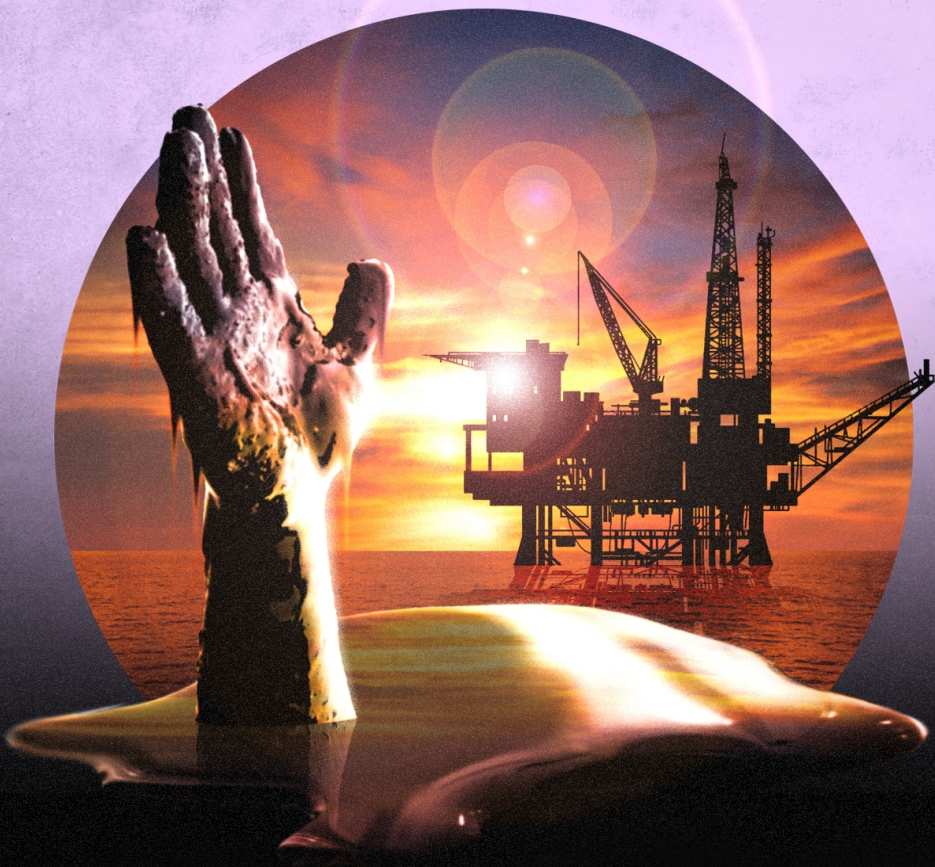


From the classic era of Doctor Who

LETHBRIDGE STEWART



THE CRUEL OIL



HARRY DRAPER

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART

THE CRUEL OIL

Based on the BBC television serials by
Mervyn Haisman & Henry Lincoln

Harry Draper



CANDY JAR BOOKS • CARDIFF
A Russell & Frankham-Allen Series
2017

(This story is set shortly after the novel,
The Daughters of Earth)

Senior Lifeguard Beth McBride emerged from the station and scanned the coastline of South Queensferry from behind the ancient railings, her fingers welded round a cup of hot, sweet tea. A bleeding copper sun rose over the world, tinging the reptilian-scale ripples of the sea a myriad of hues. She monitored the vast expanse laid out before her, from the sickbay at the very edge of the land to the shattered corpse of a rowing boat stranded on the cragged and treacherous rocks, the paddle piercing its weak wooden frame. Veiled in the dawn mist was the mighty Forth Bridge, which towered above the boats and steamers as they sliced through the waters. *This*, Beth thought, *is where I belong.*

But something was wrong. A serpentine trail of pure black slithered through the estuary, like the casting of a shadow. A fuel leak from one of the vessels? Except its path along the surface of the sea could be traced from the horizon to the shore. She had never seen anything like this before. That eel of ink had now bonded itself to the froth of the tide, as it lapsed back and forth over the body.

Unconscious or dead, Beth couldn't tell. She rushed inside the station to dial 999. But even with the ambulance coming, she had to do something. Medical

kit in hand, she ran down to the mudflats, whipping sand in her wake, her lungs clutching onto every breath.

Her instinct was to check for a pulse. But when she came closer, she saw that the body was not buried in the mud at all. It was nothing more than a blot in the sunlight. The pungent smell alone made her sick. The last vestiges of Homo-Sapien were collapsing into a deep pool of shapeless, molten black. Whatever evolutionary alchemy had stamped this creature upon the earth, it had left it unfinished.

With one last fibre of its ebbing life, the body limply lifted its bulbous head. Beth screamed at the faceless sphere, but could not move away in time before it reached out a hand to her, flesh dripping from its fingertips.

Then there was silence, save the crashing of the waves.

It wasn't the end of the world, but Anne Travers was late for a drink.

Tonight – Friday 27th February, 1970 – was the first date with William Bishop, provided it was not to be slapped with a D-Notice under suspicion of violating the Official Secrets Act. But as she looked up at the pin-drop stars in the black canvas of the sky, and walked through the masses in Queen Street, coat collar up and head held high, Anne felt that little bit freer.

They had arranged to meet at *The Heartcove*. Anne

found it nestled in one of the alleys of the New Town, partially illuminated by milk-cloud lamplight, and followed all the other couples through the main door. It had been some time since she had enjoyed an evening out. If nothing else, she hoped it would prove a healthy tonic to the past year.

Inside, *The Heartcove* was bathed in mulberry light. Smoke trailed from cigarettes, forming ashtray clouds, memories already drained from sluggish minds like lager from bottles. Over the radio, Neil Diamond was proclaiming his love to his Cracklin' Rosie.

At the bar, Bill was waiting. He looked odd to Anne, out of uniform and in civvies, as if he were an undercover spy. *Perhaps that is what the line of duty does to you*, she thought. Bill seemed to relax when his eyes met her smile.

'Hello. You look nice.'

'Thank you. I didn't have time to notice myself.'

'Would you like a drink?'

Glasses in hand, Anne and Bill found a corner table smuggled away from sight.

'I've only just remembered this isn't really my cup of tea, I'm afraid,' confessed Bill.

Anne sipped her Babycham. 'And this really *isn't* a cup of tea.'

They both laughed, then fell silent.

'How's Sally?' Bill asked after a time.

'She's not great, but I'm sure she'll get there. I feel

almost guilty about, well... this date. Knowing that Lethbridge-Stewart and she have...' Anne then trailed off, and Bill nodded.

'And *him*?'

