

Nothing Returns

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This book is written in UK English and has been edited/proofread according to UK grammatical rules, which differ a little from US spelling and grammar conventions.



Chapter 1

Stone.

Flames shivered inside the orange stone, illuminating flecks of black sediment—halted in place as the magma had cooled and taken solid form. It was as if a thousand tiny souls, descending into a fiery core, had been frozen in a terrible moment of anticipation—forever awaiting their judgment. The light of the oil lamp blazed through the rough gemstone as it sat in Thomas Claypole’s palm. The skin around his fingernails looked scratched and reddened—indication that the nails had had to be brushed thoroughly in order to present a clean, properly maintained appearance. A great deal of dirt had been removed.

Crosswick had spotted numerous details of the man’s attire that told the same story; carefully repaired holes in an expensive jacket and waistcoat—clothes that would not have been worn into such a condition by someone who could comfortably afford to own them.

Lewis Crosswick was the wrong person for this man to try to deceive—to try to pass himself off as wealthier and more successful than he was. Crosswick knew every trick and was revolted by all of them. He had a finely calibrated eye for fraudulent nobility—sensing it as though it were an irritant, like a sufferer of hay fever sensed invisible particles on the wind.

‘After all, this is not an age when time, money, and manpower should be wasted digging for deposits that may, or may *not* be, where we had hoped,’ Claypole said, his words encased in a constructed assertiveness—betrayed by the slight tremor of the voice and the refusal to look around the room, the refusal to look at John

Rudge—Crosswick's foreman—and the other large men standing at the door with him. Betrayed by the details. He had been calling for a few days, always at inconvenient times. There had been others, but this one had been most insistent.

'The seeing stone of Tanganyika will allow you to direct your efforts toward fruitful endeavours—sites that are *guaranteed* to hold great riches!' Claypole eagerly explained.

'I'm to understand that you can use the gem to see if there is gold below the surface?' Crosswick asked.

'I can. As well as other precious deposits, such as diamonds, aluminium, copper, and so forth.'

'With what degree of clarity?'

'As clearly as you see me sitting here before you,' Claypole said, ending the statement with a satisfied nod.

'And you can demonstrate this... this *seeing stone's* properties? I can look through it and into the ground myself?'

Claypole attempted to engage Crosswick in a piercing stare. 'Sir, you would see only the gem itself. It takes years of study and practice in the long forgotten mystic arts of the Bantu peoples in order to harness the seeing stone's power.'

Crosswick tilted his head back, signalling that he understood. 'Techniques that *you* have mastered...'

'This is the very reason that I am offering my services, rather than the sale or lease of the stone,' Claypole said, sounding pleased, knocking on the desk with his knuckles. 'It would be useless to you!'

'I see,' Crosswick murmured, leaning back in his chair.

'Now, with regards to the matter of my fee...' Claypole began.

Crosswick smiled, faintly, but his eyes remained blank and dispassionate, as Claypole continued, 'Which is, after all, a sum that must be weighed next to the cost of exploratory digs, and a man in your position does not need *me* to elaborate on the time and money required for those, often fruitless, ventures. And when you consider the return on investment that you can expect when your mining concerns are directed with perfect accuracy...never having to blunt another pickaxe or shovel in vain...'

Crosswick glanced over at Rudge who was staring at the back of Claypole's head.

'The sum of four hundred pounds, I think you will agree, is quite reasonable,' Claypole finished.

Crosswick said nothing, holding a shallow breath while he looked at the man across the desk from him, clutching his orange gemstone. He then took a Partagás cigar, from a box on his desk, and lit it with a match. The tobacco leaves crackled in the silence as he drew a quantity of the smoke into his mouth. He did not offer one to Claypole.

'If what you say is true, you would surely favour a share of the *yield* over the paltry fee you've requested?' Crosswick said.

'A fee is all that I would—'

'Let us say... *one fifth* of everything that we find with your stone. One fifth of a goldmine is worth a great deal more than four hundred pounds.'

Claypole looked faintly strangled, as an assortment of competing lies tried to force their way out through his throat simultaneously. But before he could speak, Crosswick stopped him with a raised finger. 'However, if we dig and find nothing, you would be liable for the cost of the excavation, and contracts would be signed to that effect.'

'N-No, that wouldn't—' Claypole stammered.

'Come now, you should have no fear of such an arrangement if the stone functions as you say.'

'Mr Crosswick, you must understand that we are dealing with mystic forces, as yet unexplained by modern science, which are temperamental in nature. As a result, the seeing stone's reliability cannot be *completely* guaranteed. And my studies have left me a man of humble means—certainly unable to enter into such a—' Claypole's blathering came to a sudden halt as he became aware of Rudge and his two pitmen moving to position themselves around him—big men, with gnarled wood for skin, and thick powerful forearms bursting out of their grimy rolled-up shirt sleeves.

After glancing to the left and right of his chair, Claypole turned his eyes back to Crosswick. He offered a pleading look, then lowered his head, staring down at the gemstone—it had rolled out of his hand and onto the desk. He slowly reached for it.

'Leave your rock behind,' Crosswick said. 'These huts can become frightfully draughty when the wind picks up... I've been in need of a paperweight for some time.'

Claypole withdrew his hand and cautiously stood up. Sharpened eyes glared out from the shadows beneath cap peaks, as the men around him snarled like dogs hoping to be loosed on the wretched fellow. Exactly why they appeared to have taken this character's chicanery so personally, Crosswick wasn't certain, but he felt all the better for it. And, as Claypole made for the door, flanked by Rudge and the other pitmen, Crosswick called after him, 'And if I catch you around here again, trying to defraud my men with your elixirs and your charmed twigs, a magic seeing stone will be required to discover where *you* are buried.'

Chapter 2

Smoke.

Crosswick and Rudge walked across the site, toward the hoist house, to find out why the drilling had, once more, been halted.

'If any more of those Charlatans come tapping at the gate, please inform them that we are *trying* to run an excavation!' Crosswick said, irritably. 'In fact, have a few of the bigger men interpret that instruction as they see fit.'

'I'll do just that,' Rudge replied.

'And pass my thanks on to those two fellows for their help with that one, won't you?' Crosswick said.

‘I think they were more than happy to lend a hand. The lads don’t appreciate people upsetting things with magic spells, and the like. That sort of thing is best left alone,’ Rudge explained.

‘And being relieved of their coin by a con man?’

‘They don’t appreciate that either.’

As they passed the last in a line of huts and storage sheds, the hoist house came into view. From inside, the large spoked pulley wheel could be heard grinding and screeching as it turned. Crosswick saw clouds of black smoke blowing from chimneys on the roof of the tall, slender building—chimneys that were connected to the exhaust hoses from the drilling engine. ‘This does not look promising,’ he sighed.

‘She started with a few loud knocks when they fired her up this morning, and she’s been acting up ever since,’ Rudge said.

‘When did they last recalibrate?’ Crosswick asked.

‘You’ll have to speak to Charlie. He’s on his way up.’

Crosswick tipped his hat to a man holding a double-barrelled shotgun, who he had posted on the entrance of the hoist house. There had been reports of shadowy figures lurking around the nearby forest, watching the site after dark. Most likely locals from the town—up to no good. It was possible that they were taking the measure of the night watchmen, weighing up their chances of getting away with stealing from the site. After a series of unexplained engine breakdowns, Crosswick was more concerned with sabotage, though he couldn’t fathom why anyone would travel all the way out here just to delay his excavation.

Inside the hoist house, soot and steam from the drilling engine was billowing from hoses that snaked out of the production shaft. Alf—the hoistman—a man whose head looked like it had been flattened by a heavy object, the middle three inches of his face squashed into a series of creases, was blowing out a comparable amount of smoke from a clay pipe. He was leaning against one of the four iron beams supporting the headframe, which stood over the mineshaft. The headframe held a pulley wheel, which directed a length of wrought iron wire rope from the cage to the spindle apparatus in the engine house. The sounds of this clanking mechanism, and the irregular screeching of the wheel, interspersed dull rumblings and the hissing of exhaust gasses from below.

‘Mornin’, Mr Crosswick,’ Alf said.

‘Alf,’ Crosswick nodded. ‘Doesn’t look at all promising, does it?’ He said, pointing up at the smoke.

Alf grimaced—what vague facial features there were, were completely swallowed by wrinkles of leathery soot-dusted skin. He then said something unintelligible. ‘Started her up,’ was all that Crosswick caught—he still hadn’t adjusted his ear to some of the men with thicker accents.

The strained look on Crosswick’s face must have alerted Rudge to the trouble he was having, and he translated, ‘He said she’s been bellowing out shite since they started her back up.’

‘Oh, yes. I see,’ Crosswick said.

The cage came scraping out of the mineshaft, and clattered to a stop. Alf dragged open the folding metal gate, and Charlie—one of the drill maintenance engineers—stepped out. He was wearing a dust-covered shirt with a set of

dungarees, and a breathing apparatus consisting of a spring clamp pinching his nostrils shut, and a brass mouthpiece, with two corrugated rubber tubes connected to air tanks that were strapped to his back. He also wore a pair of brass-rimmed eye protectors.

He removed the mouthpiece and said, 'She's been giving us hell all morning, Mr Crosswick.' The nose clamp gave his voice a whining nasal quality.

'For heaven's sake! Take that contraption off your face!' Crosswick barked.

'Sorry, Mr Crosswick.' Charlie pulled the clamp off his nose, and slid the eye protectors down around his neck. 'I said, she's been giving us hell all morning. There's too much steam going through the inlet valves. I've set the regulator, but the power surges are too much for it to handle. There's air getting into the boiler from somewhere, and the firebox too, looks like. It's flaming out the sides like a burning barn!'

Crosswick flashed his teeth. 'Are you telling me that I need to go down there myself, despite employing the services of *four* engineers?'

Charlie shook his head. 'We're in the middle of checking the blast pipe. I reckon we might have a partial blockage that's sending exhaust gas back into the engine. We'll at least have an idea of what's going wrong, hopefully a solution, within the hour.'

