granules.

Tamara shrugged. "Oh, you know..."

She had explained their sordid love triangle and its deadly consequences for Dr Tyler Rockwell, and it was obvious that Grae didn't know, or understand. Lucky her, Tamara thought; it was better not to have to experience those thoroughly human emotions of grief and insecurity, leading to murderous revenge, that had erupted so tragically.

"She took another sedative and is sleeping now, but the memorial service was hard on her."

Susan had said little since the terrible events. Grae knew that she would struggle with the anomaly: with her remembering going back in time to the Vikings, and yet those events 'un-happening' due to the Firedog cancelling them out. Grae felt uncomfortable about the paradox, but she was used to riding the flukes and fluctuations of time. It was a difficult, a near-insane, strain for a linear being to bear.

"Well, I'm glad you went with her," Grae said, bringing the cup over to the table.

Tamara took the cup of coffee from Grae and took a piping hot sip. "Where's the Doctor?"

"He's still up at the Reactor."

Tamara nodded. "What a mess. Hank Thorndike told me after the memorial service that the whole place is going to be shut down. None of the other staff can replicate Rockwell's innovation—"

"For obvious reasons. Graviton threads won't be coming this way, hopefully ever again."

Tamara nodded. "Funny. It's the greatest blessing these Howell's Point villagers will ever know—how close they came to total destruction—and yet all they can see is the loss of their livelihood. No reactor, no new energy boom. Howell's Point is facing a very bleak future indeed."

Grae sighed and sat down opposite Tamara.

"Hank and I went to this shop on Main Street, Rainbow Flowers and Gifts. He looked at all of the stores up and down the street, told me how much he hated them, how he came in to the diner every chance he could to gripe to Barb about them ... and how sad he is that they'll all be gone."

"All those people dying - Dr. Rockwell, Marie, Erik, Snorrir - and now the final victim is a whole town."

They lapsed into silence, drinking their coffee as the early afternoon sunshine filtered into the tiny kitchen, bringing with it the promise of spring.

They both looked up at the sound of the front door opening and closing. The Doctor strode in, shaking his head.

"Well, I've done the best I can," he said. "Of course, there's no evidence that the nuclear meltdown happened, since the energy was absorbed by the Firedog creature. So as usual, nobody believes me. But they *did* believe me when I told them how fried Rockwell's CAA assembly was." His eyes drooped to the floor. "And of course, Marie is in police custody for the murder of her husband."

"Human justice," Grae noted.

"Perhaps it'll be ... what's the word? 'Manslaughter'?" The Doctor shook his head, and Tamara saw he was just as out of his depth as his fellow Gallifreyan at fathoming the actions the woman had taken.

"And what about the graviton thread?"

"The TARDIS isn't picking anything up," the Doctor reassured her. "I'm tempted to call this case closed, but of course I'll have to keep an eye out for any Viking demons poking their snouts where they don't belong. Speaking of which, we should probably get going."

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Hank met them on the porch.

"Leaving, I guess?" he asked, matter-of-factly.

"Things to do, places to go..." the Doctor said vaguely. "Thank you for all your help, Hank."

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"No problem, Doctor," Hank replied, shaking the Doctor's hand. "Helping people out—that's what living in a small town is all about."

Tamara hugged him. "I wish I could say things will go back to normal."

Hank looked to the spot on the horizon where the reactor loomed and nodded "Yep. It's what I had hoped for, but not *how* I hoped for it. To think the last words I said to Tyler were some smartass stuff about his fancy new energy. I could've kicked him then, and obviously he was nothing but a heel, but he didn't deserve to die. And Howell's Point doesn't deserve to collapse into the sea. But we'll pull through: always have done, always will."

Grae gave the grizzled old-timer a goodbye kiss on the cheek. "Look after Susan for us."

"I will," Hank assured her.

He waved them off from the top step of the porch, watching as they strolled off in the direction of the beach, and their blue box. Hank was full of questions: big questions about where they were going, how they were going to get there and who they really were. But he didn't ask them; he just watched until they vanished round the bend in the street and the sound of their voices faded into the roar of the distant surf, and he let his questions fade and vanish with them.

After all, prying into other people's affairs just wasn't the small-town way of doing things.





In the quaint Atlantic town of Howell's Point, Dr. Tyler Rockwell is nearing a breakthrough on his Cluster Acceleration Array, which will finally make nuclear fusion a reality. However, Rockwell's high-handed manner has aroused suspicion among townspeople—while his chronic infidelity, and his advances toward lab assistant Susan Wendell, have aroused the murderous hatred of his wife Marie.

A rogue graviton thread disrupts the course of the TARDIS and lands the Doctor, Grae, and Tamara Scott in the same location—but in 1327, when it is a Viking settlement known as Vinland. Here the same passions are playing out among the leader, Erik the Bold, his wife Gudrid, and a rival couple Eorun and Bjaerni. Further raising temperatures, horrible deaths are befalling villagers who have been out on the beach after dark.

Events in these two times are connected, and through the disruption of the graviton thread, a terrifying creature has emerged, known to the Vikings as the Firedog. If Rockwell's experiments continue, the mythical Firedog could wreak untold damage upon both times.

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