

FROM THE CLASSIC ERA OF DOCTOR WHO

LETHBRIDGE

STEWART

SPECIAL

PIRATES OF THE

PRIME

MERIDIAN

ROY MARTIN

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# LETHBRIDGE STEWART

Roy Martin



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**THE CASTLE TAVERN WAS MORE TAVERN** than castle. the low ceilings and heavy wooden panelled walls did nothing to reflect what little light there was inside. The place was everything Spencer wasn't: old.

It was Spencer's dad's turn to have him for the holidays. The trip out to Peacehaven had been billed as a mystery surprise, which usually meant work had kept him busy and he'd had no time to plan anything. No mystery there, or surprise. Spencer played along. 'Happy families' was a game he knew well.

He'd have preferred to be back home, meeting up with his mates, or playing his Atari. But he supposed it was kind of nice to be spending time with his dad. Even though he was currently sitting with a Coke, watching him talk to some military type.

His dad had always been vague about what he actually did for a living. His long periods of time away from home were spent at meetings, apparently. Spencer got the impression his dad had not only forgotten he wasn't supposed to be working, but was actually working now. The conversation at the bar with the stiff in the uniform seemed to be anything but a social call. Spencer caught the military-looking type glancing past his dad and over to him, the dull lighting doing its best to reflect off his well oiled dark hair.

To a city kid, Peacehaven was... different. Not much really going on, except lots of people eating fish and chips, ice cream and buying plastic buckets and spades, which at the end of day were left abandoned on the beach, broken and degraded. The only pastime

was hours on the beach letting pasty skin turn red. The pirates weren't bad though. Not something you'd see in south London.

When his dad had asked if he wanted to have his picture taken with one, Spencer had declined. Quietly, he kind of did, but he kept this to himself. He didn't want to be seen as a tourist – it just wasn't cool.

Spencer took his eyes off his dad for a second, looking over to what must have been one of the locals. He was sitting in the corner of the tavern, still in his pirate costume, enjoying a pint of beer. His face was mostly hidden behind an explosion of hair, and his beard was in bad need of a trim. It was definitely one of the better costumes. He even had a cutlass resting at his side, with a deep-green, jade-inlaid handle. In this dim light it looked like it had a very faint glow to it. The local, Spencer saw, was looking over in the direction of his dad. Then he turned to look directly at Spencer. The local held his gaze for a few moments, as if sizing him up, before looking back towards the bar. Spencer's eyes followed to where his dad was shaking hands with the man in uniform. His dad came over.

'Sorry, Spence, I didn't intend to chat for so long,' his dad said.

'Who was that, Dad?' Spencer asked. 'I didn't know you had friends in the army.'

Over his dad's shoulder, he watched the local in costume leave, his pint glass left half full on the table. The half chandelier mounted on the wall dimmed slightly as he walked past.

'I don't know if you could call Alistair a friend. More of an acquaintance.' His dad noticed he seemed

distracted. 'Spence?'

Spencer brought his attention back to the conversation. 'He looked important. All those badges and stuff.'

'You could say that. He's a brigadier. He's visiting 225 Squadron Air Training Corps just down the road. Decided what you want to eat?'

Spencer had forgotten he was supposed to be looking at the menu. He tried his best to avoid the obvious, but he was tired. Surely it was all right to be a tourist for one evening? 'Um... fish and chips.'

'Good choice, considering where we are.'

Spencer looked back across to the abandoned pint of beer, wondering if the local was coming back. Perhaps he had retired for the night, exhausted after relieving the tourists of their pieces of eight for a 'Picture with a Pirate' - funnily enough, taken on a Polaroid instant camera. Spencer got up to find the gents while his dad ordered dinner.

The corridor was narrow, and he stumbled slightly on the uneven wooden floor. The walls were lined with black and white illustrations on old yellow paper - sloops and brigantines, ships from the golden age of piracy, a fun fact he'd learnt the first night they'd arrived at *The Castle Tavern*.

The lighting dimmed. The split seconds of darkness seemed to fill the space with salty air, before fresh light brought with it fresh air again. Spencer stumbled again. For a moment the wooden floor had felt like it was dipping away from him, before rising back up to meet his feet before he could even blink. The bulbs hanging from the ceiling swayed almost

imperceptibly on their chords. As he retraced his steps back to the bar, the lights flickered on and off several more times, threatening to plunge the narrow damp corridor into darkness, before deciding to remain in operation.

Spencer saw his dad at the bar, saying goodbye to the brigadier again. The orphaned pint still sat in solitude on the table in the far corner, only now it was empty.

‘The brigadier forget something, Dad?’

His dad gave him a quizzical look. ‘Very impressive. I didn’t know you knew your army insignia.’

‘What?’

‘How did you know he was a brigadier?’

‘Because you told me. Your acquaintance Alistair. Visiting the army base, or whatever it is, down the road.’

Spencer’s dad looked confused. ‘How could you possibly know his name? Were you listening in on our conversation?’

‘No, but that local was. The one dressed as a pirate sitting in the corner.’

His dad looked over to where Spencer was indicating. ‘I think I might have noticed someone dressed as a pirate, Spence. Is this one of those teenage pranks? Funny, ha, ha. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Have you decided what you want to eat?’

‘Really? Fish and chips. Like I told you before I went to the toilet.’

His dad smiled at him awkwardly. ‘OK. Back in a minute.’

Spencer sat back down, but not before brushing the dust that had settled on his chair in the few minutes he'd been away. *This place really does need sorting out*, he thought. Too late, he realised that HIS DRINK ALSO, was covered in dust.

Fortunately, his dad had booked them separate rooms, opposite each other. This meant Spencer could enjoy some downtime. He was excited at having a television in his room, and fiddled with the aerial to clear up the snow. But with only three channels to choose from, there was nothing much to watch. He didn't want to get out of bed again to change the channel, and selected a wildlife programme he could fall asleep to. A combination of the day's walking and the sea air soon had him asleep.