Crosswick's attention became divided as his eye was drawn to the cage, and he found himself imagining the pit that it was suspended above, and the steam rising from a subterranean world that they had carved out. Ancient layers passed through, exposing a place that men had never been. He suddenly became conscious of Charlie waiting for an answer. 'See that you do,' he murmured.

Crosswick and Rudge left the hoist house, and made their way back to the huts.

'A great deal more initiative needs to be shown,' Crosswick said, as they walked briskly across the site. 'Apart from anything else, these delays are letting the men down. Time and time again, we have hard workers standing idle due to engine failure! If this excavation falls behind schedule, the blame will fall squarely with the engineers!'

Rudge seemed to roll this idea around his head for a while, before saying, 'At least with Charlie, you can credit him with coming up and facing the shot and shell... while the others hide down the pit. He's always the one who takes responsibility.'

Crosswick snorted. 'As far as I'm concerned, that merely demonstrates that the man is politically dim-witted and will never get anywhere in life. But the fact is; he knows more about engineering than the other three *combined*... so I put up with him.'

Chapter 3

Ink.

Crosswick approached the hut that he used as an office. Treading on boards that had been laid over the mud, his clean leather shoes skimmed the edges of the

sludge. In places he almost lost his footing—the boards acted as a bridge across the mud for the slugs and snails at night, and the wood was criss-crossed with slippery, metallic trails.

In the makeshift office, Crosswick went straight to a pile of papers on his large oak desk. He snatched a letter from his wife, Charlotte, from the top of the pile—he had postponed reading it in order to meet with that charlatan. Taking an ornately flourished silver letter opener, he carefully sliced the envelope. A faint scent of their home escaped from the tear, but when he took a deeper breath, to savour it, the damp, earthy smell of the hut had consumed all trace.

He slid out the custard-hued paper, and carefully unfolded it. As he looked over the letter he realised that, before arriving in this place, he had never seen her handwriting. The characters were low and rounded, and she dotted her *i*'s and *j*'s with little dashes. Even here, apart, there were things he could learn about her, pieces he could imbibe and make a part of himself.

He read, 'My darling Lewis, I trust this letter finds you in the best of health, good spirits, and invigorated by the fire of your determination, which you so much enjoy and thrive on. I hope your work remains fulfilling and continues to progress as you would wish it to. I cannot express how proud I am of you, and I'm confident that you will write to me soon with news of your success. I must confess, however, that a part of my desire to hear of a fortunate outcome derives not from the financial security it will afford us, nor from the much deserved satisfaction that I know you will gain, but, selfishly, from a longing to have you return to me, never to be taken away again...'

They had been married just two weeks, when Crosswick had been tasked with conducting this excavation. He had left her sweet smelling skin. He had left the ringlets of her hair that spilled from her pillow onto his, above the layers of cotton sheet and the woollen blankets, under which he would reach for her as he woke, pulling her close to him. He had left the warmth of their fireplace, where they would sit together, naked, exploring the novelty and the thrill of each other's touch.

In a carriage, laden with his belongings and equipment, he had come here, where he would dig and scrape a future out of the ground for them, for their children. His son would have a better start than he'd been given—he would see to that. As Crosswick had travelled north, the green rolling fields of the south had gradually wilted—giving way to deathly yellow grasses, and the windswept crags of the northern countryside. Adamantly grey skies loomed over landscapes bristling with bayonets of rock. The sides of hills were stripped bare by the gales, exposing layers of sharp slate just below the thin crust of topsoil. Golden corn fields stopped appearing in his carriage window, and were replaced with rugged, mountainous sheep country.

Along the way, he had seen black smudges above the chimneys of distant cities—he didn't know which cities they were. And on the freezing cold day he had arrived, rather than going straight to the cottage arranged for him, he had first visited the drilling site. Telling the exhausted carriage driver to wait for him on the narrow dirt track, he had walked up a gradual hill, following a hand-drawn map that he had prepared before leaving.

The wind had suddenly blasted him as he reached the stacked rock formations at the crest of the gradient. Sharp little fragments of hail needled the skin of his face and hands. He had taken a hammer from a leather tool bag and driven an iron claim marker into the granite—a crack forking out from the spike betrayed the vulnerability of this seemingly indomitable rock. All of the wind, and the rain, and the seismological shifting of the ages, had failed to grind it down. But he would triumph where the elements had failed.

He had written to Charlotte that day, as soon as he had arrived at the cottage, to tell her that all of his fears and misgivings were unfounded. Now that he was here, he knew that he could achieve what he had set out to do. Crosswick sat for a moment, remembering the feeling that he had had that day; doing everything he could to inhabit the body and spirit of that man. Then, taking a leaf of paper from a box in the desk draw and plucking his pen from its holder, he dipped the nib into a brass, Rococo inkwell, and began writing. ‘My dearest Charlotte—’

There was a knock at the door. Crosswick sighed, and then placed the pen back into its holder. ‘Yes?’ he called out.

Rudge clomped into the hut—his face now blackened and his mud-covered boots leaving a thick trail of sludge behind him. ‘She’s all sorted out. Moving at a fair rate now,’ he announced.

‘Was it the blast pipe?’ Crosswick asked.

‘Charlie said it’s still a mystery—just started running properly on its own.’

‘Crosswick clicked his tongue against his teeth as he thought. ‘If we don’t know why it started... it could stop again for similarly mysterious reasons.’ He considered this for a moment, and then said, ‘Have the engineers look into the cause of the problem after drilling has stopped.’

‘They won’t be happy about having to work after hours again,’ Rudge warned.

‘I’m afraid it can’t be helped. We’ll never reach the target depth on time if the engine continues to perform as unreliably as it has.’

‘I’ll let them know how important it is,’ Rudge said.

Crosswick nodded, satisfied, but then his brow tightened as Rudge’s words sunk in. ‘Been bellyaching, have they?’ he asked.

‘Only a touch more than usual,’ Rudge said.

‘And the rest of the men?’

‘About the same.’

‘Hmm,’ Crosswick pondered. ‘Perhaps I should have a talk with them...to check on their morale and to discuss any problems they may have...’

Rudge’s cheek bunched up against a squinted eye. ‘I wouldn’t get them thinking of reasons to complain. We should probably just leave well enough alone.’

‘We should, should we?’ Crosswick said. ‘Well, I’ll follow your advice—you seem to have the temperature of the situation.’

Crosswick had realised that the men weren’t used to his methods or his style of leadership. They instantly assumed they’d done something wrong if he asked how they were getting along. Perhaps Rudge was trying to spare them this discomfort. He’d shelve the matter...for the moment.

‘Now, what progress can we expect from the day?’ Crosswick asked.

‘If our luck holds, I reckon we’ll get another eight feet before we knock off.’

‘Then please make sure our luck holds.’

Rudge smiled. 'I'll make sure the lads' minds are on the job, for the luck you'll have to appeal to a higher power.'

When Rudge had left the office, Crosswick studied the progress chart, pinned on the wall behind his desk, that showed a graph of the time they had left and the number of feet that had yet to be drilled. Beige coloured paper, marked with lines of green and red ink. With his fingers, he spanned out the estimated progress for the day. The height of the line increased, but the end of the day took him across to the next column—another day closer to the deadline.

Chapter 4

Gas.

The drilling engine ran for just over two hours before another unexplained mechanical breakdown occurred. The engineers were at a loss. It was a further two hours before it ran again—functioning properly for the rest of the shift. The random nature of the breakdowns was fuelling the men's already superstitious nature. Fred Dartle—one of the engineers—had, with complete sincerity, put forward the theory that saying the word 'bugger' in the engine's presence caused it to seize up, as, he had noted, someone shouting this word had preceded the last two breakdowns. When Crosswick had ridiculed the idea, and reminded the man that he was an engineer, Dartle asked if he should still implement a rule against it, *just in case*.

Work was finally halted for the day, when Rudge had knocked on the door of Crosswick's hut, his arms slathered to the elbows with mud, warning that he had seen areas of the mud bubbling and was concerned that it could be gas released by the drilling. Rudge was apparently pulling Ron Cuttle—the telegraph operator—out of the mud after he had fallen down and was unable to find his footing. It was then that he had noticed some patches of frothing in the sludge. Crosswick had had to go over to the hoist house, and have the mine evacuated while they tested for gas. On the way over, he had begun to feel lightheaded, and had also had a few sharp twinges of pain in his chest. Wondering if it could be a result of the gas, he had asked if any of the men in the pit had experienced physical symptoms, but none of them complained of anything out of the ordinary. He had also walked passed Cuttle, who was completely coated from head to toe in mud, wandering aimlessly around the site, mumbling to himself—something to do with his 'father's shirt sleeves'. The man was clearly drunk.

'Fell in the mud, did he?' Crosswick had asked Rudge.

In a generous and forgiving tone, Rudge had explained that Cuttle usually had a few drinks over the course of the day, without adverse effect, but now and then it got the better of him. Rudge had also warned of what an aggressive foul-tempered man Cuttle was when completely sober. And although Crosswick didn't approve, he had to admit that Cuttle was generally well behaved, performed his job diligently, and, indeed, had a pleasant cheery demeanour. Also, due to the fact that Crosswick was the only person on the site who received telegrams—the

families of the miners being simple folk who did not communicate by any method other than speech—Cuttle had long spells of sitting around with little to do, and was not kept out of the inn by long hours like the rest of the men.

‘Tell him to see that he controls himself in future,’ Crosswick had grumbled to Rudge.

‘Aye, I’ll have a word,’ Rudge had replied.

They had sent one of the men down the production shaft to pull out the rest of the miners—who had emerged from the cage, ten at a time, weary and powdered with rock dust—resembling animated statues, carved from the granite itself. For the men, the delay was neither a welcome break nor a frustrating hindrance. They were too tired to make such distinctions.

Chapter 5

Mud.