'I presume he's busy inspecting Leopold's new recruits in Imber. Or combing his moustache.' Having said that, Anne half expected Lethbridge-Stewart to appear in the club that very moment, bearing his military gaze and dry smile upon them.

'What about you, Anne?'

'Keeping myself busy. Only because I couldn't bring myself to go back home. I went to Argosy Isle to see how they're doing, examining the damaged Yeti. You'd think they were shepherding wild beasts there, if it weren't for the spheres. I was tempted to keep one for myself, like a family heirloom.'

'You've been thinking a lot about your father,' Bill observed.

Anne nodded, strangely numb. 'It was almost as if father were written all over it. Like it was...' She took a moment to find the right word. 'Like it was shrapnel. So is that it? Is that how I'm choosing to remember him? The Yeti, the Intelligence, London being consumed, does all of that define him in my mind forever? Surely I don't want to hold all that against him. Not now that he's...'

Bill allowed a silent moment, before he asked, 'Do you...?'

‘Do I... what?’

‘Do you regret it? Working for the Corps. Bland, the Vault, the mind stone... everything else.’

‘William,’ she said, ‘this past year has been unlike anything I could have imagined. How many people can say that they’ve spoken to creatures from outer space? Who knows? Had none of it happened, we wouldn’t have met. For that alone, I wouldn’t have missed any of it for the world.’

And Bill smiled at that.

Anne continued. ‘It’s simply the unpredictability. Never knowing what’s coming. I only wish I could schedule all these invasions and madmen. And know for certain I could have a weekend to myself in between.’ The glass of Babycham remained untouched. ‘I just wish I were like you, Bill. I wish I could, oh, soldier on.’

‘Everybody’s soldiering on, Anne, one way or another. Some of us just, you know, decide to wear the uniform. Maybe even get decorated for it.’ Bill edged his hand closer to hers. ‘You’re the last person in the world who should change.’

Their hands almost touched. Then, one of the bartenders came over and asked Bill if he would take up the receiver. There was a call for him. He promised Anne that he would only be a minute, and he was as good as his word, for moments later he met her at the table again, face sombre.

This is what the line of duty does to you.

They were briefed by Lieutenant Colonel Walter Douglas over the phone. Two bodies admitted to the closest place of safety, confirmed deceased, nature of mutilation unusual, cause of death unknown. The following morning, Bill, now in uniform, drove Anne over to South Queensferry in his Land Rover.

‘Not quite the date we had in mind.’ He laughed at that.

The sickbay was quiet in respectful silence. Anne and Bill were met at reception by a Doctor Tom Carmen, a man you could never imagine out of his lab coat. ‘Thank you for coming at such short notice, Doctor Travers.’ He turned to Bill. ‘We are possibly going to be quite some time, I don’t know if you want to...’

‘Pardon me, sir,’ Bill said, ‘but where Miss Travers goes, I go. Second Lieutenant William Bishop, Scots Guards.’

‘Is that the arrangement?’ Doctor Carmen asked.

Anne forced a smile. ‘Well. Sometimes I’m under his protection. Sometimes he’s under mine. We dabble. Don’t we, William?’

Doctor Carmen inspected them both, forming an opinion. ‘Very well. This way.’

Anne felt like she and Bill were being practically marshalled through the building. At last they arrived

at the morgue. Awaiting them was a sepulchre of clinical silver surfaces and pristine cloth draped over two cadavers like napkins concealing leftovers from a macabre feast. Standing over the two bodies was a younger man than Doctor Carmen, but obviously a person of importance. He nervously rubbed his gloved-hands, but once aware of the presence of others, he composed himself, determined to live up to whatever responsibilities came with the sharp suit and occupation.

Doctor Carmen introduced him. ‘Peter Hewlett, offshore installation manager for Hibernian Oil. We asked him to come in, given the precise nature of this incident. Mr Hewlett, this is Doctor Travers and her chaperone, Lieutenant Bishop.’

Peter shook them both by the hand. ‘Pleasure to meet you. I hope we’ll be some help to you.’

‘Thank you, Mr Hewlett. We understand that some casualties occurred in succession yesterday. We were hoping you could elaborate further.’

Doctor Carmen intercepted the invitation to explain. ‘At 6.58am yesterday, a Miss Beth McBride, one of the local lifeguards, dialled 999 to report that a body had washed up on the shore. When the ambulance arrived, they found... something unlike anything they had ever seen before.’ He slowly removed the cloth to reveal the first of the two bodies.

‘My God...’ Bill said.

It was like something excavated from a plague pit. The skeleton was laid out before them, but was barely recognisable as human. Clinging onto the mottled bone, riddled with cracks, was a viscous cloth of crude oil, serving as secondary tissue, although it was now peeling away to reveal the rib cage. Locked inside was a web of black ribbons, protecting a motionless, long-dead heart.

‘From what I ascertained from your commanding officer, I understand you’re familiar with this sort of matter.’ Doctor Carmen then shook his head. ‘Although I dread to think how that might even be possible.’

Anne studied the subject before her. ‘Is it safe?’ Doctor Carmen nodded. ‘Well,’ she began, ‘the bone’s survived, but has been subjected to intense heat, judging by the scorch marks. The flesh has all but burnt away. What does that look like to you?’ she asked Bill, indicating the rib cage.

Cautiously, he approached the slab. ‘A web? Or nerves?’

‘A rudimentary central nervous system,’ Anne agreed. ‘Even facsimiles of specific organs like the heart, complete with arteries and veins, as if it were an imperfect blueprint of a human body. It’s incredible. And obscene.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Doctor Carmen said, ‘we have no means of identifying this poor soul.’

‘I wouldn’t say that.’ Anne had noticed something. Instinctively she took a scalpel from a tray close at hand, and delicately stripped away a section of the oil from the skull, revealing a strip of metal fused to the bone. ‘I thought there was something there. See? A titanium plate in the right side of the jaw. Difficult to determine the exact nature of the initial wound itself. The oil has reduced the body to this state, but it hasn’t affected the metal.’

‘Such operations are common practise,’ Doctor Carmen pointed out.

‘This area’s known for its boxers,’ Bill added.

‘Please,’ Peter interrupted, ‘let Doctor Travers speak.’

Anne continued. ‘But if you look closer, you’ll see that there’s some older fractures in the bone here.’ She then pointed to the hands. ‘And a titanium screw in the left wrist, again preserved against corrosion. Two very specific injuries, both suggestive of manual labour, and two distinct operations. Now, why go to all the trouble if this was some sort of fake? That leads me to consider this a genuine fatality. This body was found on the shore, most likely washed up from the North Sea. And given the most realistic circumstances in which this man could have been contaminated, I’m thinking, Mr Hewlett, if you were to check the records of workers sent out to the rigs in close proximity to this area, and cross-reference the information, you would

probably be able to identify the body. It would take some time, but it would be a start.'