He was slowly brought out of his slumber by a high pitched noise. Disorientated, and slightly annoyed, he opened his eyes to a bright white light staring back at him. He squinted at the large white numerals of the digital flip clock on the bedside cabinet. It was nearly 2.00am. He dragged himself out of his warm bed, the old oak floorboards sending a ripple of cold up his body. He pressed the off button. The television screen ceased its incessant noise, parting company with a pin point of cycloptic light as the screen faded to black.

Spencer was about to fall back into bed when he heard a heavy thud coming from downstairs, followed by hushed voices. Quietly, he opened the door to his room. The air in the corridor felt somehow... heavy. A dim, warm glow came from the

top of the stairs that led down to the restaurant and bar. He'd heard stories of old taverns like this having lock-ins, where the landlord would invite a few select locals to be locked in the tavern and drink way past licensing hours.

Moving slowly towards the stairs, he listened hard to hear snippets of adult conversation. From the top of the stairs, he could see shadows running across the walls. Whoever was down there, they were moving towards the back of the tavern. He could make out two voices, scratchy and old. From the stairs Spencer could see candles set up on the bar, the shadows bouncing around the room as the two men moved past. In the low light, Spencer recognised the green glow of the cutlass handle from earlier. This wasn't a lock-in. His curiosity got the better of him.

It was hard to see, but it looked like the two men were carrying a case of some kind. It was long but not very deep, with handles at each end. It reminded him of crates he'd seen in old war films. Spencer could just about make out numbers and letters stencilled on the side: 51, 15 and what looked like the letters N O O. The stair Spencer was sitting on creaked as he shifted his weight to get a better look. Both men stopped and listened. Spencer leaned back into the shadows, holding his breath so as not to make a sound. He could hear his heart pounding in his chest. It seemed like they stood there listening, frozen still, forever, but eventually the men moved off down the corridor.

Slowly, Spencer moved down the stairs to the entrance of the corridor. The two men had stopped at the far end. The shadows were thicker in this confined

space, but Spencer could make out the men pulling on something. The heavy creaking of wood was followed by a sudden glow of light. This old tavern must have had a cellar!

The two men manhandled the heavy crate down the stairs, closing the cellar hatch after them. Standing in the corridor, now in total darkness, Spencer shivered. Stealthily, he made his way back upstairs to his room, not wishing to push his luck and upset the locals.

Next morning, over breakfast, Spencer's dad received a call on the tavern's landline. After a few minutes, he returned, looking disappointed.

'Everything all right, Dad?' Spencer asked.

'Yes. That was Alistair. I'd arranged a surprise trip to the air base for you. Thought it might be exciting, something different. That's what we were talking about last night when he dropped in. Apparently, they've had something stolen.'

'A break in at an air base? Sounds like one of those spy movies.'

'Well that's the strange thing. Nobody actually broke in. Whoever it was managed to get past the guards and security.'

'What was taken?'

'Alistair couldn't say. Probably something top secret, knowing him. Don't worry, we will find something just as exciting to do today.'

As he finished his breakfast, Spencer's mind turned to the events of the night before. The two events surely couldn't be connected, but what if they

were? Two men in the dead of night, carrying a heavy case into a hidden cellar definitely seemed like suspicious behaviour to him. But then again, in a town where people wore pirate costumes 24/7, it might just have been perfectly normal.

Spencer's dad looked at him, concerned. 'Everything all right, Spence?'

'Yeah, I'm fine. Just saw something strange last night.' Spencer told his dad the events he'd witnessed.

'That *is* strange. But what makes you think it has anything to do with the theft at the base?'

'Well, the case they were carrying reminded me of ammunition cases in those old war films we used to watch together.'

'I'm sure it was nothing more than locals moving a bit of moonshine. This is a tavern, after all.'

'I don't know, Dad. It didn't look like it was made to carry bottles. Is it worth letting your friend know what I saw?'

'Alistair is a busy man, Spence. But I guess it wouldn't do any harm for him to know.'

His dad used the tavern's phone to make the call. Spencer stood close by, trying to hear both sides of the conversation. After the usual pleasantries, he listened as his dad recounted the night's events. His face said it all. On the other end of the phone, Alistair was listening politely but, as soon as the call was finished, would forget about it. Spencer was a little annoyed at not being taken seriously. He could tell the conversation was coming to an end. 'Oh, Dad, tell him about the markings on the side of the case. The 51 and 15 thing.'

Torn between his phone conversation and Spencer's interruption, his dad hesitated. 'Sorry, Alistair, hold on... Spencer was just telling me something. Look, sorry to bother you. I'll let you get on with your busy day.'

Spencer watched his dad's face change from one of apology to one of intrigue. 'What is it, Dad?'

His dad handed him the phone. 'Alistair has asked me to put you on the line.'

'Hello?'

'Hello, Spencer, I'm Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart. I just overheard you mention some numbers. Can you repeat them to me, please?'

'Er, yeah, sure. The case had 51 and 15 on the side.'

'Anything else?' the brigadier asked.

'Um, the letters N O O,' Spence replied.

'You're one hundred percent sure about the numbers?'

'Yeah, positive.'

'Thank you, Spencer. Hand me back to your father, please.'

Spencer watched his dad's expression change yet again.

'Wow. He changed his tune, Spence,' his dad said as he hung up the phone.

'Why? What's happening?'

'Once you mentioned those numbers, Alistair was suddenly very interested. He's sent some of his men to collect us.'

'So I was right. Whatever is in the case is something to do with the army.'

'Looks like it.'

*'Cool.'*

Spencer and his dad decided to wait outside in the morning sun, sitting on one of the benches and watching the seagulls investigating the rubbish left lying around. It wasn't long before a military Land Rover came down the road. The driver parked up, letting the brigadier and his two MPs get out.