At the end of the day, Crosswick poured two glasses of brandy from a decanter on a small tray table near his desk. As he was doing so, Rudge arrived and took a seat. The drink at the end of the day had started as a celebration of the first time they had fired up the drilling engine, and had persisted every day since—now becoming a part of the routine. They had initially talked about the excavation, but had gradually progressed toward discussing the wider issues of the day, and eventually their family lives—Rudge was soon to be married, also, to his fiancée, Elsie.

Rudge was a working class northerner, but seemingly well educated, and was the only person that Crosswick had found up here that he could relate to at all. ‘What are we going to do about the drainage?’ Crosswick asked, pointing at the black smear of mud that Rudge had walked in.

‘The pumps are drawing it out by the gallon, but it just keeps coming. The storms haven’t helped, mind... but even accounting for that, there’s a *lot* of water coming from somewhere,’ Rudge said.

‘An aquifer?’

‘Could be, but I’ve never heard mention of any springs ’round here.’

‘Perhaps we should have a number of the men bail out the worst of it at the start of the day?’

Rudge winced slightly. ‘We’re shorthanded as it is.’

‘That’s the very idea of the drill!’ Crosswick snapped, rubbing at the tension gathering in his forehead. ‘An army of workers is not *supposed* to be required. And we certainly have no more money in the budget for pumps!’

‘Just weather it then, I’d say.’

‘I’m inclined to think that there is rather too much *weathering*, and *making do*, going on around here already.’

‘It’ll get us there in the end,’ Rudge said, before he drank the last of his Brandy.

Always calm, always reliable—Rudge’s presence alone had a soothing effect on Crosswick.

'The end is fast approaching, my dear Rudge,' Crosswick sighed, pointing up at the chart. 'Faster than we're drilling... and *Lord Richard* isn't accustomed to delays.'

'He'll have to tell that to the granite,' Rudge said, winking.

'If he were here, believe me, he *would*. And by George, I would not be surprised if it listened,' Crosswick said, wearily.

Rudge smiled—big blocks for teeth.

'Be a good fellow and pour us both another drink,' Crosswick said, taking a cigarette from a silver case and lighting it as he watched the big man hunched over the drinks tray, handling the decanter and glasses delicately, as though they were liable to be cracked by the force of his hands.

The truth was that they're positions in life were only slightly removed, or rather, the positions in which they had *begun*. Crosswick had had only slight advantages, but it had been enough for him to squeak into a bracket above that of his parents. His father had made a small amount of money, most of which he had invested in sending Crosswick to study at a first rate engineering school. This had provided him with an income and a basis for climbing through the social ranks.

And though Crosswick enjoyed Rudge's company, and believed him to be a more than capable foreman, he also kept him as a curiosity. He was the man he could have ended up as-barred from moving up in society by slightly too humble an origin. Crosswick liked to have him around in the way that a soldier might keep a musket ball that narrowly missed him as a souvenir.

'And how are the men?' Crosswick asked, holding out the cigarette case for Rudge when he returned to his seat.

'More settled into their work now. Jack Braddon still has the odd remark to make about fellas put out of work by the drilling engine, but the other lads are sick of hearing it...like the rest of us,' Rudge said, as he took a cigarette.

'And, more generally? With regards to the excavation itself? And their feelings... about the rock... and so forth...'

Crosswick trailed off.

Rudge took a moment to answer. 'I reckon they're kept too busy to let their minds work on it.'

'Good. Let's keep it that way,' Crosswick said.

Conscious of the sombre mood this subject always seemed to throw over the conversation, Crosswick already had the next question loaded. 'And how is Elsie? Eager to have you back from your stay here, I'm sure?'

'Glad of a break from me, more like.'

'Nonsense!' Crosswick laughed.

After another brandy, he showed Rudge to the door. Crosswick stood in the doorway, and watched him ignore the wooden boards and trudge through the mud toward the barracks where he and the men slept. The air was cold, but also clean and refreshing in comparison to the damp wood and stale cigarette smoke of his hut. He carefully stepped out onto the planks of timber, breathing deeply. His eyes were drawn to the moon initially, but then to how remarkably bright the stars were. The moon was merely one of many thousands of blazing white orbs. It was a vast and glorious display—the sort of sky that seemed only to be found in the darkest corners of the countryside.

Only half realising it, he found himself off the boards and walking around in the mud, marvelling at the view, feeling, for a moment, released from all the stresses and difficulties that he endured. But then, just as the sense of peace consumed the last of his conscious thought, there was a rotten squelch underfoot, and he slid, flailing his arms and lunging forward to keep his balance. He then tipped and slid back the other way, before his heels dug into firm ground below the sludge, and he found his footing once more.

Crosswick looked down, to try to avoid the patch he had slipped on, and saw a slug the size of a man's forearm, writhing in the mud—a great gouge in its side where he had stepped on it. He stumbled away from the hideous thing, until he made it back onto the planks, and bounded back to his hut.

In the lamplight, he saw that his shoes, and the first three inches of his trouser legs, were smeared with black mud. The right foot also had a slick coating of milky slime with chunks of the slug's flesh clinging to it. He removed the shoe with his fingertips, and threw it straight into a barrel of water in the corner of the room that he used for washing up.

Only five percent of a slug population is above ground at any one time, the rest are under the surface, devouring the roots. A slug has more teeth than a shark.

Chapter 6

Nautrium.

Crosswick should have been staying in a nearby cottage, but he hadn't felt as though he could abandon the site. Anything could happen while he was gone. Consequently, he had only been there twice—once to put his belongings inside, and once to take half of them back out and transfer them to his hut at the site, where he had set up an office and hung a hammock to sleep in. He had also mounted a pickaxe on the wall as a symbol of the soon-to-be ornamental status of the tool.

It seemed better for the morale of the men—that he slept there like the rest of them. Being seen to endure similar hardships made them respect him more, thus feel more committed to the work that he set for them. It made them feel as though this was a team effort. In previous business ventures, there had been those who scoffed at this approach, but Crosswick was convinced that having the men who worked for you believe that they were part of a shared endeavour was the best way to motivate them. And the men had to be motivated—six weeks was a viciously tight deadline by which to have drilled an additional four hundred and fifty feet.

Crosswick slept uneasily that night. As he was drifting off, as the line between reality and dreams softened, razor-edged images made sudden intrusions—memories of the first day, when they had commenced the initial blasting to get down to the drilling depth. He did not want another day like that as long as he lived... and he could ill afford the time that it would cost him if he did. He woke several times in the night, coughing, with a pain and a warm itching sensation in his chest. Each time he was confused by his surroundings, until his eyes found

the model of the drilling engine on his desk, or the coat stand next to the door, reminding him where he was.

When he was stirred by the sound of the work bell being rung outside, Crosswick was as tired as he had been when he retired for the evening. He hauled himself up and sat on the hammock, staring down at the floorboards in a trance, until he was jolted out of it by a knock at the door. Still in his nightshirt, he got up and opened the door a few inches, recoiling from the gust of cold air that blew through the gap.

'Telegram, Mr Crosswick,' Cuttle said, handing Crosswick a card.

Crosswick pushed the door closed and took the telegram over to his desk. He sat, and placed the card down in front of him, propping his head up on his elbows, rubbing his eyes and yawning—his jaw clicking noisily. He focused on the words below the post office crown insignia. 'Request confirmation that required drill depth will be achieved on scheduled date. Backers eager to set next phase of enterprise into motion. Expected shipments of element vitally important. Reach deposits on time at any cost. Work men to complete exhaustion if necessary. Reply at soonest available opportunity—Lord Richard Sailsbury.'

Crosswick rubbed his chin—bristles scraping back against his palm. He got to his feet, pinned the telegram to the progress chart, and set about washing, shaving, and dressing.

The element was something called *Nautrium*. Lord Richard had it on good authority that it would be the most sought after commodity of the next century. The difficulty was that it was too unstable to be blasted for, and time was of the essence—the shifting markets, the commercial rivals, the monopolies still to be granted. Lord Richard had to be the first to market. The first to market would win. But haste and heed do not generally go hand in hand. It was a quandary for Lord Richard, and an opportunity for Lewis Crosswick—it was his chance to move up.

There had been a demonstration of a small-scale prototype, then contracts had been signed and money had been provided to turn the idea, that Crosswick had dragged around for nearly ten years, into a reality. Dreams were syphoned from his head and forged in brass and iron. His drilling engine was transformed from a model on his desk, and plans on his drawing board, into a machine that could cut into the rock faster than any man, and without the need for destructive blasting when they were too close to the *Nautrium* deposits.

And more contracts were signed, and fine cigars were lit, and Massougnés cognac was poured, and privileged hands shook his, and slapped his back, and he could feel the spiked gates that had always been locked to him start to creak open. It felt like fire and steam in his veins. It felt like freedom and security intertwined. It felt like acceptance.

Chapter 7

Brass.

Crosswick opted for boots that morning. As he slogged over to the hoist house, Rudge spotted him along the way and walked with him.

'More of the sludge has spilled over into the shaft and topped up the water in the tunnel,' Rudge grumbled.

Crosswick shook his head. 'Where, in god's name, is it coming from?'

He raised his hand to delay Rudge's reply, when he spotted Cuttle walking passed—presumably on his way to the inn.

'You there! Cuttle!' Crosswick called to him. 'Take a note for a telegram to Lord Richard Salisbury.'

Cuttle walked over to him, plucked a pencil from behind his ear, and slid a notebook from a leather satchel he had strapped around his shoulders.

'Work progressing as planned. Target for completion date unaltered. Confidence high. Please reassure investors,' Crosswick dictated.

He registered a moment of pinch-lipped concern on Rudge's face. They walked on.

'How long has it been out of action?' Crosswick asked.

'All morning. The engineers haven't got a clue what's wrong this time,' Rudge said.

'*This time?*!' Crosswick barked.

Rudge sighed, and said, 'Aye.'

In the hoist house, Crosswick lifted a set of dusty overalls from a hook on the wall, and put them on over his clothes. Then, from the same hook, he took a bag containing breathing equipment—to be used in case of a sudden exhaust hose failure or a release of firedamp gasses from the rock. Ready to descend, he and Rudge stepped into the iron cage. Perhaps it was not dissimilar to how he would have been dressed on a regular basis if things had turned out differently, he thought. Perhaps a journey down a mineshaft would have been a daily fixture of his life.