'That was more information than any of us was expecting, Doctor Travers,' Peter said with admiration.

'I'm very quick,' Anne quipped, with a wink. 'Have either of you talked to Miss McBride further?'

'There's nothing more she can tell us,' Doctor Carmen answered bluntly.

Peter smiled sympathetically. 'We've notified her family.'

'But this is why we're really concerned.' Doctor Carmen went over to the second slab and slowly removed the cloth to reveal another body. Anne and Bill exchanged a horrified glance.

The face of a terrified young woman, screaming for her life, was preserved like an impression in the oil coating every inch of her head. Her throat was clotted with petroleum, which Anne knew, deep in her heart, had now flooded the victim's insides and drowned her from within. The pupils, once alive, had fully dilated, all trace of iris consumed by blackness. Her head and upper chest were intact, but her arms and lower body gradually trickled into a molten glass pool that reflected the light of the exposed ceiling lamp.

'Is this...?' Bill began, unable to bring himself to ask for fear of the answer.

'This,' Peter said simply, 'is Beth McBride.' He cleared his throat. 'Right. I'll look into our records and

see if I can find the information that you are after. Could I use the telephone in your office, Doctor Carmen?’ After a civil nod of the head, he was already slipping past them to leave, Doctor Carmen escorting him through the door.

They left Anne and Bill alone with the casualties.

Midnight. A private lab at the sickbay had been put aside, allowing Anne to carry out her work. Bill was asleep in a chair, his handgun placed on the desk beside him. A handful of soldiers from the Corps had been dispatched to the facility. This was his first opportunity to get some rest. After a while, Anne put a cup of tea on the desk and gently brushed his hair to wake him. He smiled to her as a thank you, and she returned to the microscope to concentrate on examining the specimen slides.

‘It’s astonishing,’ she said. ‘Hydrogen and carbon molecules, arranged into a cellular structure.’

‘You don’t think it’s a hoax, then?’ Bill asked, yawning. Anne invited him to peer through the lens to see for himself.

Doctor Carmen came into the room, carrying a file under his arm. ‘Doctor Travers. These are the records that Mr Hewlett sent for. He wanted you to have a look.’

‘Thank you.’ Anne took the file from him to read. ‘His name was Simon Glover, all invasive surgeries we

identified on the body present and correct, manual labourer... retired two years ago? That can't be right.'

Bill turned to Doctor Carmen. 'And that's all the info you were given?'

Doctor Carmen gave a long, hard stare at Bill. 'And that, indeed, is all the "info" I was given. If you'll excuse me. I have work to do.' He left them, forcefully shutting the door behind him.

'Blimey,' was all Bill had to say.

'Long hours,' Anne said. 'It's bound to wear you out.'

'That's one explanation for his mood. Still. We're no closer to working out how Glover ended up on the shore. If it was him.'

'Perhaps.' Anne thought for a moment. 'What did you say in the morgue? How did you describe the oil in the body?'

'A web, I think.'

'Well, that gives me an idea.' She began to write hurriedly on a piece of paper.

Bill waited for her to explain. 'So, what's this notion of yours then?'

'Something back in Lon—'

Screams rang out, cutting Anne off, followed by rapid gunfire. Then, the gunfire died out. Bill took hold of his weapon and motioned for Anne to stay put while he investigated. Naturally, Anne followed him.

*

Two guards had been positioned by the door of the morgue, a precaution implemented by the Corps. When Bill and Anne found them, their bodies and rifles were sprawled across the floor, oil already dressing their wounds and poisoning them from within.

‘Bill. Look.’ Anne indicated the morgue door. It was open. Only Beth McBride’s body was to be found on the slab. Simon Glover’s was gone.

Three soldiers came running to their assistance, responding to the commotion. Bishop addressed them.

‘You lot. Evacuate the building. Then spread out. We have a hostile intruder at liberty.’

They obeyed. Bill turned and looked over his shoulder. Anne was nowhere to be seen.

Anne followed the trail of black imprints left sporadically in the labyrinth of corridors.

At last, she found Glover, or what remained of him, pitifully hanging in the grip of his new skin. Bonding itself to the bone, the oil had forged a semblance of a man, its heart now beating once again. But it was already struggling to retain its form. It moved slowly forward, supported only by the wall. Keeping her distance, Anne followed and observed the creature. Its speech was slurred, as if its vocal chords were loose and unable to compose the words. Whatever it was, it was desperately clawing at its own throat to force the speech to emerge. Then, it came to a door. Somebody

was on the other side. A shadow formed in the window panel, and the creature tentatively planted its palm upon the glass. This seemed to calm it, and the slurred speech gradually slowed into heavy breathing.

Anne was fascinated. It was like a new born recognising another of its own kind, perhaps by mistake but nevertheless reaching out.

The glass cracked and splintered into a web. Bullets pierced Glover's body and dug deep into the bone. Anne lurched away, knocked back by the shock. It only took a few cartridges more to fully unravel the sinew binding the body, and the creature fell. The door opened, and a soldier burst through, just as taken aback by his own action as Anne was. He was not yet addicted to the shot of a gun.

'A-are you all r-right, M-Miss?' he asked.

Before she could answer, the creature made a final lunge for the soldier's throat. His piercing screams rose high into the building, as the last of his life was throttled out of him. Then, both the soldier's and Glover's newly-animated body fell to the ground – dead.

Bill came running to her side, soldiers following in his wake, and he took her by the arm.

'What the hell do you think you were doing? You could have been...'

He stopped himself. Anne broke away from his grasp. She said nothing, as the soldiers trained their guns upon the two bodies.

Doctor Carmen held his head in his hands, Peter Hewlett sitting opposite his desk. Anne watched them both from the sidelines of the office.

The telephone would shrill regularly, Carmen would answer the calls with the same promise, then slam down the receiver and await the next demand for explanations or request for procedure, neither of which he could accurately provide. In between every call, Peter and Carmen would discuss the situation further.

‘I’ve not known anything like this in all my years,’ Carmen confessed, removing his spectacles to rub his eyes. ‘I simply cannot believe it.’

‘I guarantee you’ve made the best decision, Doctor,’ Peter said. ‘We’ll have these bodies contained at Hibernian Oil’s facilities, where their... unique condition can be properly accommodated for. Clearly this is some elaborate hoax at all our expense.’

‘I don’t see how this can be possibly be—’

‘But whatever happens, this sickbay will not be endangered.’

Carmen sighed. Anne could see that he had no choice. ‘Very well, Mr Hewlett. On your own head be it. I can’t deal with this. And I don’t want anybody else here harmed.’