*'Morning, Tom. So, this is your son Spencer?'*

*'Yes. Spencer, this is Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart.'*

Spencer felt very grown up as he shook hands with the brigadier.

*'So, young man, would you like to tell me in your own words what you saw last night?'*

*'Um... Two men dressed like pirates carrying a case into the cellar.'*

*'And you're sure the case had the markings you mentioned?'*

*'Yes. One of the men was in the tavern yesterday. When you and dad were talking, he was sitting in the corner.'*

*'How do you know it was the same man? As you might have noticed, lots of people around here dress like pirates.'*

*'He had the same cutlass. I recognised the handle. It had a green, glowing handle.'*

Spencer saw the brigadier react slightly.

*'Did you see them come back out?'*

*'Um... no. I went back to bed.'*

*'Well, you've been very helpful, my boy.'* Spencer and his dad followed the brigadier inside.

Spencer overheard the brigadier questioning the landlord, who swore the cellar hadn't been used in the twenty years he'd owned the tavern. Folklore said it had been sealed up after the East India Trading company purged the seas of pirates in the 1830s. As far as he knew, that was the last time it had ever been used.

'Spencer, can you show us where you saw the two men enter the cellar?'

Spencer walked them down the narrow corridor, to where the two men had disappeared. Looking closely, he could just about make out the outline of the old cellar door. The hinges were rusted shut. It didn't look like it had been used in hundreds of years, just like the landlord had said.

'Are you sure this is where you saw the two men go?' the brigadier said, looking quite sceptical.

Spencer nodded.

The brigadier gave instructions to his men to force the cellar door open. One of them went back out to the Land Rover, returning with a crowbar.

They all watched as the two soldiers did their best to free the door in the floor. Eventually the rusted hinges gave up, letting the hatch rise. Cobwebs and dust hung to the old wooden stairs leading down into the darkness. One of the soldiers handed the brigadier a torch.

'Wait here, please, Tom. You too, Spencer.' The brigadier and his two men went down into the darkness.

Spencer waited, wanting to know if they'd found what they were looking for. A few moments later, the

brigadier called for Spencer and his dad to join him. Spencer had to stoop slightly. The cellar had obviously been built when people were shorter. The torch the brigadier was holding illuminated the space. Spencer had never seen so many cobwebs in his life. It looked like nobody had been in the cellar for hundreds of years. Before the brigadier could comment, Spencer spoke. 'You don't believe me, do you?'

'It's not that I don't believe you. Those numbers you said you saw, you couldn't have made those up. Only those with top clearance know about that case. I'm just wondering if you're totally sure they came down here. As you can see, it looks like nobody has disturbed this place in a very, very long time.'

Spencer had to admit the brigadier was right. But where else could the two men have gone? This was the only cellar. 'I... I don't know why it looks like this, but I definitely saw them open the hatch and disappear with the case.'

'Can you tell me anything else about the cutlass you mentioned earlier?'

'No, not really. I just thought it was a cool trick. Although I did notice it start to kind of flash when they got to the cellar door. Like it was... pulsing.'

'Would you mind coming back to the base with me? I need to show you something.'

Spencer looked at his dad, who shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

'I guess we get to see the base after all, Spence.'

The brigadier gave orders for one of his men to remain at the tavern, while the drab olive green Land

Rover took the party back to the air base.

The base was how Spencer had imagined it. Checkpoints with armed guards punctuated their ride across the grounds to the far side. They passed helicopters and other planes, probably used for training. High towers dotted the perimeter's inner and outer fences, which was covered in razor wire. Spencer couldn't imagine how anyone could have stolen anything.

They stopped outside a building with even tighter security. The brigadier took them down in the lift, and after what seemed to Spencer a very long time, they stepped out into a small room off of a larger laboratory.

Spencer looked through the big double-glazed windows separating the two spaces. Men and women in white coats and carrying clipboards were busy bustling around. The smell of the place reminded Spencer of when he was seven and had ended up in hospital having broken his arm falling from a climbing frame. He listened as the brigadier spoke into the desk intercom.

'Hello, Anne. Please could you bring in the sample designation Oscar, Bravo, Golf seventy-nine?' A muted voice on the other end assented to the request.

'Please take a seat, both of you. I shall order up some refreshments.'

'Alistair, when I asked if you could show us around the base, you could have just shown us around outside. You really didn't have to go to all this trouble.'

'Nonsense, Tom. Spencer here has been extremely

helpful. Besides, he clearly has good observation skills. A good quality in my line of work.'

The door opened. A woman came in, carrying a small aluminium case. Stencilling on the side of the case read OBG79. The woman introduced herself as Anne Travers, and opened the case.

'Spencer. I need you to take a look at this.' Anne held up what looked like a black stone, handing it to Spencer. 'Hold this, would you, and go over to the windows to the lab.'

Spencer took the solid black stone. It was cold to the touch. Now it was in his hand, it looked more like black glass. And not just any ordinary black. The kind of black that made ordinary black look white. As he walked over to the windows, the black glass started to glow green, getting brighter the closer he went.

'Wow, that's so cool! What is it?' Spencer asked.

'Obsidian. It's a naturally occurring volcanic glass. Formed when lava cools rapidly Obsidian is usually only the blackest of blacks. However, as you can see, this one also glows green,' Anne replied.

The brigadier tapped his swagger stick on the desk. 'Was this the green you saw on that cutlass you mentioned?' he asked.

Spencer was having fun, moving backwards and forwards in front of the window partition, watching the colour change from a midnight black through to pulsing green.

'Spencer?'

'Sorry. Yeah, I suppose it could be. I'm sure the handle of his cutlass was never black though. What makes it glow green?'

The brigadier signalled for Spencer to hand back the obsidian to Anne.