'Mornin', Mr Crosswick,' Alf croaked, as he made his way over, smoke puffing out of his pipe in time with the syllables.

'I'm sure Alf wonders why he bothers hoisting the engineers down there, don't you Alf?' Crosswick said. 'So they can stand around scratching their heads, eh?'

Whatever it was that Alf said in reply was mangled beyond any possible comprehension. Crosswick nodded with a strained smile, which seemed to be a sufficient response, as Alf closed the cage gate. Going down the shaft, Crosswick felt as he always did—conscious of an oppressive weight. At first he thought it might be caused by an awareness of the countless tons of rock that would be hanging over his head in the tunnel. But, over time, he realised that the little scratch they had made in the earth's surface led him to be cognisant of the unimaginable mass below them.

This was a faint sensation, however. The overpowering experience was one of nervous energy, a strange excitement that made the world feel like it was proceeding at twice the normal speed. It would fade while he was down there, but the first ten minutes in the pit were always sharpened by this quality. On Crosswick's initial descent, Rudge had picked up on it and interpreted the restlessness as fear. Unprompted, he began to explain how well propped the

tunnel was—how you could march a brass band up and down, while stamping your feet, and the ceiling wouldn't even shudder.

But Crosswick wasn't afraid. Not then, not now. He was invigorated by these moments—this time that would, in the story of his life, mark a turning point. The light tremble in his hands wasn't terror at the thought of a collapse. His blood was up. He was eager to get his marvellous drill tearing into the rock that stood between him and his future.

Davy lamps glowed, lighting patches along the tunnel. The cut granite walls were propped at intervals by wooden beams, on which pipes were suspended by iron rings—the exhaust hoses that carried out the worst of the steam and smoke from the engine. Dust covered men groaned and strained as they wheeled tubs filled with waste rock, taking it to be hoisted out through the production shaft.

The air grew hotter, and thick with moisture, as they moved down the slope of the tunnel. Until, finally, they reached the drilling engine. Shrouded in a faint atmosphere of steam, the machine stood on ten iron wheels, aligned on a set of tracks that were positioned either side of those for the rubble tubs. The length of the engine was an intricate latticework of pistons, camshafts, coupling rods, gears, and flywheels.

The drill tip and the front half of the engine was powdered with rock dust, but where it was clean, the brass components glinted by the light of the Davy lamps. At the rear of the engine, the firebox glowed, heating the water tanks and sending steam roaring through the machine's metal arteries—driving pistons, and hissing from valves. Above the furnace, exhaust hoses sprouted like roots, reaching out along the walls of the dark tunnel and up through the production shaft.

Though the engine was halted, the pitmen were still clustered around it, chipping away with their pickaxes. Their job was to work alongside the drill, widening the tunnel, so that the back end of the machine, which was slightly broader than the drill tip, could move forward. These men, who often had a strenuous job keeping up with the engine's progress, were not about to let the opportunity to buy themselves some breathing room go to waste. Most of the others, whose duties were to cart out the waste rock, or to keep the drill tip cool with buckets of water, were currently sat idle—using the breakdown as a chance to regain their strength, while the engineers futilely pulled levers and turned dials.

The group around the engine parted when they saw Crosswick and Rudge coming. Crosswick went straight through the gap and began adjusting the machine's various settings. The engineers—Charley Bray, Harry Rance, George Crepsley, and Fred Dartle—stood back, and waited in a row as Crosswick worked.

'Spanner,' Crosswick said.

Dartle rummaged in his bag and then handed him the tool.

Crosswick loosened a bolt on the governor, then adjusted the regulator so that he had an extra three percent of control over the drill's rotation speed.

He then nodded to the fireman—to recommence stoking—and pulled a long brass lever to start the engine. Blasts of steam hissed from the valves, and the drill began spinning steadily.

Crosswick turned and looked at the engineers. 'I repeatedly said that the regulator needs to be adjusted! *Hourly*, if necessary! The short delays that it causes amount to a mere *fraction* of the time that we're losing due to the

procedure being neglected!’ Crosswick marched over to a patch of bored out granite and rubbed it with the palm of his hand. ‘The rock is made up of many sedimentary layers, each with a different *density*. When you observe a difference in colouration, or a change in the friction sound, you must stop, examine the rock’s consistency, and then set the regulator to compensate for the alteration in the load bearing!’

The engineers met him with blank expressions. They had been working for twenty hours. Every so often their bloodshot eyes were swallowed by their blackened faces, as they blinked slowly in the darkness—this was the only indication that they were alive and conscious.

‘Are you listening to me?!’ Crosswick growled.

A weak murmur came back from the engineers.

Crosswick became distracted when, looking over Charlie’s shoulder, he noticed a boy—he was some distance up the tunnel, watching them intently. ‘Look here—this *boy* is paying more attention to what I’m saying than any of you!’ Crosswick called to the boy, ‘You there!’

The boy’s eyes flashed wide and round—probably thinking that he was in trouble.

‘You! Young lad! You come and have a look at it!’ Crosswick said, waving him over.

The boy approached, holes in the knees of his trousers flapping open as he walked.

‘Interested in engineering, are you?’ Crosswick asked.

The boy studied the workings of the drill, cautiously, as though he still half-expected a clip around the ear.

‘I say—you’re interested in this machine?’ Crosswick said, slowly and clearly.

The boy nodded.

‘I should think you could keep the thing running as well as this gang of bumbling fozzlers!’ Crosswick snarled at the engineers.

He turned his attention back to the boy. ‘You see, this is an *inlet valve*. Too much steam going through here, and we have power surges.’ Crosswick then pointed at the regulator. ‘And if this regulator is not checked, and checked again, we have mechanical failures... and then what?’

The boy looked confused.

‘And then no more drilling!’

Crooked teeth emerged from the boy’s dusty face, as he smiled—appearing to understand.

‘Why, this young lad should keep an eye on the engineers—make sure they’re following my instructions!’ Crosswick said, ruffling the boy’s hair—a small cloud of dust rising from it.

‘A young engineer!’ Crosswick smiled at Rudge. ‘I’m quite convinced that, one day, he’ll build a bridge that spans the channel! All the way to France, I’ll wager!’

‘I bloody ’ope not,’ Rudge grumbled.

Seeming emboldened, the boy said something about being ‘enamoured with inches’.

‘You’re..?’ Crosswick said, narrowing his eyes.

'He said, he hammered the hinges straight on his Granddad's gate,' Rudge translated.

'Ah! Good lad!' Crosswick shouted.

He took the boy by the shoulder, and pointed up the tunnel—at the hoses that trailed along the ground and hung from the support beams. 'I want you to keep an eye on these hoses. They carry the smoke and the steam out of the production shaft—to stop you lads from choking on the fumes down here. It is a method that I designed especially for this mine. So, as you're about your duties, you make sure they're not tangled or trailing along the tub tracks.'

The boy looked all around the tunnel, wonder in his eyes, seemingly acknowledging the presence of the exhaust hoses for the first time.

'Keep an eye they don't spring any leaks. And tell the other boys to take care too,' Crosswick said.

'Aye, I will, Mr Crosswick,' the boy replied.

'There's a good lad.'

Crosswick turned and shot the engineers a final threatening glance, before pacing off up the tunnel.

Chapter 8

Rock.

The next morning there were reports from red-eyed, jittery looking night watchmen. A terrible screaming had carried on the wind from some unseen source. The watchmen had argued among themselves while describing the sound—some identifying it as a wounded fox, others sure they had heard unintelligible words in the cries.

Later in the night, there had been distant sightings over at the edge of the forest—human figures jumping between the trees like animals, tangling themselves up in the black, leafless branches, disappearing into a mass of twigs and limbs, before they were sighted again, and again, at different locations along the woods. Probably local madmen, Rudge had said. He explained that something had gotten into the river water these past few years. Run-off from the fields was the general assumption, but he suspected that it had been carried up from the metal works south of the town. People would be bed ridden with burning fevers—their minds completely destroyed.

The men had decided that the events of the night were a bad omen. Crosswick had come to understand that they viewed the granite in this area as an immovable feature of the landscape, and weren't entirely comfortable with their roll in using new technology to drill deep into its previously impenetrable core. They were men who accepted things as impossible who were now involved in redefining the borders of possibility. This mental schism had manifested as an inflamed propensity for superstition, and they had begun to regard everything out of the ordinary as a warning from the gods, or angry spirits showing their displeasure.

The mood that day was fraught with tension, as the rest of the men heard about the unusual sightings. Everywhere that Crosswick went, groups of them were huddled—grim looks on their faces, muttering to one another. The clandestine meetings would break up when they saw him coming, and the men would scatter and go back to their work. Fear, rumour, and exaggerated tellings of the events intertwined with old ghost stories, and swept through the site like influenza. It made the men irritable and distracted.

Peter Addington—one of the pitmen—claimed to have heard whispering voices making vicious threats toward him and his family, while he was walking back to the barracks. He and Tom Worthington had gone prowling around the site, armed with axe handles, looking for the culprit, but they found no sign of anyone lurking about. Crosswick was concerned with the direction this was all heading.

A telegram from Lord Richard arrived, reading, ‘Had progress figures you provided examined by my man. Estimates that target depth can no longer be reached by deadline. Have explained to this Luddite that you are employing new technology and are a man we can count on. Please provide detailed breakdown of how remaining depth will be drilled by deadline. Nervous partners in need of reassurance’.

A ferocious storm wracked the site that evening, and the wind was whistling through every knothole and around every poorly fitted plank of wood in Crosswick’s hut. He looked through his trunk, and found a wool blanket that Charlotte had packed for him. She had expressed concern about him staying warm. ‘It can get frightfully cold in the north,’ she had heard. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, warmed and comforted by the memory as much as the fabric. His chest was hurting again, and his hands felt cold and tingly. The weather couldn’t be helping with these troubling symptoms.