Doctor Carmen glanced from the stack of paperwork to a framed photograph of his wife and children facing him from the desk. ‘I’ve... got some

calls to make, I'm afraid,' he uttered apologetically.

Peter and Anne decided to leave him in peace. Once outside, Peter turned to her.

'Doctor Travers? Could I trouble you for a word in private?'

Anne agreed, and Peter ushered her aside, waiting until a group of soldiers had marched purposefully past and he was convinced they were alone.

'May I ask who you work for? Only – forgive me – the results you wielded back in the morgue, how you did it so quickly, it was quite remarkable.'

Anne considered the implications of her answer. It seemed like a genuine enquiry.

'The Scots Guards. And it was nothing, Mr Hewlett, really.'

'Oh, Peter, please. If I may call you Anne.' He sighed. 'I would like to ask a favour of you. But I wish to assure you that there will be no comeback. No consequences upon you career. If anything, I'd like to help you as best I can. Simon Glover's records. I've discovered that they've been faked. He has in fact been working for Hibernian Oil for at least two weeks now, at Silhouette One.'

'Silhouette One?'

'An offshore oil rig. A very sophisticated one. Like a scalpel, it's capable of scoring the very epidermis of the planet with such precision, not a single drop of oil that bleeds through the wound is left untouched.'

‘Quite a feat,’ Anne observed.

‘Some would consider it a keg of gunpowder in prime position to cause untold environmental scarring. Santa Barbara all over again.’

‘Volatile?’

Peter’s grim expression confirmed her suspicion. ‘My initiative was to launch an investigation. An impromptu inspection to comb Silhouette One for any involvement in this incident, without—’

Anne finished his sentence for him. ‘Without compromising the combing of the oil we need every day. That’s why you don’t want it brought to the attention of Doctor Carmen or anybody else, I presume.’

Peter smiled, admitting defeat on that score. ‘I could file a report, but getting authority could take time. Time we might not have. Now, if you were to accompany me to the rig, we could determine what is happening there. As recompense, I’ll provide more than ample funding for everything you could ever need or ever want.’

‘I’m very flattered by your offer, Peter. And I must confess, I am concerned that something *is* happening.’

‘Would you require your chaperone, Mr Bishop?’

Anne paused. ‘No,’ she said simply.

‘I’m very grateful to you, Doctor. I took the liberty to make arrangements in advance. We leave the port tomorrow at nine.’ Peter thanked her once more and

left her alone in the corridor, the name Silhouette One lodged in her mind.

Bill was waiting outside, leaning against the Land Rover, soldiers positioned around the perimeter of the sickbay. He felt ruffled, annoyed, but he needed to remain calm, to trust Anne and not play the heavy hand. Another officer would assume command, and he would return to Edinburgh.

Anne joined him by the Land Rover. 'I forgot to ask; could you fetch this equipment for me? Once you've had some sleep.'

She held out the note for him to take.

'Yeah. Yeah, of course.'

He took hold of the paper, but she did not yet release it into his custody, their fingertips barely touching.

Then, she walked back to the sickbay, leaving him in the dark, knowing that he had understood.

Sunday morning.

Anne looked out at the sea through the window of the helicopter, tightening her grip upon the cords of the lifejacket. Peter Hewlett sat next to her, his eyes fixed upon the water below. It would not be long before they reached their destination.

She had been anticipating a silent and remote companion, but contrary to her expectations, Peter seemed to relax in her company and they began to talk.

‘My father was considered something of a crackpot,’ Anne ventured. ‘Which I didn’t believe, or want to believe, until his later years.’

The strangeness of it all gradually occurred to Anne as their exchange progressed. She found herself opening up to Peter about the late Professor Edward Travers, although she did not specify the details of non-terrestrial incursions and near-death experiences.

In turn, Peter explained how, despite the long hours and the interminable meetings that came with the job, he had wanted to push the boundaries of scientific comprehension and advance our understanding of how to protect our world. He had wanted to help the industry become more efficient, and had worked his way up the internal hierarchy to do so. He went from being, in his words, ‘the little man to the invisible hand’.

At last, a vast machine, held in position by its compliant tower, loomed into view. Silhouette One. The steel legs dug into the ocean bed, allowing the rig to drink from its submerged chalice and quench its thirst. Spire cranes protruded from the structure, encircling the main derrick at its heart. A city suspended in the sea.

‘Silhouette One, this is Charlie Delta Winston, requesting landing, repeat, requesting landing, over.’

The helicopter touched down. Anne and Peter climbed onto the rig, feeling the paper cut of the cold. Waiting on the deck was a group of four engineers, all

standing to attention like soldiers in their black uniforms. Peter addressed the chief engineer.

‘Apologies for the lack of advance warning,’ he said. ‘We wish to discuss a matter of security. This is Doctor Travers.’

Without another word, Anne and Peter were led through the winding network of gantries and cast-iron bridges. Anne had to force herself to keep a level head. The sea was ruthlessly thrashing against the rig, as if to consume them all.

They passed through the pumping chamber. Anne felt she would be deafened by the reverberating echo of the power station nested within the rig. Behind the wall of noise, the constant hiss made her feel as though she were being followed. The workers within this atrium, drone-like and caked in mud, were the constituent parts of a machine working harmoniously to maintain the stability of the drilled wells. They paid no heed to Anne and Peter’s expedition, and continued to push hard against the swivelling heavy pumps, churning the black gold as if it were the bile in the throat of the ten thousand feet deep wellbore.

But what Anne noticed more than anything else was that the walls of the chamber had been devoted to decorative murals, depicting countless faceless figures emerging from a blackened sea, their hands reaching out. At the sight of them, Anne’s memory of the creature planting its palm upon the glass re-surfaced.

But she kept quiet, as Peter surveyed the operation. Presumably he was content with what he saw.

‘Have a sample sent over to the main laboratory,’ he ordered.

In the control room, two operators were sat at the main desk, absorbing the data read-outs relayed from the bank of computers and the pressure gauges. Anne and Peter went over to the window overlooking the rig. They had a panoramic view of Silhouette One. An emblem of an Albatross was mounted on one of the girders, its sculpted wings stretching out as if to fly, only to remain fixed to its position.

‘Perhaps, Mr Hewlett,’ Anne said, ‘it’ll be worth explaining why we’ve come to Silhouette One.’

‘Of course.’ Peter beckoned to one of the engineers. ‘May I see the new arrival?’

They turned to face the door, as another worker was ushered into the control room. Anne was faced with the terrified young woman whose body she had examined in the morgue.

‘That’s Beth McBride. That’s not... That’s not possible. How can she be alive? How can she be...?’