‘Have you heard of meridians?’ Anne asked.

Both Spencer and his dad shook their heads.

‘Well meridians and anti-meridians are lines that criss-cross the globe. They have been used for hundreds of years as navigational markings. Unlike the equator, which is determined by the axis of the Earth’s rotation. In a sense, they’re arbitrary. One day, it was decided where the meridians should be, and that was that. Or so we thought. However, through the work we’ve been doing, we’ve discovered that sources of energy run along each meridian and anti-meridian, in perfect parallel.’

Spencer was finding it difficult to understand, and felt sure that his dad felt the same. Anne smiled in recognition of this. ‘Okay, simplified, the meridian grids are astrological power lines, the strongest of which is the Prime Meridian. It’s no coincidence the Prime Meridian runs straight through Stonehenge, often associated with strange and unexplained activity. The energy matrix these grids create culminates in the North and South Poles, kind of like a battery.’

Spencer was beginning to get it. He leaned forward as Anne took a picture of Edinburgh castle from a file on the desk.

‘Geology is at the heart of this power grid. We know Edinburgh Castle, for example, is built on dolerite rock, from extinct volcanoes. Well, it’s not alone. Dotted across the country, you’ll find other fortifications all built on similar formations. A

coincidence, one would assume. After all, for defensive purposes castles are generally built at the highest possible point, and often these are places of extinct volcanic activity. But it turns out this dolerite rock gives out a certain frequency. Nothing surprising if you think about it – we use quartz in watches to regulate time keeping. What is interesting, however, is what we found when we plotted out the locations of all such castles around the country, indeed, the world. Viewed on a frequency map, these places glow brighter than the surrounding locations, although these too are often volcanic. There is something different about the dolerite rock beneath the castles, when compared to the dolerite of the areas around them. And all these castles either fall directly on, or regular distances away from, meridian or anti-meridian lines.

In his excitement, Spencer forgot where he was and jumped in. ‘So, the castles are drawing power from the meridian grid, and amplifying the frequency of the dolerite. Is that right?’

‘Yes, clever boy. The castles are located at strategic points around the world,’ replied Anne. ‘Can we keep him, Alistair?’

Before the brigadier could even open his mouth, Spencer said, ‘So, what was in the case that was taken? The one I saw those two men carrying?’

‘A control module,’ Anne replied.

‘A control module for what?’ Spencer asked.

‘A control module for the meridian grid. With the control unit we can tap into the frequency, amplify or deaden it somewhat. It’s the first step towards

controlling it, harnessing its potential, whatever that may be,' Anne said.

'So the Noo controls it,' Spencer said.

'The what?' the brigadier asked.

'The Noo. That's what else was on the side of the case.'

'Ah, yes. I see what you mean now.' The brigadier turned to Anne for help.

'51.4779 degrees North, 0.0015 degrees West. The latitude and longitude of the Prime Meridian,' Anne said. 'This base isn't located far from it. In fact, the tavern you are staying at is directly *on* the Prime Meridian. It leaves the south coast of the United Kingdom on the beach just down from the tavern. The Global Positioning System the American's have been working on would know it as WGS84.GPS. Of course, that is years away from becoming *officially* operational, like with all these things. What we're working on is much more than a Global Positioning System. My job is to provide a Global *Protection* System. Off the books, of course. With enough energy diverted to the meridian grid, we can, I hope, use the meridian grid for defence, like a shield.'

'I'm still not sure how the glowing rock fits in.'

'The frequency of the meridian grid causes this unique type of obsidian to glow.'

'So that guy's cutlass was glowing because the tavern is on a meridian line?' Spencer asked.

'You really are quick, Spencer. And not just any meridian line, the Prime Meridian. But the odd thing is we only discovered any of this just under a year ago. Nobody outside this facility is supposed to know

about the resonation of the meridian frequencies. The control module was a prototype. We need to find the two men you saw last night and ask them a few questions.'

'Are we in any danger staying at that tavern, Alistair?' interrupted Spencer's dad.

'Not at all, Tom. As you know, I have a man there at the moment. When I've dropped you both off, I will leave another of my men. They have orders to arrest anybody who goes down into that cellar.'

Back at the tavern, Spencer and his dad did as they were told. Acted normal. Alistair had promised Spencer and Tom he would keep them updated if there were any developments.

A few days passed. In town, Spencer had been on the look-out for the pirates acting strangely, but no luck. Tonight, was their last night in *The Castle Tavern* and Spencer sat in bed mulling over the events of the week before falling asleep.

It was the dead of night, and Spencer's sleep had been restless. He had so many unanswered questions. Tonight was his last chance to solve the mystery of the pirate with the glowing cutlass. He decided to keep watch - unofficially, of course.

He opened the door to his room. The hallway was quiet, a dead zone for noise, until he started tiptoeing towards the stairs. The floorboards cracked and coughed, shattering the silence like ice splitting across a frozen lake in deep winter. Spencer made his way as quietly as he could to the bar and the corridor leading

to the cellar. From the ambient light of the moon through the window, he noticed the cellar door wasn't quite closed. He thought of calling his dad, but didn't want to wake him for nothing. It might only have been a soldier wanting a wee.

Opening the cellar door, he could see a torch lying on the floor. He called out in hushed tones to see if anyone was still down there.

Silence.

Spencer moved in further. In his shorts and t-shirt, he could feel a draft against his legs. Funny, he'd not noticed that last time. The hairs on his arm stood on end.

He called out again in hushed tones, but still there was no answer. Reaching for the torch, he scanned the room. The two soldiers were lying unconscious on the floor. For a moment he froze, thinking they were dead, but then noticed their shallow breaths misting in the cold air. He tried to wake them with no luck.