He sat down at his desk, deciding that he would write to Charlotte, letting her know that her blanket was currently wrapped around him. As his pen hovered over the paper, he noticed his pocket watch on the desk—Rudge would be here any minute. He should wait until he had the proper time to devote to writing the letter, he thought.

On cue, Rudge knocked at the door. Lightening blazed across the sky as he came in out of the rain, a wave of mud sloshing over the doorstep. He took off his soaked overcoat and cap, and took a seat across the desk from Crosswick.

‘I had hoped that falling behind schedule was something we would make up for over the course of last week.’ Crosswick said, as he poured them both a drink. ‘As opposed to the beginning of a *trend*.’

‘If we can just keep the engine running, the lads will have a fighting chance,’ Rudge said.

‘*Fighting*—that’s what’s needed! Enthusiasm, initiative... *drive!* The engineers and the men aren’t working as one unit. There’s discord... there’s... *unease*.’

‘I’ll give a few of them a kick up the arse,’ Rudge said.

‘I’ve no doubt you can put an extra layer of sweat on them, but I fear it’s their heads that are the problem. The tales that the night watchmen are telling them are dividing their attention and making them restless.’

‘Aye,’ Rudge sighed.

‘I could turn a blind eye... but considering the events of the day we commenced work, I feel as though I could be *blind* to a potential disaster,’ Crosswick said.

On that morning, when they had started blasting, a big lantern-jawed miner had begun to quietly cry. Then another two had joined him—grown men, weeping like children. Then more, and still more. One of them had fallen to the ground, convulsing, making an awful shrieking sound. That man, James Althorp, had had to be taken away, but Crosswick remained in contact with the infirmary where he was recovering. At present he was well, and conscious, but his speech still hadn’t returned. He mostly liked to sit at the window and watch the storms for hours on end, the doctor had informed Crosswick in his letter.

Most of the men, assembled there that day, were as confused as Crosswick had been by the outbursts. But even those who hadn’t suffered mental breakdowns seemed to have been in a sombre mood. There was something about them reaching down under the rock with mechanical ease and precision, with only a small dedicated crew of men, that troubled them. It flew in the face of their traditional hardworking sensibilities, Crosswick had assumed. Or perhaps it was the large number of miners, who would ordinarily be employed, missing out on work.

Crosswick summed it up as the old world colliding with the new—with the modern technologies that were changing the face of industry. But ultimately he didn’t know for certain where the uneasiness stemmed from. And no one, not even Rudge, seemed capable of putting it into words. There was just something they didn’t like about the mine, possibly even something that scared them. Increasingly, he suspected that it was something about the rock itself.

‘It was an unfortunate business,’ Crosswick said. ‘Not something I want to have happen again. A breakdown of morale like that, on a *large scale*, could finish us once and for all. Training new men in the methods and procedures... well, there simply wouldn’t be time.’

‘We should be able to hold it all together... but it’s not good,’ Rudge acknowledged. ‘The long hours, combined with the superstitious talk going around—its wearing the lads down from both ends. Their backs *and* their heads are knackered. But the only thing that stops them telling each other even *more* tales, is to keep them working. I just hope things settle down around here.’

‘We need more than *hope*. I want a stop put to it,’ Crosswick said.

An echo of that first day returned—the sense of all-consuming dread that came over him then. ‘I wrote enquiring about James Althorp,’ he said, quietly.

Rudge didn’t reply.

‘The doctor suggested that the shock of the blasting might have driven him mad,’ Crosswick said.

Rudge frowned—clearly unconvinced. ‘He was a pitman twenty years. He’d ’eard more explosions than the Royal Fusiliers!’

‘Perhaps that was it—the accumulation of it?’

This made Rudge think for a moment, but then he shook his head, dismissively. ‘I would have seen it coming. If lads aren’t suited, and some aren’t, I’ll give you that, there are *signs*. Their hands shake, they’re soaked with sweat on cold days... they stammer when they talk.’

Crosswick got up and fetched the brandy bottle, pouring them both a drink—large measures. ‘I think we may be up against a rampant epidemic of hysteria... I think it’s time I had a talk with the men.’

Rudge sighed. ‘You’re the gaffer, but I’m telling you now—it’ll likely stir up even more trouble.’

Chapter 9

Ale.

The next evening, Crosswick walked across the boards over a sea of mud. He held his hat in place with one gloved hand, and pulled his overcoat tight around himself with the other. The wind clawed at him as he made his way across the site, toward the recreation hut. The night sky was flecked with spectacular explosions, frozen by time and distance. The ground was a writhing carpet of slugs.

Shouting, and singing, and roaring laughter spilled from the recreation hut and reverberated around the yard. The hut, which the men had quickly begun referring to as the ‘the inn’ had been Crosswick’s idea. It was essentially a barn containing tables and chairs and a few barrels of ale. It provided the men with a place to go at the end of the day, where they could socialise, have a few pints, and play cards or dominoes. If you gave them as many of the comforts of home as possible, then they would be less eager to *be* home—that was the reasoning behind it.

Making the workplace a surrogate for home, for family, for friendship—this, Crosswick believed, was the future of creating a productive workforce. The few shillings worth of ale he provided them with would be more than paid for by additional hours that the men didn’t even notice they were working. They were here anyway... why not help out for a little while longer? They only had the boredom of their bunks to face if they returned to the barracks. They were born tunnellers, these men. Each hour they didn’t have pickaxes in their hands, was an hour they weren’t doing what they were put on earth to do. It needed to be facilitated and channelled into a profitable enterprise. Keeping them here—that was the key.

When Crosswick pushed the door open, yellow light, heat, and smoke, vented out into the deep blue evening—it was as though a furnace door had swung open. He walked into the smell of sweat, damp clothes, and pipe smoke. There was a marked reduction in the jovial clamour. Crosswick looked around the inn, as he removed his wool overcoat and hung it on a hook near the door.

The men were distributed among seven large, round, wooden tables. There was an unmanned bar at the back of the room, lined with glazed clay jugs of ale. He spotted Rudge—the only man in the room willing to make eye contact with him—sitting at a table with a few of the men. There was Cuttle, and Jack Braddon, who he recognised, and a couple of others that he didn’t.

‘Get Mr Crosswick a seat, lad,’ Rudge said to a boy, who was sitting on a stool next to the bar. The boy balanced the cigarette he was smoking on the edge of the

bar, and then dutifully hauled over a wooden chair and placed it next to the table. Crosswick sat, removed his gloves, and placed them on the table with his hat. 'Good evening...lads,' he said, forcing a smile.

The men had fallen silent, and were gazing down at their pewter tankards of ale.

'Enjoying a hard-earned drink, I see,' Crosswick observed. 'I think that's a capital idea. A pint of finest Yorkshire ale for me.'

Rudge turned again to the boy. 'Be a good lad, and fetch Mr Crosswick a pint.'

'Those winds are picking up again,' Crosswick said, rubbing his hands together.

'Aye,' Rudge said, stuffing a tuft of tobacco into his pipe.

The rest of the men eyed Crosswick nervously from under the brims of their caps, through screens of pipe smoke, peeking over the tops of their flagons as they took great draining mouthfuls. The eyes darted away whenever Crosswick met them with his.

'Well it's much nicer in here, I can assure you!' Crosswick said.

No takers. Some awkward shifting in seats. The conversations at the other tables had dropped to a suppressed murmur.

'I say—it's *much nicer in here!*' he repeated, directing it at the man next to him—a man that he didn't recognise, who had a dark red beak for a nose. 'It might be wise to hold out here until the morning! Erm...' Crosswick looked over at Rudge.

'Bert Drysdale,' Rudge murmured.

'Bolt the doors until spring arrives, eh, Bert?!' Crosswick said.

Bert slowly nodded once... or perhaps just lowered his head—it wasn't clear which. The boy came over to the table, and carefully placed a flagon of ale in front of Crosswick.

'Ah!' Crosswick exclaimed, picking it up by the handle and sipping some off the top. 'Ahhhh!' he sighed. 'Well...' Again he looked around the table in search of some basic human acknowledgement, and, again, received none. 'How are we all getting on?'

No answer.

'Everyone happy? Satisfied with their work?'

There was a low, vaguely affirmative, murmur.

'Marvellous. Now, if there is any disquiet, I don't want you to hesitate to speak to Mr Rudge here, who will bring the matter to me, and I will do everything I can to help. I want a happy and harmonious mine.'

'They're all happy enough getting stuck into their work, Mr Crosswick. There's no complaints here,' Rudge said.

'As much as I hope that that is *true*, I don't want you men feeling stifled—as though you can't open your mouths—if there *is* something the matter,' Crosswick insisted.

'They're content, aren't you, lads?' Rudge said.

They all mumbled in agreement.

'Well, that's excellent,' Crosswick said. 'And I want you all to know that the extra hours you've been working have not gone unnoticed, or unappreciated.'

'They *have* gone *unpaid* though,' Jack Braddon said, under his breath.

'*Jack...*' Rudge warned.

Crosswick looked at Braddon, suspiciously, before continuing. 'And I hope that you're all aware of the importance of our work here. The Nautrium element

deposits that we're excavating will provide materials that will revolutionise whole branches of British industry. Your devoted labour is a service to your country and your fellow man. It's a *fine* reward... along with a pint of ale at the end of the day, eh?' Crosswick winked.

'It is, Mr Crosswick,' Rudge agreed.

The men made forced sounding noises of support.

Braddon drained the last of his ale, and clanked the flagon down on the rough wooden table. 'Well, I don't know about 'elping meh fellow man, or revolutionisin' British industry... but some extra brass for the extra work would be reward enough for me.'

'That's enough!' Rudge snapped.

Grinning widely, Braddon replied, 'Mr Crosswick said we should get any grievances we 'ave off our chests. Well now, if you're telling me that was all just hot air, I'll understand...'

'Not at all,' Crosswick said. 'I asked for a frank disclosure in good faith. Now, if you were privy to our comparison balance sheets, I'm confident that you would recognise the limitations of the excavation budget. But, of course, these are financial matters and not something that I would expect a man of your trade to understand—'

'*Comparison balance sheets*, is it? So does that mean we're in line for a share of the profits we're diggin' out the ground? When the dust settles, like?'