‘I’m not going to lie to you, Doctor Travers,’ said Peter, ‘but I haven’t told you the whole truth.’

Anne had been waiting for this. She had suspected Peter was hiding something. But she had not expected this.

Beth McBride tilted her head, studying Anne with a degree of fascination. Anne watched, as the pupils of Beth's eyes began to dilate until they consumed the iris and dyed them a permanent black. Spider veins of oil began to materialise on her face, spreading to every face of every operator and engineer in the control room, like a neurotropic virus. Only Peter appeared immune, yet disturbingly emotionless.

Anne ran through the door. She reached the other end of the gantry, and saw that every worker on the rig was now looking at her through oil-dyed eyes. She heard the rotor blades, and knew that the helicopter was abandoning her to Silhouette One.

Peter came to her side.

'Shall we have a moment in private, Doctor?'

And only then did his eyes turn to pools of black.

'I just want to know where she's gone.'

'And I wish I could tell you, Lieutenant.'

Bishop paced round Doctor Carmen's office.

'You say she sent you back to Edinburgh to fetch some equipment,' Carmen surmised.

'And I have it. But why would she...?' Bishop stopped and considered. He retrieved the piece of paper Anne had given him earlier from his pocket, and read it back to himself. He shot an urgent look at Carmen.

'Can I use your phone, Doctor?'

'Of course.'

Bishop dialled frantically, then willed a voice to come through the other end of the receiver.

‘Sir? Bishop here. I have a feeling Anne’s in danger.’

‘What are you exactly? Only I want to know what it is I’m dealing with.’ Anne was afraid, but calm. As a prisoner, all she could do was glean information and buy herself time. She sat opposite Peter. Beth and the engineers were positioned by the doors as guards, the operators resuming their functions. Peter needed a moment to formulate his answer, then spoke freely.

‘I am Peter Hewlett. Or rather the man he would like to have become. He was the first to come into contact with us when he was nothing more than a servant of the establishment. I have since found him a most excellent host, and have acclimatized myself to this fascinating world.’ The words seemed to flow with genuine integrity, but Anne found it difficult to discern their sincerity. He continued. ‘They – the Silhouettes, I like to call them – siphon the oil from their physical form, as a bi-product surplus to our requirements, but one which is of value to you when purified. And since we are capable of replicating at a cellular level...’

Anne realised. ‘A constantly replenishing supply of oil.’

‘You can see, can’t you, how remarkable the benefits would be for your society? We – or rather you – could lower the price of oil without fear of the economy

collapsing. We are your new lifeblood.'

'The American Embassy would probably like to know about this. Mr Hewlett.'

'But consider what this would mean for the dominance of the Middle East. The independence of the UK. A self-sustaining rig, operated by its own power source. The oil, drilling for the oil.'

'And consider the consequences. Lower prices mean a greater consumption of petrol. You'll be devastating the world you want to control.'

'Not unlike human beings then. And I do not wish to "control" your world, as you put it.' He hardened his gaze upon the sea, all the way out to the horizon. Anne detected a sense of longing in him. 'There are more of us, Doctor Travers. Dormant. Patient. Incubating within the wellbore. Waiting for the scalpel of Silhouette One to release us into the light. I only wish for them to rise to the surface. To feel the sun. To thrive, as is their right. Imagine. We could have many more rigs like Silhouette One rolling out over the North Sea, each one a perfect life-support system, providing us with more than just the means to survive. But purpose.'

'Even so, you assume that you have their consent, that this reservoir will never run dry. What do they get in return for their services? Apart from hijacking these peoples' bodies, and hiding from the world.'

'We don't ask for much.'

‘Nevertheless, you ask.’

‘You saw the murals on the walls. What did they remind you of?’

Anne thought for a moment. They had reminded her of something, come to think of it. ‘Cave paintings.’

Peter nodded. ‘Human bodies have proven useful to us. As vessels. They have provided us with a blueprint for survival. In time, the Silhouettes have even been able to forge facsimiles of the internal organs. It helps to have a spare heart when the old one is... broken. But in binding themselves to human physiology, they now want to understand human psychology. Which is why I devised this solution. We are careful only to accept workers onto the rig who will not be missed, whose records I can amend.’

Peter hesitated, but then removed the glove from his right hand, which was now reduced to a charred black mass. At the wrist, the flesh had all but crumbled, exposing the oil-pumping veins. Anne was momentarily repulsed, but then recovered her doctor’s instinct.

‘May I?’ she asked. She examined Peter’s hand more closely, afraid that it might fall apart at the slightest touch. She wasn’t sure why she was showing compassion, but nonetheless she had to look.

‘I do not know exactly how long I have left.’ Peter’s voice was mournful. ‘I had hoped I could fully stabilise my form, just like the others. But I’m something of a

deviant. And I evidently cannot hold back my fate.'

'Because the oil creates a furnace,' Anne realised, taking her hand away from his. 'It burns up the body it inhabits like fuel, leaving only bone. That's what happened to Glover. He was one of the relief crew. I suppose he realised what was going on, and tried to escape.'

'And he did. Just not the way he intended. He fled into one of the supply vessels, but lost control. In more than one sense. By the time he had washed up on the shore, the damage had already been done. Which was when Beth McBride was unfortunate enough to come to his assistance.'

Anne looked across at Beth, devoid of emotion and rooted to the spot. She could not discern how much of the original woman remained.

Peter anticipated the question forming in Anne's mind. 'She was able to retain Miss McBride's external appearance and preserve it, if only temporarily. It's her means of, shall we say, a memorial.'

'Wearing a dead woman's face?' Anne turned to Beth. 'Miss McBride? Beth? Can you hear me? Can you understand me?' Beth tilted her head once more to look at Anne directly, her eyes presumably as blank as her mind. Anne kept trying. 'Do you happen to remember the morgue? Me, Bill and Doctor Carmen?'

Beth's lips parted slightly as if to answer. Peter prevented her.

‘They want to be like you, but that is precisely why it is important that they remain here. Where it’s safe for them and for you. You’ve seen the havoc that occurs when they are at liberty outside of the rig. That is why I have done everything I can to contain this situation.’

‘By unleashing that creature in the morgue?’

‘I took advantage of the resource Glover’s body left behind. Simple enough to temporarily instil life into the Silhouette before you arrived. But I knew that would only buy us a little more time to move Miss McBride to the rig. And you were able to identify Glover’s body in a matter of minutes. I was not anticipating *you*, Doctor Travers.’

‘So you’re going to have to kill me.’