Spencer scanned the cellar with the torch once more. The far wall was missing! A small voice in his head told him to get his dad, who could then get the brigadier. But his curiosity got the better of him. He just wanted to take a quick look.

There was the unmistakable smell of the sea. He was at the beginnings of what looked like an old tunnel. The wall was propped up with uneven bits of wood. He listened hard; faint and unfamiliar sounds clawed their way up to him. Spencer took one last look back before stepping in.

The small torch did the best it could. He could see the motes of dust cascading in the tight beam of light,

disturbed by the intermittent movement of wind washing past him. The further he walked, the fresher the air became. Soon he could see the tunnel beginning to narrow. He stopped again to listen and was sure he could hear voices. Spencer killed the light. Up ahead, disembodied in the darkness, the unmistakable green glow of the cutlass handle moved. He listened as footsteps on wooden stairs moved away. He waited until silence filled the tunnel then climbed out.

Lanterns hung from heavy old wooden beams. Barrels and boxes of various sizes littered the floor. Foot-steps could be heard overhead. Moving slowly towards the stairs, above him Spencer could see what looked like a ship's mast, rising high into the moonlight sky. The footsteps were headed in his direction. Spencer quickly moved behind the biggest box he could find. It smelled like coffee.

Two night shadows fell the length of the stairs, then vaulted away as the footsteps passed. Moving back out and up the stairs, Spencer couldn't quite believe his eyes. He was on a ship, and an old ship at that. He could see three huge masts rocketing into the sky, each one as wide as a man at the base. He remembered the brigadier mentioning the beach wasn't far from the tavern. This must be where he was now, he thought to himself. Climbing on deck, Spencer used the shadows as cover. Something was wrong.

He knew he was on a ship, but it wasn't moving, not even rocking a millimetre. Around him he could see the shadows of tall buildings close to the ship, too

close. The moonlight reflecting off a metallic dome caught his eye, the light falling across the big ship's wheel. Behind it he could see the name plate of the ship: *Cutty Sark*. That had to be wrong. He remembered a school trip to the *Cutty Sark*. It was in Greenwich, nowhere near *The Castle Tavern*. Spencer had to get back and let the brigadier know what he'd found.

The sounds of laughter came from the far end of the ship. Spencer made his way back down into the hold using the shadows for cover. He looked for the entrance to the tunnel but couldn't find it. He'd forgotten to make a mental note of where it was. Panic started to creep through his bones.

Come on, Spencer, you have an eye for detail. Just think. Spencer retraced his footsteps in his mind.

With relief, Spencer started down the tunnel, back to the tavern. Up ahead he could hear voices. Was this more of the men who had stolen the case? If it was, Spencer knew it was game over. He had nowhere to go. He had nowhere to hide. He could hear the voices of at least three men getting closer. He started to panic; looking both ways, up and down, wishing the walls would open up.

A familiar tone came down the tunnel. It was the brigadier! Hurrying forward, Spencer was met by three guns aiming directly at him and a torch directly in his eyes.

'Spencer! Goodness me, boy, we could have shot you. What are you doing down here?'

'The men who took that thing from the base,

they're at the other end of this tunnel. But something's... weird. This tunnel comes out in Greenwich!

'Greenwich? Remarkable. Leave this to us. You need to get back upstairs.'

Spencer hurried along the tunnel, leaving the brigadier barking orders. He was about to head back up the stairs to safety when his curiosity was piqued again. The small voice of good sense was overwhelmed by the voice of adventure. After all, how dangerous could it be, now that the brigadier and his men were here?

Giving the brigadier and his men a few moment's head start, Spencer followed on behind, keeping a safe distance. Being told off by his dad was bad enough; what it would be like getting told off by a brigadier? Spencer didn't want to find out.

Near the end of the tunnel, he stopped. In the soft candle light from the hold, he was just able to make out the trio of soldiers pausing at the exit. Hushed voices reached him, as the brigadier told his men the plan. As the soldiers began to creep forward, Spencer followed slowly.

Hearing a commotion, he hurried his pace, finding the exit and diving behind a large crate, this one smelling of tobacco. He watched as the brigadier's men manhandled the two men dressed as pirates off the stairs and down into the hold. The two men swore as they tried to free themselves.

'Oi, you Scallywags, get yer hands off me!' one of the pirates said in a rough harsh voice. He made a sudden reach for his cutlass, but was stopped by the

soldiers just in time. The second pirate remained quiet. Spencer recognised him.

The brigadier stepped forward. 'Right, you two. I want to know who you are and what you're doing here.'

Both men remained silent. In the torch light, Spencer could see their faces. Their foreheads were deeply lined with wrinkles, and any skin not covered by beard was instead smeared with dirt. Their stony eyes surveyed their captors resolutely.

'I see. You two are the strong silent type. Well, I'm Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, and on behalf of the Queen I'm —'

'What are you landlubbers *doing* here?'

'Ah, so you do have tongues?'

'When I run you through with my cutlass, I'll cut yours out.'

Spencer could see the brigadier was unfazed by the threat.

'Indeed. Your cutlass.' He reached down and pulled it from the thick leather belt around the man's waist. The handle was glowing. 'How do you know about the obsidian? And where is my case?'

'This old sea dog don't know what yer talking about. You're gonna be shark bait pretty soon, boy.'

'Please. Enough of your threats. I know you have knowledge of the meridian grids. And I know you use the obsidian on the handle of your cutlass as a key of some kind. Perhaps it allows you not to only navigate the meridian grids but also specific time frames along it?'

'Would you listen to the fancy-dressed land

lubber. An East India Company man if ever I saw one. I'd like to see how you do with the plank. Get those nice clothes of yours wet.' Both men laughed.

Ignoring them, the brigadier continued. 'I also know you're not from here. Rather neat trick of connecting Peacehaven with Greenwich, I must say.'

Spencer noticed the body language of the man change, just slightly. The pirate's eyes narrowed. The brigadier had touched on something.