'I think you'll find that my *drilling engine* is doing the bulk of the work,' Crosswick replied.

'Aye, but somehow my pickaxe has still seen action. And as far as I know, your drill can't drag out the rock it breaks,' Braddon said.

'And glad you are for the job, aren't you, Jack?' Rudge threw in. 'Or, do you have another way of feeding your bairns?'

Braddon attempted to answer, but Rudge cut him off. 'Ran empty, have you, lad? Go and get yourself another—they're on the house.' He pointed his pipe stem at Crosswick.

Braddon gave Rudge a blank stare, only the eyes hinting at the anger and disgust behind the mask, then he got up and walked over to the bar.

'And the rest of the lads feel the same way, don't you?' Rudge said.

More noises.

'Happy for the job, aren't you?' he asked, loudly.

'Aye,' they all said, more clearly than the first time.

'Good lads.'

Crosswick raised his eyebrows at Rudge as a thankyou. He turned back to the rest of the men around the table. 'And as for all of the superstitious nonsense floating around the site—ghost stories and what have you—'

Tightening of skin, brows sinking lower, concerned glances being exchanged.

'I hope that I can trust you all to snuff that sort of thing out where you see it flaring up?' Crosswick said.

'There's no need to—' Rudge began.

'After all, we are conducting a mining operation here, and it's a rather serious business with substantial financial investment,' Crosswick caught himself and

added, 'a *limited budget*, but certainly no place for imaginations running wild or the telling of children's fairy tales.'

'No, it isn't,' Rudge agreed.

Crosswick nodded, satisfied, picking up his flagon once more.

'I 'eard there was a hand reaching out of the mud the night before last.' Bert said, suddenly, a cold stern look on his face. 'One of the lads ran over to 'elp—said he thought someone had fallen in and sunk down. Well, when he took hold of it, it grabbed him... tried to pull him down. He tugged so hard to get away that his fingers went right through it—like the mud itself had been given life and reached out to take one of us.'

'Have you ever heard such tripe?!' Rudge laughed, looking around the table.

Nobody else was laughing.

'The mud grew an arm?!' Cuttle said, in horror.

'That's what I 'eard.' Bert nodded.

'From who?' Rudge asked, mockingly.

'Peter Addington. He said it 'appen to one of the lads keeping an eye out at night.'

'What lad?'

'He didn't say.'

'I've a feeling that's because it didn't happen.'

'*He* said it did.'

Rudge snorted dismissively.

'Well, there we are...' Crosswick sighed. '*Stories*, you see—upsetting everyone. So let's have no more of it.' He turned to Rudge. 'Have a word with Addington will you? Tell him to stop spreading his extraordinary tales.'

'I'll do just that,' Rudge said.

The man across the table from Crosswick suddenly broke his silence. 'I 'eard one of the lads who went home took a shortcut through the forest and hasn't been seen since.'

'And who did you hear that from?' Rudge asked.

'His family haven't seen hide nor hair of him, I 'eard,' The man replied.

'You've spoken to them, have you?' Rudge said. 'Remind me, when were you last back in town?'

'Not since we started.'

'Then how do you know?'

'It's what I 'eard.'

Cuttle spoke next, the fear and excitement creeping around the table.

'I 'eard about another lad who went missing out there, a few years ago. Had too much ale and fell asleep on the river bank. When they found him he was covered with slugs the size of your hand... one of them had covered his face and smothered him in his sleep.'

'Bloody 'ell!' the man opposite Crosswick whispered.

'They said he was half eaten by the time they found him... and sodden with slime,' Cuttle added.

'Now, this is *precisely* what I'm talking about—this sort of preposterous babble is causing an erosion of morale,' Crosswick said.

'Who's to say it didn't 'appen?' Bert asked.

'Well, I'm certain that a slug can't smother a man for a start!' Crosswick replied.

'He said he 'eard it happened,' Bert said, nodding over to Cuttle.

A man passing the table, who must have been listening in, stopped and said, 'I 'eard the same story. I know a lad who saw slugs, deep in the forest, that'd grown near the size of a man. They can rise up and latch onto you, take you to the ground and eat you.'

'Nonsense! *Limax Cinereoniger* is the largest species of slug in the British isles, and can grow no larger than eight inches, or so,' Crosswick said.

'You seen 'em bigger than that since you've been 'ear, 'aven't you?' Bert said.

'I... I *have*, but—'

'Then, if you don't mind me asking, Mr Crosswick, 'ow d'you know they don't come bigger *still*?'

The rest of the men murmured in agreement.

'They can't grow to be the size of a man! I'm certain of that much!' Crosswick said, beginning to lose his patience.

Dubious looks, and pipes billowing out smoke all around him.

Bert stretched himself up, sitting tall in his chair. 'All I know is; that forest isn't a place for men... and we're a little too close for comfort 'ere.'

'Anywhere that men want to go, is *a place for men*! The fact that there is a collection of trees growing out of the ground is an irrelevance!' Crosswick said.

'So... do you think one of those horrible big slugs got that lad who went missing?' Cuttle asked.

'That, or the wolves,' Bert said.

'Wolves were hunted to extinction in the last century!' Crosswick interrupted, raising his voice.

'Not 'round 'ere,' Bert said.

'There are none left! *Anywhere*, in the entire country!' Crosswick shouted.

More dubious glances were exchanged.

A Wolf can eat more than twenty pounds of raw meat. When presented with a large amount of food, wolves lose their ability to feel sated.

Chapter 10

Steam.

In his hut, Crosswick stared at the progress chart while sipping a glass of brandy. He wondered what he expected to see, in the dates and feet of tunnelling recorded, that he hadn't seen before. He was developing an obsession with gazing at the chart. Any time his mind strayed, he'd find himself on his feet, looking up at it—as though he was worshipping at an altar, praying to the gods of time and pressure, pleading with them to bend the rules. If he only stared at the lines of ink long enough, would the impossible become possible?

Another two glasses of brandy, and he was sat at his desk rereading some of Charlotte's letters, going back over some of his favourite passages. 'The *Spiraea* bushes have erupted into a furious growth spurt and seem determined to colonise

every inch of the flowerbeds. Grow as they might, I tirelessly clip them back to their original size, as I don't want a single thing to have changed when you return. I want you to walk through the gate, and along the garden path, and for it to be exactly as you remember. We will recommence our life together without the slightest need for readjustment. There will be no news, nor developments to catch up on. It will be as though you never left'.

Crosswick turned the letter over and ran his hand lightly over the paper, feeling the raised impressions made by the pen. It was a link to some physical part of her—an intricate texture, formed by pressure that her hand had applied. An echo of her voice. The scent of her perfume lingering after she had left the room.

He took another letter from the pile. 'My dearest Lewis,' it began. 'A shower of rain has chased me from the garden, but, when I remembered that I had meant to write to you today, I waved a thank you to the clouds for setting my priorities in order. Is it also raining where you are? Despite your absence, my love for you—'

His attention strayed from the words, returning, once more, to the back of the previous letter. 'The *pressure*,' he whispered to himself.

His eyes locked onto the empty space in front of him, effectively blind, as his mind raced through technical drawings and diagrams, steam pressure capacities and torque ratios. He scooped Charlotte's letters together and pushed them into the draw of his desk. Then, jumping up and darting over to a stack of leather-bound folders, he set about leafing through design sheets and technical papers associated with the drilling engine, plucking out any that he thought useful and tossing them onto the desk. There was a knock at the door.

'Come in!' he called.

Rudge stepped inside, followed by a river of mud.

'Ah, Rudge—just the fellow!'

Rudge looked confused by the frenetic activity, the papers strewn across the desk, the brandy bottle on the table—the end of the day drinks routine upset. Crosswick stopped and glanced at his watch, was it that late already? 'Fetch yourself a glass,' he said to Rudge. 'We can discuss this over drinks.'

'Discuss what?' Rudge asked.

'I was just thinking about the blast pipe and the pressure funnels. Now, perhaps we could recreate the problem that Charlie suspected, but to our *advantage*. If we redirect a portion of the exhaust gasses, and alter the gearing of the flywheel to compensate, we could generate extra horsepower while enabling the drill to maintain a more consistent rotation speed. It might give us an extra—' he blew out a breath and rolled his eyes back, as he made a rough calculation. 'Three feet per day?'

'That would certainly get us nearer,' Rudge nodded, moving some of the papers around on the desk.

'We would need more water bailed onto the drill for cooling, and extra care would have to be taken with the exhaust hoses—there would be *fierce* pressures involved,' Crosswick explained.

'Will it pose a threat to the lads?' Rudge asked.

'No... no,' Crosswick assured him. 'Of course, in engineering terms, we're in uncharted territory. One generally finds these things out by trial and error,' he added.

‘Well... if it’s an error, what might—’

‘Nothing,’ Crosswick said, waving his hand. ‘I’m sure nothing at all.’

‘You’re *sure*, Mr Crosswick?’

‘As sure as it’s possible to be with a thing like this.’

‘Because there are plenty of ways those lads can get hurt down there without us adding another one,’ Rudge said.

‘I’ve done the calculations.’ Crosswick pointed to some figures that he had scrawled on the back of a telegram. ‘I wouldn’t make potentially dangerous alterations to the machine blindly, now would I?’

‘No, I’m sure you know what you’re doing,’ Rudge said.

‘I’m getting us there on time, Rudge. That’s what I’m doing. That’s a promise I intend to keep.’

They had another drink and discussed the procedures for handling the increased pressures, deciding that they would go ahead with the engine modifications before work started the next morning. Crosswick was pleased that Rudge seemed to be behind the idea of his own accord—without needing to be told that he would do his job and keep his opinions to himself. They had an objective, and that had to be placed above all else. He hoped that, in his own way, Rudge understood.

Eventually the conversation turned to Crosswick’s visit to the recreation hut. ‘Not the desired effect,’ Crosswick admitted.