‘Of course not. You would be missed. There would be an investigation. And murdering you was never my intent, Anne, I promise you. Just as I did not murder the people who came to the rig and whose bodies were taken. That was a necessity. Whatever you may think of me, I am not without conscience.’ Peter leaned in closer. ‘You have not yet reported back to your paymasters. If you had, it would only have been a matter of time before Silhouette One was investigated. That opened a window to...’

Anne finished his sentence for him again. ‘To buy my silence.’

‘I need your help, Anne. The Silhouettes, they...

they are all I have in the world. I have devoted my fortune to ensuring their survival. Except that may not be enough. And this could endanger everything I have ever worked for. All I have ever *cared* for. But as I said before, your name would not be linked to operations here at Silhouette One. You could work for me. Help me, even. A laboratory is available here at the rig. We could cultivate the Silhouettes together. In return, anything you desire could be yours. I have the Holy Grail in the palm of my hand, and I am offering it to you.' He held out the decayed hand as proof of his claim.

'You're serious, aren't you?'

'We could form a good partnership, Anne. And I am in need of a successor.'

'So the rig remains a morgue? You keep sending people here to have their bodies used as fuel. That just keeps going on and on, does it?'

'We could investigate the possibility of a more humane solution. Failing that, we continue as normal. But I need an answer.'

'I don't believe any one has the right to decide who lives and who doesn't, Hewlett.'

'Even in death, they'd be giving us a chance to breathe!' Peter snapped. He rose from his seat, indignant. 'That's more purpose than they could have dreamed of in their fleeting, fragile lifespans. Consider what I have done in Peter Hewlett's place. Look at

what I have achieved.’ He prowled the control room, regarding Beth and the other workers, silent and still, as his trophies. ‘At least when I die, I’ll have an obituary worth reading.’ He paused. ‘I shall need an answer, Doctor Travers. It’s your choice.’

‘I’m not going to lie to you, Mr Hewlett,’ said Anne. ‘But I haven’t told you the whole truth.’

Her voice was now drowned out by the sound of rotor blades cutting through the air. Peter looked out at the sky and saw three helicopters circling the rig from above, then looked at Anne, enraged.

‘Before we left, I gave Bill a note and asked him to fetch some equipment for me. I also added a name. Silhouette One. I trusted that he would understand. I didn’t want to walk into this without some help.’

‘Very well, Doctor Travers,’ Peter said decisively. ‘Since you leave me no choice...’

He marshalled Anne onto the platform and out into the icy open, Beth and the engineers following in their path. They surveyed the assault force overhead, buffered by the wind, only just holding their position. In unison, every worker abandoned their duties and swarmed to the main derrick. Anne watched as the drones planted their palms upon the metal outer casing of its base. They remained silent as the rig violently shifted. Before Anne could determine what was happening, oil blossomed within the rig and sculpted itself into a venomous serpent, using the derrick as its

spine. It rose higher and higher, a consciously-controlled tidal wave of blackness defying gravity itself. It was alive.

The helicopters pulled back to escape the predatory reach of the oil. Peter was satisfied by this demonstration of defence and gleeful at witnessing the fear the Silhouettes instilled in these human beings' beating, bloody hearts. The semblance of a smile cracked across his face, and like the surface of glass, splintered into shards and spread to each and every Silhouette, except that of Beth, who did not move.

Anne edged away from Peter. A lone supply vessel was now approaching Silhouette One, unobserved in the midst of the chaos. On board was Bill and a squad of soldiers from the Corps. Once the boat reached the belly of the rig, Bill took hold of the ladder, carrying his precious cargo. The sea did its worst, but Bill held on for dear life, clambering ever upwards.

'I didn't think you'd come,' she said, helping him up.

'Well, I've always wanted to be Captain Pugwash. And I had to make sure you were safe.'

She and Bill broke out into broad grins, and set up the device on the platform.

'May I enquire as to what this is supposed to be, Doctor Travers?' Peter's attention was now focused upon them.

'It's something I designed a while back,' Anne

explained. 'I wish I had a better name for it, but it's always been referred to as a web destructor. And if I'm right, Mr Hewlett, it will be equally effective against you.'

At the flick of a switch, the device pulsed into life. Nothing happened. Anne looked at the web destructor in disbelief, then at Bill, perhaps hoping he would offer the answer. But he couldn't. Peter advanced, just slowly enough to allow the scale of their failure to truly register.

'I think you're only embarrassing the memory of your father more than is necessary, Anne. Time to find some peace with him.'

An unimaginable pain seared through Peter's spine. Beth gripped him by the throat from behind. His eyes shot open, as he felt immense pressure exerted upon his neck. Beth slammed him against the barriers and held him like a ragdoll over the very edge of the rig and above the sea, as it dashed against the steel totems holding the rig into position. Anne and Bill could only watch, powerless. 'What are you doing?' Peter screamed. He writhed, fought back, but could not escape her vice-like grip. 'You can't survive without me. Let go of me! I order you to let go of me!' His rage only served to kindle and feed the flame within her. His skin became brittle, and began to fall apart in Beth's grasp.

All Peter had ever wanted was to experience life. To

feel a breeze upon his skin and to taste the salt air in his throat and to live under the sun. Now was the time to complete the experience. His body succumbed to the pain completely. In that moment, Peter Hewlett's flesh was cremated, and the ashes scattered by the cruel wind of the North Sea. The exposed Silhouette instantly died from the trauma of losing its vessel, and turned to droplets that fell into the sea through the gaps between Beth's fingers. They disappeared beneath the waves. Gone.

Anne and Bill held onto each other, as the oil continued to pump out of the rig. But sensing that Peter had gone, the drones turned and marched towards their prey.

'Beth,' Anne called out, 'it's up to you now. Your choice.'

Beth looked at the web destructor, then at the Silhouettes, then at Anne and Bill. A vague memory of the couple in the morgue, and how they recoiled from her in horror, now came flooding back. But in fear, they embraced each other. Beth could never have a life like that. Not anymore.

So she decided, and reached out her hand. Ribbons of oily black fled her fingertips and bonded to the device like biological circuits. Now the connection was complete, the web destructor could do its work. Beth activated it, and the sonic scream of the device hammered through the heads of the workers. The

Silhouettes abandoned their hosts, leaving the bodies to crumble. Even the serpent of black that towered above them was not immune, and retreated into the wellbore, desperate to escape the pain induced by the web destructor. The rig was now unstable. The sheer mass of the draining oil was pulling it apart.

‘Into the boat!’ Bill shouted.

But Anne would not leave. She called out to the lone figure standing on the rig, but it was no use. Beth McBride remained anchored to the deck, looking out to the sea, waiting for it to take her. She turned her head and calmly smiled at Anne, thanking her.

Bill had to seize Anne by the hand. They scrambled down the ladder and into the boat. The crew immediately set to work escaping the shadow cast by the sinking rig.