'As I was saying earlier, before you interrupted me, I am arresting you both and taking you back with us. I want my case back, gentlemen, and I will get it back. Along with the truth of what you've been up to all these years.'

Spencer saw this as his cue to hurry back to the tavern, before the brigadier found he'd disobeyed his order.

The next day, Spencer and his dad were escorted once again to the base. The brigadier and Anne were waiting for them.

'Well, Spencer, you did it again,' the brigadier said as they walked into the makeshift laboratory. 'You seem to have the knack of being in the wrong place at the right time. We've recovered the control unit, and your help in that effort deserves an explanation of all we have discovered. The man you thought was simply *dressed* as a pirate is, in fact, a *real* pirate. They both are.'

'You mean a pieces of eight kind of pirate?'

'As strange as it sounds, I do indeed, Spencer.'

'But that would mean...'

‘Yes, it would. Miss Travers, please explain.’

Anne grabbed some chalk and started to scribble on a nearby blackboard. ‘These men, it would seem, have harnessed the grid for navigation,’ she began. ‘For any sort of travel, you need a direction based on fixed points – something to navigate by. Travelling in time is no different. But our understanding, our experience of time is itself arbitrary, made up. Our typical chronology cannot locate a fixed point, as technically it doesn’t exist, and it is only in our minds. 1970 isn’t actually 1970. We just call it that. If you want to navigate to another point in time, or more accurately navigate throughout the ages of the planet, you need something to measure things by. Something constant, fixed. The meridian grids provide this. The frequency of obsidian decays at a consistent rate, and by this measure, the meridian grids identify time exactly. It’s a bit like carbon dating. The amount of carbon-14 found in an item can determine its age. This grid around the Earth enables the pirates to navigate forwards and backwards, even in parallel, and know exactly where – *when* – they are. The stronger the frequency, the younger the earth. The weaker the frequency, the older the Earth.’

Spencer and his dad listened, not really believing what they were hearing.

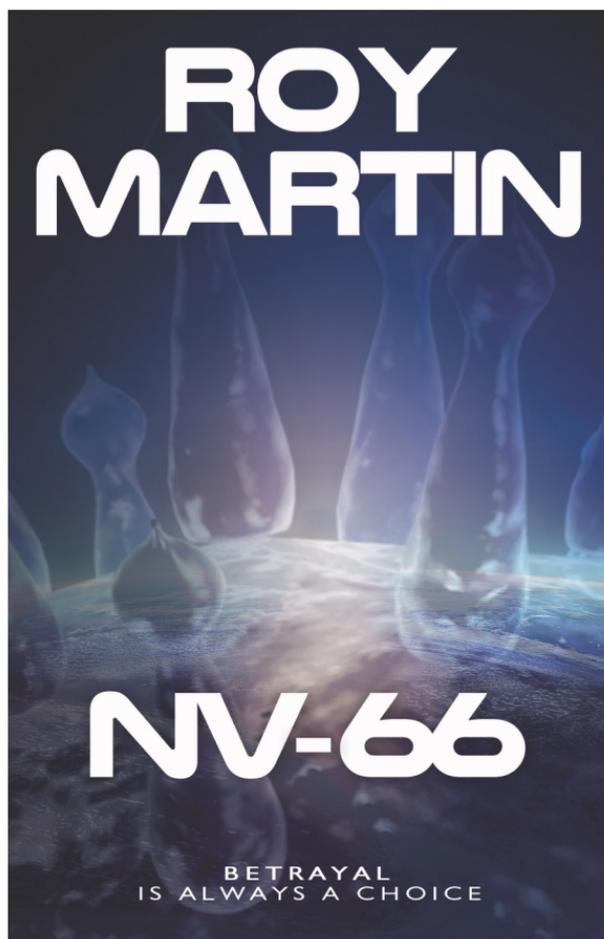
‘The pirates managed to map out a time line based on the meridian grid, using the obsidian cutlass to measure the frequency of the signal. Clever really,’ the brigadier said.

‘But what’s so special about the *Cutty Sark*? It was never a pirate ship,’ asked Spencer.

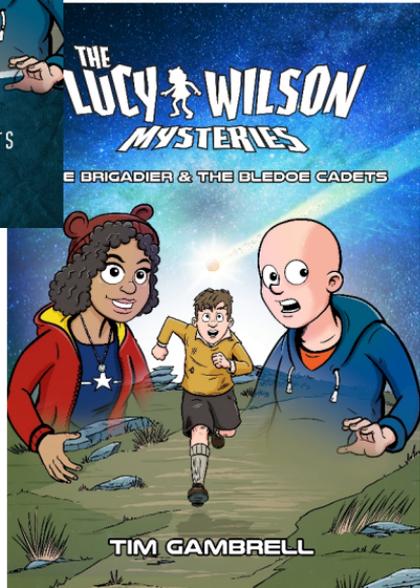
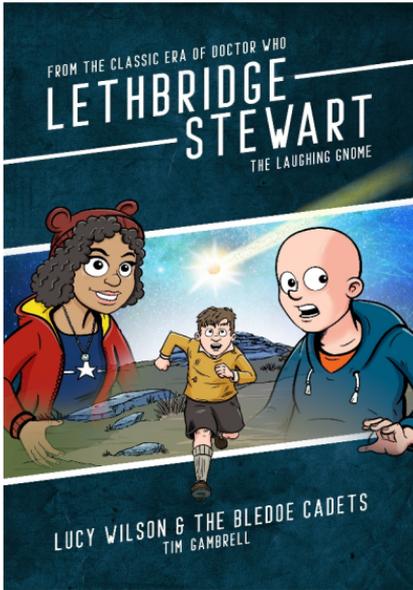
‘Ah. You’re absolutely right, Spencer. It never was. It’s not the ship that’s special, but the place. The Prime Meridian runs straight through Greenwich. It’s a convenient way station for the pirates to stash some of their loot. The future is a whole new market for smuggled wares. These industrious pirates have made a fortune buying, selling and stealing across time. I know someone who will be very interested in what they have been up to. Fascinated, in fact...’