‘I told you,’ Rudge said. ‘The more you talk about it, the more you get them talking about it.’

‘They seem quite capable of chatter without my assistance...and god knows it’s not a matter of them being left with time for their imaginations to run wild. The poor wretches are working every hour that they’re stood upright. They must have discovered some method of communicating in their sleep!’ Crosswick paused, and then said, ‘Perhaps the inn was not the wisest addition to the site...’

‘Well, you can’t take it away now you’ve give it to them. You think there’s unrest now.’ Rudge said.

‘Hmm,’ Crosswick begrudgingly agreed.

‘They’re kept busy, they get a pint at the end of the day. Trust me, there’ll be talk, but it won’t get any worse,’ Rudge said, in a reassuringly casual tone.

‘It’s the *deadline*, Rudge. We can’t have men running off the job because they’ve been frightened by eerie stories, and sightings of phantoms reaching out of the mud! We can’t have minds wandering, when only a complete focus on the task in hand is going to give us a chance.’

Rudge began to reassure him—‘They’ll get thro—’

‘We can’t have them reluctant to break the rock,’ Crosswick interrupted.

He positioned and repositioned the gleaming orange stone around his desk, avoiding Rudge’s eyes. There was a period of silence, and suddenly Crosswick felt a very urgent need to ask the question he had been avoiding since the day they had begun their work here. ‘What are they... afraid of?’ he asked, cautiously.

Rudge’s features hardened. ‘It’s been here a long time this place,’ he said, the strain visible around his eyes, the words seemingly requiring some effort to push out. ‘It’s like there’s a trace of the old times lingering—dark years, before people were really people and great beasts, that they find the bones of, that don’t exist

anymore, ruled savage kingdoms. I'm a god fearing man, don't get me wrong, but I don't believe the almighty was always here with us. I think there was a time *before*, when death was the only god. Folk 'round here, though they might not find the words, I reckon they feel the same way. And buried deep down, there's always the fear that that time could come back. So they're eager to keep things the way they are... imperfect as they may be.'

Crosswick sat perfectly still, gazing into the frozen fire of the gem and the mass of tiny flecks being dragged to their annihilation.

Chapter 11

Sleep.

Days went by with the deadline looming ever closer. Nights became restless affairs. Crosswick would wake with a terrible burning sensation in his lungs, and his hands numb and paralysed—fingers pulled into claws, joints and knuckles aching. If it wasn't the pain, he would be shaken from rest by strange half-remembered dreams—something dreadful waiting for him behind doors, down exaggerated, gaping rabbit holes, or sometimes just in the darkness of a disjointed version of his hut. Everything was incorrect in some vague sense—warped by the process of mental reconstruction. Always the thing pulling him closer, always the air robbed from him and his screams no more than breathless gasps, always his legs with a will of their own, marching him toward some unspecified doom.

When he had tentatively broached the subject with Rudge, he said that it wasn't uncommon for men new to the pit to dream of such things. He believed that the subterranean world, and its unique dangers, required a period of acclimatisation.

One morning, after particularly heavy rain, the mud became so bad that a man sank up to his waist and needed to be pulled out with a rope. There was no choice but to halt the drilling for several hours, as the mine shaft had become so flooded with sludge that all hands had to be tasked with sending buckets of it back up in the cage. Mechanical failures plagued the excavation. With mud clogging the gears of the engine, it refused to start each day and required many hours of cleaning, repair, and recalibration. After Crosswick's modifications had increased the engine's horsepower, the drill developed a certain amount of lateral movement in its rotation and smashed itself loose against the rock. Extensive repairs had to be carried out. Fred Dartle lost two fingers on his right hand, when the gearing started inexplicably while he was reaching inside to retrieve a dropped bolt. Unable to perform his duties one-handed, he had to be let go.

They had only fifteen days left to drill the remaining two hundred and thirty feet. Crosswick was working the men for hours that were unsustainable for the human nervous system. He flew into rages at innocent messengers who brought him news of delays. The men looked at him differently now. General attitudes around the site had gotten worse, lurching unpredictably between lethargy and aggression, with numerous brawls between the miners—both above ground, as well as in the pit. The worst instance involved a man of retiring disposition, who

had to be physically restrained to prevent him from cracking his downed opponent's skull in two with a sharp rock. Crosswick had encountered both men as they were being pushed out of the hoist house—stumbling, shirtless, into the yard, blood from their split lips and crumpled noses smeared around their faces.

The men had begun shirking night watch duty, fighting over whose turn it was, as rumours of strange sightings spread through the site. Large black shapes had been seen rising up from the ground half a mile across the fields. Broad and ancient trees had been found uprooted and left at the edge of the site with no drag marks nearby, as though they had been pulled out of the ground and hurled from the forest by a giant.

A strange glow had started to emanate from the woods, and was said to grow brighter as the howling picked up at night. The howling, even Crosswick had realised, was no ghost story, having been woken several times by it himself. The source remained a mystery. And, for the past few days, whenever these strange cries were heard, there had been a deep rumbling, like the laboured breathing of some colossal beast echoing from the mineshaft. It was almost as though the pit was answering a call.

Two men had fled one night, when it had grown particularly loud and unnerving. Crosswick had stood at his hut door, gulping back glasses of brandy and instantly refilling them—trying to get drunk enough to sleep. He'd watched the men run over the fields, until they were lost to the darkness.

Charlotte wrote to him expressing her disappointment and concern at his failure to return her letters. He had yet to find the time to write to her. Something always needed to be done that very moment.

Chapter 12

Teeth.

Crosswick marched into the hoist house, put on his overalls, and walked over to the cage, giving a brisk nod to Alf. 'Good afternoon, Alf. Everything running as it should be?'

Alf replied with a completely baffling series of noises, the words 'fat' and 'bastard' in among them... possibly.

'Well... that's exactly it,' Crosswick replied, stepping into the cage and knocking on the side to indicate his readiness to descend.

Alf scraped the gate closed and the cage jolted into motion—sinking into the mineshaft. Today Crosswick's sense of excitement came from the fact that he was making a random inspection of the mine to see how closely his procedures for operating the drilling engine were being observed.

He had started to love carrying out these inspections. Before he had considered this sort of thing too intrusive, but now he constantly felt the urge to sharpen the men in any way he could, to keep them at maximum pressure. Nothing else was going to get them over the finish line. Sitting behind his desk, waiting for bad

news, was slowly driving Crosswick out of his mind. This was something he could do to physically intervene—to push things along.

The cage made a crashing sound as it reached the bottom of the shaft. He hauled the gate open, and went striding briskly down the tunnel, wooden prop beams flicking past.

'You there! At the *front* and *back* of that tub! Boots are to be kept away from the exhaust hoses!' he barked at two men who were both pushing from the same side of a tub full of waste rock.

'Yes, Mr Crosswick.'

'Sorry, Mr Crosswick.'

They took their correct positions as Crosswick pressed on toward the drilling engine—the sound of which reverberated up the tunnel, becoming louder as he weaved his way around the puddles and the worst of the mud. Somehow, great clews of leeches had gotten into the water that had pooled from the cooling process, and the men bailing it onto the drill inevitably ended up with the beastly things anchored to bleeding points all over their shirtless bodies. It had made cooling duty a miserable job, and the men tasked with it were starting to resemble plague victims.

Rudge had ordered that tins, punctured with nail holes and filled with ground liver and chicken giblets, were to be placed in the water to act as traps. Each morning men lifted them from the water, heavy with black writhing masses, and sent them up in the cage to be vengefully thrown into the campfires above ground. But still the water was thick with the devils, reinforcements presumably shipped in on the river of mud and slime that spilled down the production shaft. Presently, Jack Braddon walked past—his arms dripping wet and dotted with leaches—carrying a tin in each hand, taking them to the place of their fiery execution.

Leeches are hermaphrodites and don't need any particular type of partner to reproduce. Leeches can consume five times their own bodyweight in blood.

Harry Rance looked like a startled rabbit when he saw Crosswick coming. He tapped Charlie's shoulder—who was crouched down adjusting the valve on a steam pipe, and looked confused by Rance's frantic hand signalling, until he also spotted Crosswick.

'Everything satisfactory? The engine operating properly, is it?' Crosswick said loudly, fixing his eyes on Rance.

'It's, it's erm... it's all as it should be,' Rance stammered.

'*Is it?*' Crosswick asked, narrowing his eyes.

'I... I think it is, Mr Crosswick,' Rance said, looking back over at Charlie, hoping to be rescued.

'Well, I'll need better than *think*, man. I could ask any one of these *tub pushers*, who don't know a flywheel from a lump of rock, if they *think* everything is as it should be. I pay you to *know*.'

'Yes, Mr Crosswick.'

'*Yes? Yes*, I'm correct in my assertion? Or, *yes*, everything is as it should be?'

'Ah... I don't rightly know, Mr Crosswick.'

Charlie took a few steps toward them, but Crosswick gave him a look like he should stay where he was. He wasn't going to have this interrupted.

‘Come now, this is not a test or an attempt to catch anyone out. I merely come down here, from time to time, to see if I can be of assistance to you,’ Crosswick said, smiling reassuringly.

He was there for nothing of the sort. It gave him great satisfaction—charging down the tunnel when they weren’t expecting it, spreading fear in his wake, having them never know when he’d strike next. When he wasn’t there, he wanted the thought that he might appear at any moment to loom over them like a spectre. And when he was, he wanted to see them squirm, and to hear them fumble over their words. He wanted them to get a taste of the stresses and pressures that he had to endure on a daily, *hourly*, basis.

‘Well?’ Crosswick snapped.

‘Everything is as it should be,’ Rance said, cautiously.

‘One would expect to hear that expressed with a little more conviction if it were true,’ Crosswick said, studying Rance’s face—doing his best to give the impression that he could read the man’s thoughts. ‘I’d better have a look for myself.’

To Rance’s visible relief, Crosswick turned his attention to Charlie, who, unprompted, said, ‘She’s been running like a thoroughbred. We’re getting the knack of the timings now.’