At a distance, Anne and Bill watched as Silhouette One was swallowed hungrily by the sea, the waves smashing against their vessel.

‘Not a drop,’ Bill said. ‘Not a drop of oil spilled into the ocean.’

‘They must have fled into the wellbore. No one will know what happened. No one will know about her.’

Then, the boat sped on, until the debris left nothing more than ripples tinged by the sun.

Anne Travers was late for a drink, but it wasn’t the end of the world.

It had been another long week. She had filed a report for Douglas. He had voiced his disagreement with her decision to go to Silhouette One alone and put herself and her colleagues in danger. Nonetheless, he had thanked her personally, conceding that without her, Hewlett would have had ample time to conceal his operation.

After that, Doctor Carmen had helped her to contact Beth McBride's family, so that she might offer her condolences. It was, she felt, the very least she could do, given that they would never know about her sacrifice.

Tonight – Friday 6th March – was to be the second attempt at the first official date with Bill Bishop. Although this one would be different.

They met at the entrance of the Royal Botanical Gardens. He had bought a flask of tea for them both, remembering that the Babycham had not proven too popular. For a time, they simply wandered along the snaking pathways of the hothouse, past the bejewelled ferns and the stone walls drenched in phosphorescence.

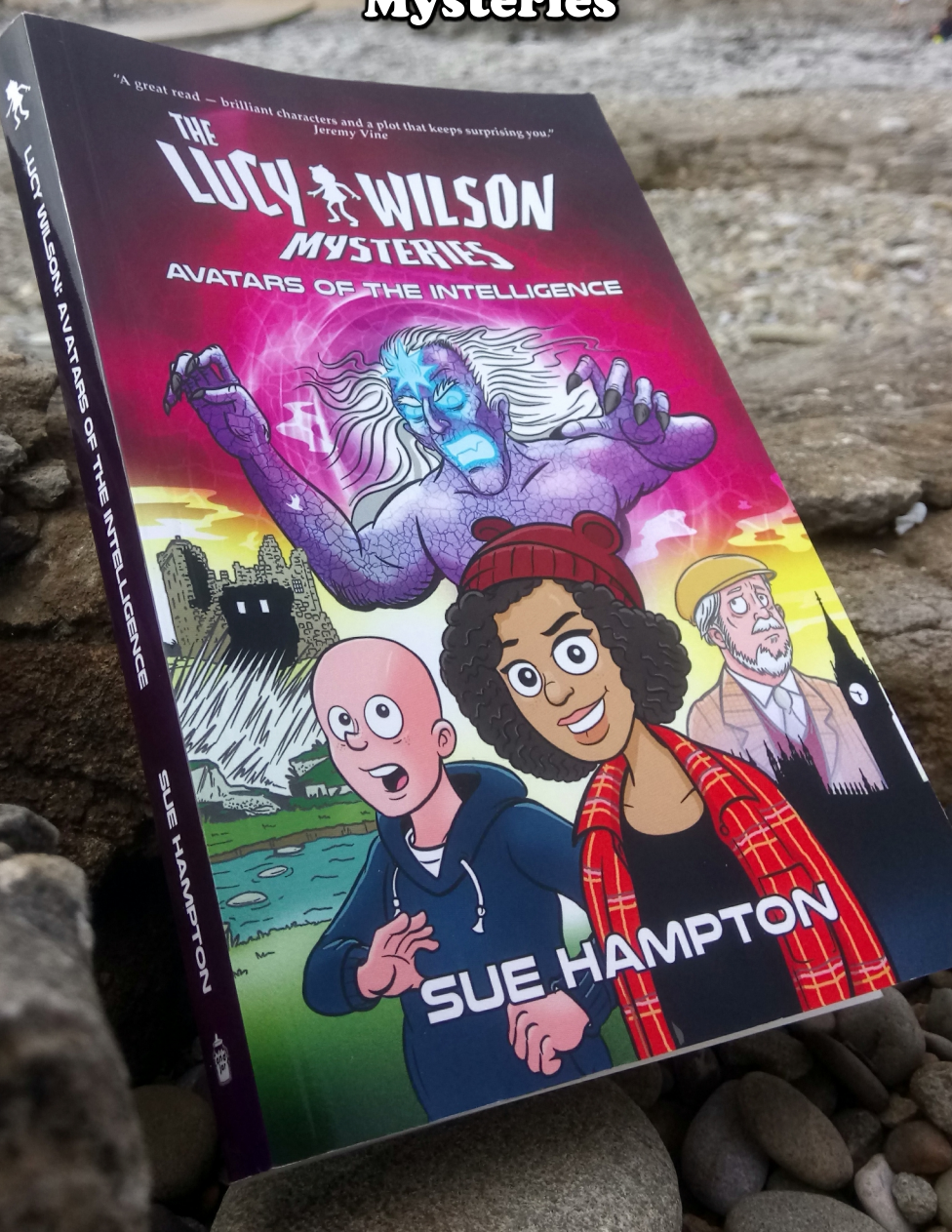
Anne was once more thinking about her father, although somehow the memory was not as hard to bear as it had been before. She would have to prepare herself for the funeral. Perhaps it was time to finally talk to her brother.

She looked at Bill and smiled. He returned the smile and they turned their heads up at the night through the

glass roof, the stars fully formed in the petri dish of the universe. It was, to the ordinary mind, a peaceful end to another day. To those who knew more, it was a smokescreen, beyond which lay countless constellations harbouring sacred worlds and galaxies as rich as stained glass. In the botanical gardens, only Anne and Bill knew of the horrors and wonders that were waiting out there. But they could wait tonight.

At last, they took hold of one another's hand.

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: THE FORGOTTEN SON
by Andy Frankham-Allen

For Colonel Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart his life in the Scots Guards was straightforward enough; rising in the ranks through nineteen years of military service. But then his regiment was assigned to help combat the Yeti incursion in London, the robotic soldiers of an alien entity known as the Great Intelligence. For Lethbridge-Stewart, life would never be the same again.

Meanwhile in the small Cornish village of Bledoe a man is haunted by the memory of an accident thirty years old. The Hollow Man of Remington Manor seems to have woken once more. And in Coleshill, Buckinghamshire, Mary Gore is plagued by the voice of a small boy, calling her home.

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by David A McIntee

Lethbridge-Stewart was supposed to be in the mountains of the east, but things didn't quite go according to plan. On the eve of war, something appeared in the sky; a presence that blotted out the moon. Now it has returned, and no battle plan can survive first contact with this enemy.

Why do the ghosts of fallen soldiers still fight long-forgotten battles against living men? What is the secret of the rural English town of Deepdene? Lethbridge-Stewart has good reason to doubt his own sanity, but is he suffering illness or injury, or is something more sinister going on?