The brigadier personally escorted Spencer and his dad back to the tavern, but not before they were both sworn to secrecy. On the journey back, as his dad and the brigadier chatted, Spencer thought back over the last few days. Who knew a week in Peacehaven with your dad could be so much fun?

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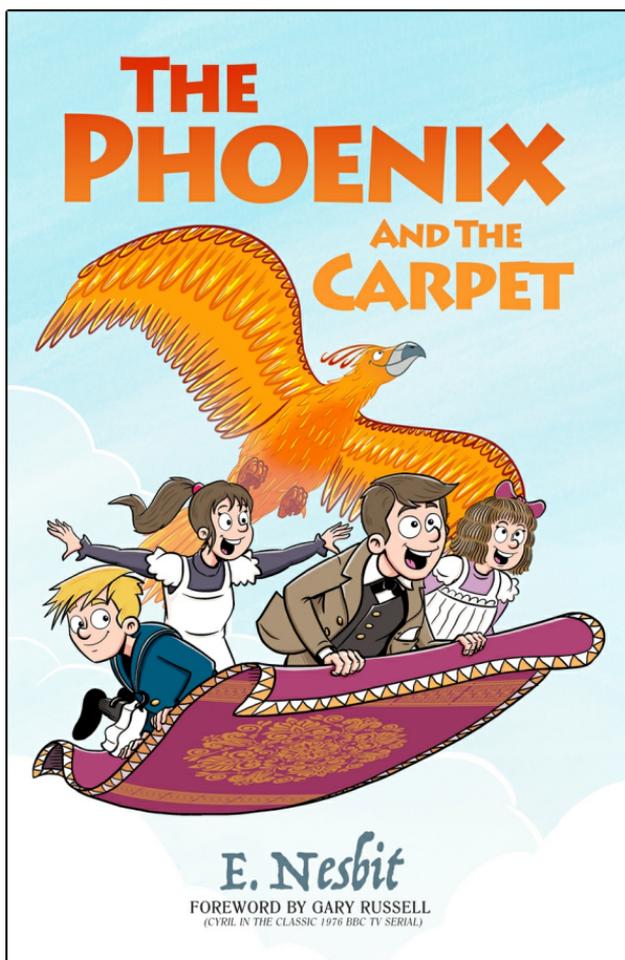