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What connects a shooting star, ghosts of men killed in 1902 and the beast that roamed Fang Rock in 1823? Lethbridge-Stewart and Anne Travers are about to discover the answer first hand...

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by Nick Walters

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It's the summer of '69. Flower power is at its height, and nuclear power is in its infancy. Journalist Harold Chorley is out of work, and Colonel Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart is out of sorts. Dominex Industries are on the up, promising cheap energy for all. But people have started going missing near their plant on Dartmoor. Coincidence, or are sinister forces at work?

Join Lethbridge-Stewart and uneasy ally Harold Chorley as they delve into the secrets behind Dominex, and uncover a plan that could bring about the end of the world.

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: MOON BLINK

by Sadie Miller

July 1969, and mankind is on the Moon. Both the United States and Soviet Russia have lunar bases, and both are in trouble.

Back on Earth, Anne Travers has learned she is about to be visited by an old friend from America, Doctor Patricia Richards. Lance Corporal Bill Bishop is aware of the visit, and is on hand to meet Richards.

She brings with her a surprise, one which the Americans and Russians wish to get their hands on. But the only man who can truly help Anne, Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart, is away in Scotland.

It's a game of cat and mouse, as Anne and Bishop seek to protect the life of an innocent baby – one that holds the secrets to life on the Moon.

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: THE SHOWSTOPPERS

by Jonathan Cooper

‘Nuzzink in ze vorld can schtop me now!’

There’s a new TV show about to hit the airwaves, but Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart won’t be tuning in. With the future of the Fifth Operational Corps in doubt he’s got enough to worry about, but a plea from an old friend soon finds Lethbridge-Stewart and Anne Travers embroiled in a plot far more fantastical than anything on the small screen.

Can charismatic star Aubrey Mondegreene really be in two places at the same time? What lengths will ailing entertainment mogul Billy Lovac go to in order to reach his audience? And is luckless journalist Harold Chorley really so desperate that he’ll buy into a story about Nazi conspiracies from a tramp wearing a tin foil hat?

There’s something very rotten at the heart of weekend television, and it isn’t all due to shoddy scripts and bad special effects.

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INFESTATION**

by John Peel

The late 1960s and pirate radio is at its height.

Something stirs in the depths of the North Sea, and for Radio Crossbones that means bad news.

Lethbridge-Stewart and his newly assembled Fifth Operational Corps are called in to investigate after the pirate radio station is mysteriously taken off the air, and a nuclear submarine is lost with all hands.

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by Rick Cross

When Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, his fiancée Sally Wright and nephew Owain Vine embark on a much-needed holiday in New York City, the last thing they expect to find is a puzzling mystery involving coma patients, a stranger from a distant land and a dark menace lurking in the bowels of the city's labyrinthine subway system.

Before long, they're battling an ancient evil pursuing a deadly campaign of terror that could bring Manhattan under its control... and the world to its knees.

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: BLOOD OF ATLANTIS

by Simon A Forward

Could Atlantis really have arisen in the Aegean Sea?

Lethbridge-Stewart's nephew, Owain Vine, and a group of eco-protestor friends, are attempting to oppose an operation undertaken by Rolph Vorster, a ruthless South African mining magnate with his own private army, who is out to harvest as much Atlantean riches as he can.

Lethbridge-Stewart, along with Anne Travers, is called in to investigate a missing Russian submarine that appears to be connected to Atlantis, recruiting the colourful eccentric archaeologist, Sonia Montilla, along the way. All the while, Captain Bugayev and an undercover Spetsnaz team are investigating the fate of their government's missing submarine. A complication that could light a major fuse on the Cold War.

Meanwhile, Atlantis grows, and its reach is utterly inimical to human life.

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: MIND OF STONE

by Iain McLaughlin

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart has been remanded to Woodworms Scrubs Prison, and his team have no idea why. Secrecy surrounds his case, but his team barely have a chance to process anything before they are sent on a mission to Egypt.

Why does it seem like Lethbridge-Stewart is going out of his way to court trouble from the prison's most notorious inmates? And what does it have to do with well-known gangster Hugh Godfrey?

In the Ptolemaic Museum of Cairo, Anne Travers and her team are trying to uncover the mystery surrounding some very unusual stone statues.

One thing connects these events; the cargo transported by Colonel Pemberton and Captain Knight in August 1968.

ISBN: 978-0-9954821-5-9

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: NIGHT OF THE INTELLIGENCE

by Andy Frankham-Allen

Three men feel the pull of the Great Intelligence.

One; Professor Edward Travers, who was once possessed by it, plans to return to the Det-Sen Monastery to clear his mind of the Intelligence once and for all. But he never makes it. The Vault want him, but an old friend is waiting in the wings to help.

Two; Owain Vine, who carries the seed of the Intelligence within, is in Japan on a pilgrimage to cleanse himself of the taint he feels in his soul. Soon a happy reunion takes place, and Owain learns that past friendships are not what they seemed.

Three; Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, who finds himself haunted by the spectre of his brother, James, who refuses to stay dead.

The stage is set for the long, dark night of the Intelligence.

ISBN: 978-0-9957436-3-2

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: THE DAUGHTERS OF EARTH

by Sarah Groenewegen

To celebrate Lethbridge-Stewart's birthday, a romantic weekend is planned for him and Sally in a remote cottage in the Scottish Highlands. Unfortunately for Sally, freak weather causes her to crash her car.

Lethbridge-Stewart, meanwhile, is in Cairngorm investigating UFO sightings.

Elsewhere, the Daughters of Earth, a women-only peace movement, are making waves in the political world, but just who is their enigmatic leader? And what links the Daughters with the events of Cairngorm and Sally's accident?

ISBN: 978-0-9957436-4-9

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LETHBRIDGE-STEWART: THE DREAMER'S LAMENT

by Benjamin-Burford Jones

While visiting his mother, Lethbridge-Stewart is a little perturbed when Harold Chorley calls to ask for his help. A train from Bristol has gone missing, and Chorley is convinced it has something to do with the Keynsham Triangle, where over fifty people have vanished without trace since the early 1800s.

Elsewhere, Anne Travers is coming to terms with a loss in her family, and sets about preparing for a funeral. However, news reaches her that both Lethbridge-Stewart and Chorley have gone missing, and her help is required to find them. And, hopefully, solve the mystery of the Keynsham Triangle.

What connects the missing train to the Triangle, what has it got to do with a Wren from the 1940s, and just why does it appear that Lethbridge-Stewart and Chorley are in the village of Keynsham in 1815?

ISBN: 978-0-9957436-5-6