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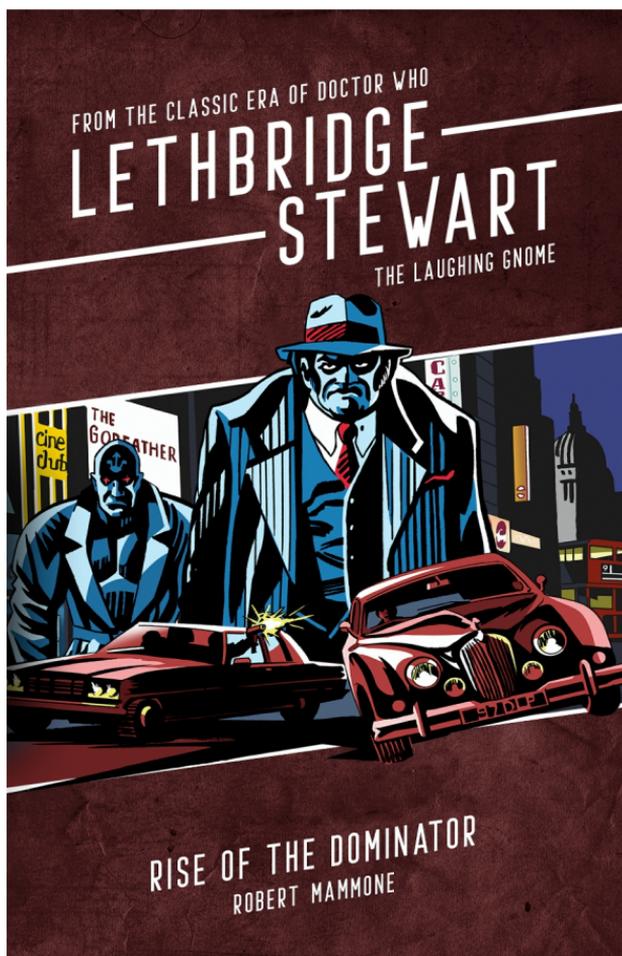
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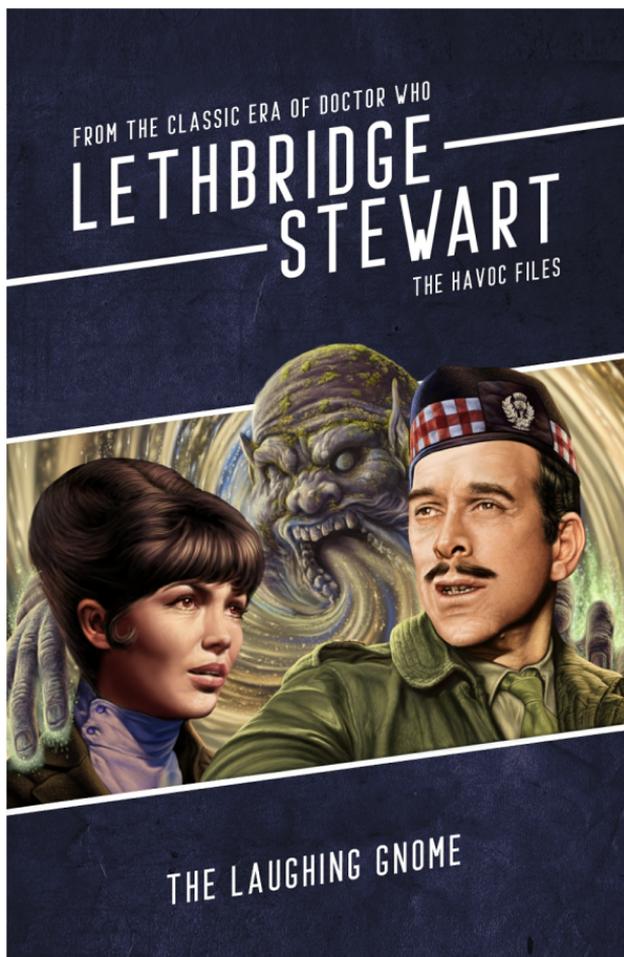
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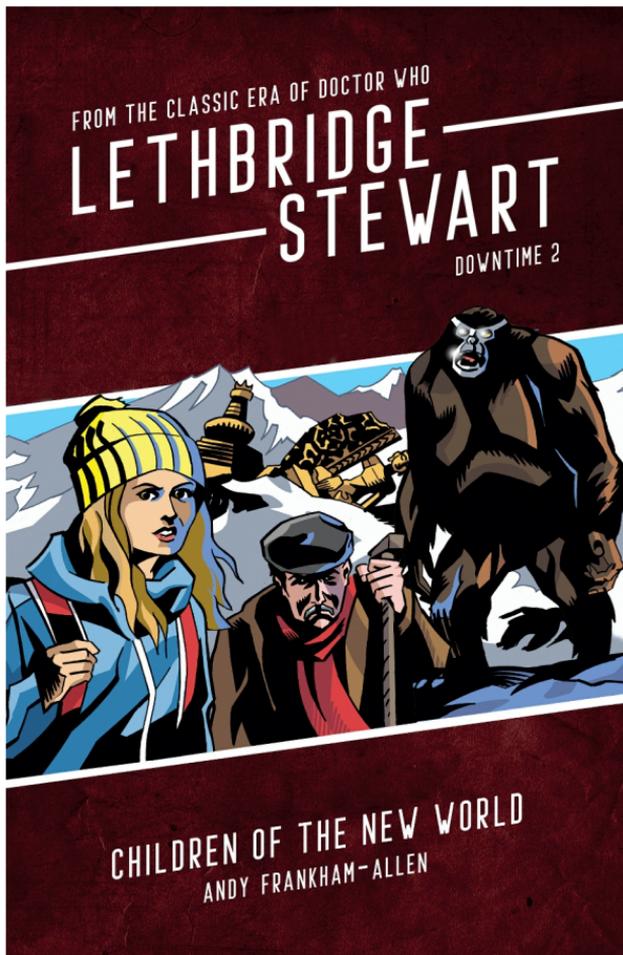
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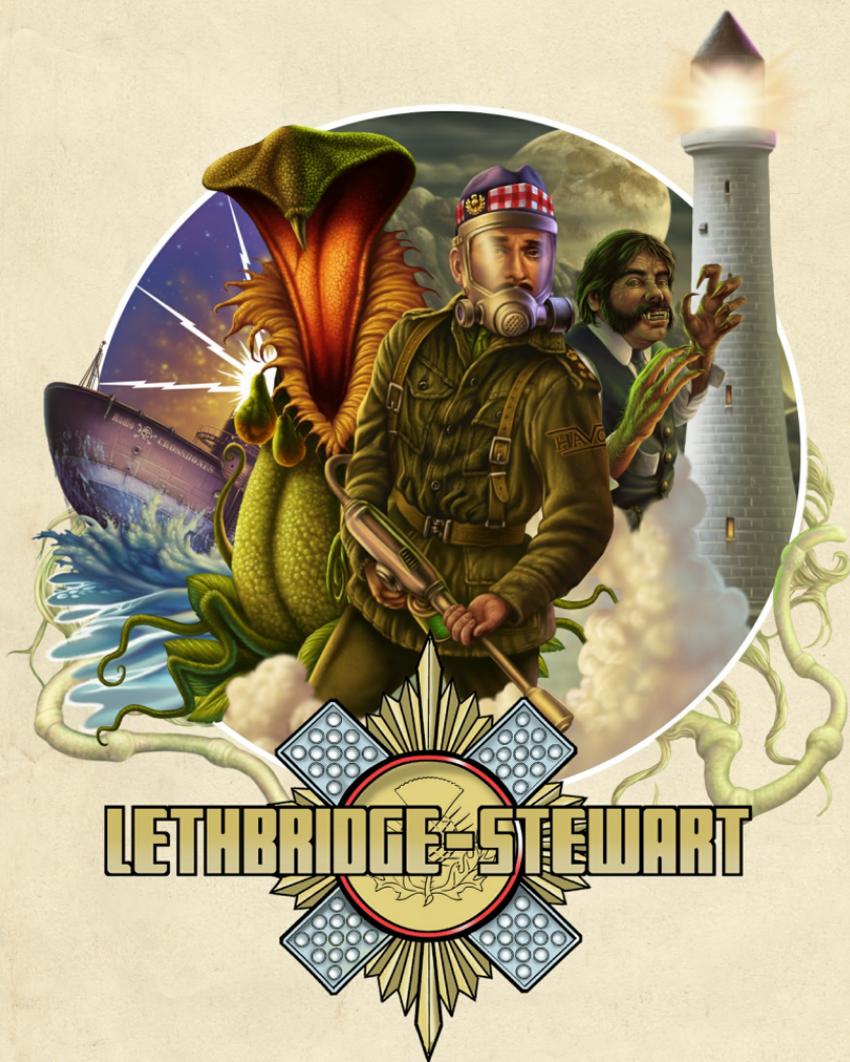


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