‘Very good,’ Crosswick said, quietly—still not entirely convinced, as he examined the regulator and the brass dials of the engine’s settings.

Charlie waited patiently, perhaps even indifferently. He wasn’t afraid like the others. He was too innocent, too politically infantile. As far as Charlie was concerned, he was trying his best and doing a good job of it, so why would he get tongue tied when questioned? It was as though he conducted himself with the unsullied certainty of a child.

‘Me and the lads were thinking we might adjust the valve gears and let an advanced admission into the cylinders, in the middle of the stroke, like, to cushion the inertia when she’s at full pelt. I reckon that would make the engine even more reliable,’ Charlie said.

Crosswick twisted around sharply, glaring at the other two engineers. ‘Alter the settings that I designed this machine to run on?’ he asked, frowning.

The engineers looked terrified—Rance gestured toward Charlie, physically trying to disassociate himself from the suggestion.

‘Aye,’ Charlie answered. ‘I think it would be an improvement—lead to less breakdowns.’

Straight-faced, Crosswick looked the engineers over, remaining silent, letting the tension sit. Then, after the appropriate time, he said, ‘Good. You two—set about it right away,’ and then to Charlie, ‘You follow me.’

They walked up the tunnel, back toward the cage.

‘You *and the lads* thought of that adjustment, did you?’ Crosswick asked.

‘Aye,’ Charlie said.

‘I suspect that those two *lads* wouldn’t show that sort of initiative if they caught fire and had to locate a bucket of water.’

‘They’re pulling their weight, same as me, Mr Crosswick.’

‘Nonsense! They’re good for no more than handing you your tools! It was *your* idea, admit it, man! Take credit for it!’

‘Thing is, I don’t feel like it was,’ Charlie said, sounding somewhat lost in thought. ‘It was the strangest thing—I was standing too close to the drill, without my eye protectors, when she was spitting out a storm of dust, and a blast of it went right in my face. Breathed a good lungful in. Well, when I rubbed the worst of it out of my eyes, that’s when it came to me—the whole idea in one piece, like, there and then... as though I remembered it from a dream. So, I couldn’t say it was exactly *my* idea, in truth.’

‘Good lord!’ Crosswick said, rolling his eyes. ‘When we prise off the other two *barnacles* you’re carrying around, you attribute your hard work to the muses! What will it take for you to grasp what could be yours?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Mr Crosswick...’ Charlie replied.

Crosswick stopped and turned to face Charlie, putting his hand on his shoulder and leaning in a little closer. ‘You could run that engine on your own, with one or two of the boys as apprentices.’

Charlie smiled and shook his head.

‘You’re already doing it, man! If you came to my office and demanded that I sack Rance and Crepsley, I’d let you take over and pay you their wages in addition to your own.’

Charlie’s face straightened.

‘But you haven’t, have you? Something there, isn’t there? Something that stops you from plunging the dagger into their backs. Well, whatever it is, I suggest you rid yourself of it at the first opportunity,’ Crosswick said.

Sadness crept into Charlie’s eyes. ‘They’re good lads, Mr Crosswick.’

‘They’re living off money that’s rightfully yours! Standing around and scratching their arses while they watch you work!’

Charlie didn’t answer.

‘Say it! Tell me I should have them thrown off the site, and take the money that you are already working for!’ Crosswick urged.

Charlie looked back at him, quizzically. ‘They both have *bairns*, Mr Crosswick! I couldn’t put them out of a job.’

Crosswick smiled sadly at the creature before him—that the restrictive local honour code had stunted, and had robbed of its claws. He continued to walk, Charlie following after him, until they reached the cage where Crosswick turned and pointed back down the tunnel. ‘I don’t know if you’ve ever worked down a mine before, Charlie, but my research, prior to entering this business, informed me that they usually employ a lot more men than *that*.’

Charlie looked at the handful of men down the tunnel.

‘That’s what a drilling engine *does*—it allows efficiency,’ Crosswick explained. ‘The men who keep that engine running are allowing me to employ fewer miners than I would ordinarily have to. Your presence here is already putting a lot more than two men out of work. All I have suggested is that you demand the commensurate pay.’

Charlie looked torn inside, confused, his face furrowed with discomfort.

‘The future belongs to engineers, not men with strong backs,’ Crosswick said, stepping into the cage. ‘But only those engineers who aren’t afraid of the sight of blood.’

Chapter 13

Pain.

Crosswick had felt like a walk at the end of the day, and had gone out over the fields an hour before Rudge usually arrived at his hut. The wind was bracing and seemed to strip away a certain amount of the tension he was carrying and take it off into the air. He walked along the edge of the forest, bruised and dying light barely finding its way through the tangle of branches. He had intended to walk through the forest, but, as he followed the tree line, he couldn't see any sort of path or trail that led in. And, as the last of the light faded, there was a rising sense of reluctance. Freezing cold gusts were blowing through the trees from the west, as though the wind was emanating from the forest itself—howling an icy warning that he should stay out.

He turned back. Time was growing short and he had to get back to the hut. As he made his way across the fields, there was a building sense of something watching him from the forest—a whisper of animal aggression, like hot carrion breath on his neck, the feeling of murderous eyes burning into him from the dark spaces between the branches.

Never had the orange dots of lamp light in the distance looked so inviting or felt so much like home. The site was, for the first time, a sanctuary in a bleak landscape. There was a sense of relief as Crosswick walked back among the first of the huts, until thoughts of the deadline pressed down on him once more like a tub being loaded with rocks, its wheels grinding under the weight.

He could not envisage life presenting him with another chance like this, and he was failing. Perhaps it was the order of things—some unseen force, as yet unknown to the physical sciences, that kept everything in its place. A force that prevented a man like him from upsetting the natural order, and rising too far from the bracket of society into which he had been born. Perhaps he was butting up against something that could not be drilled through by any machine—fate.

It could be that he was born to fail, and struggling like some tethered beast was just foolishness. Maybe he should sit content with his flagon of ale like the rest of them, understanding that certain matters in this world did not concern him. That last thought proved to be enough, and he was pleased when his anger fired up—he was glad that it was still there. He would find a way, he always did.

In his hut, the floor made a squelching sound as he walked to his desk. When he took a lamp and examined the cause of it, applying pressure to the boards with his foot, mud came oozing through the gaps.

When Rudge arrived they discussed the drilling schedule—the stark fact that, at present, they would not reach the required depth even if the engine performed with total reliability.

'If it *does* break down again, roll it back and have the men take over digging with their picks and hammers until it's repaired,' Crosswick said.

'That won't add much progress,' Rudge pointed out.

'No, but we need to claw every inch that we can.'

‘Don’t you have any more tricks you can play to make the machine run faster?’ Rudge asked.

‘I’m an engineer, not a wizard,’ Crosswick groaned, trying to rub the fatigue from his eyes.

‘What about a small blast, just to get us back on target?’ Rudge suggested.

‘We’re forbidden at this depth,’ Crosswick said.

‘We’re working in a hole in the ground... who’s to know?’ Rudge smirked.

Crosswick considered it, but then said, ‘The stability of the Nautrium...no, we can’t.’

Rudge frowned, apparently struggling to come up with another suggestion.

‘Perhaps we could draw up a schedule that would allow us to run the drill in shifts, and keep it going all day and night?’ Crosswick asked.

‘We’ll need to take on more lads,’ Rudge warned.

‘The budget won’t stretch to it,’ Crosswick said flatly.

‘We don’t have the men, Mr Crosswick.’

Crosswick picked up the orange gemstone, tapping it on the desk as he considered the options. ‘Add a few more hours with the men we have, it’ll at least get us closer.’

‘But—’

‘Do it. It’s the only tool we have at our disposal.’

Rudge sat back in his chair, letting out a slow breath, before nodding.

‘Anything else to report?’ Crosswick asked.

‘Aye,’ Rudge said. ‘Henry, the young lad you spoke to down the pit...’

Crosswick pressed his fist against his mouth and looked up at the ceiling, as he tried to remember this.

‘The young engineer,’ Rudge clarified.

‘Ah! Of course! A most promising young man.’

‘Well, after you gave him that talking to he got a bit overzealous with some of the other boys—shouting at them about the exhaust hoses, ordering them around, and the like.’

Crosswick smiled. ‘When a man makes it clear that he intends to move up in the world, he will often face opposition from his less ambitious peers. I think that boy has potential.’

‘Well, one of the other boys finally had enough and thumped him with a shovel.’

‘The swine! I hope you thrashed him?!’

‘I gave him a clip ’round the ear, and sent Henry up near the engine to help with loading the tubs, you know—to separate him and the other lad, like.’

‘Good man,’ Crosswick said.

‘Only thing was, he hadn’t learned his lesson. I reckon he decided to check the hoses were securely attached to the engine exhaust vents—one of the lads said he saw him pulling at them just before... well, he must have tugged one loose...’ Rudge paused. ‘His face was badly burned by the gasses.’

‘Good lord!’ Crosswick whispered.

‘I sent him home. There wasn’t much we could do for him here... the increased pressure, you see...his eyes...there wasn’t much left of them...’ Rudge said, softly.

‘No... of course... I’m sure you did everything you could,’ Crosswick murmured, as he carefully filled his brandy glass to the very brim.

Chapter 14

Blood.

That night Crosswick woke with a pain in his chest—so severe that he couldn't move. Each time he tried to sit up, or roll out of the hammock, there was a spike of agony that held him in place. He tried to call out for help, but found that he could produce no more than a hoarse whimper. Eventually, he resigned himself to lying still, releasing control, negotiating with the pain for a time, but then also letting go of that. He examined the sensation, wondering if the aversion to pain was a learned thing. If he had to live with it, perhaps a fresh perspective could be found, and a taste could be acquired.

Somehow he drifted back to sleep, but was woken again, after an indeterminate amount of time, by the sound of a man shouting at the top of his lungs outside. Crosswick got up, relieved that the pain had subsided—only a residual sensation of warmth in his lungs remained. He stumbled groggily in the dark hut—in search of a lamp. As well as the shouting, the night was filled with strange howling noises and the sound of a deep churning from below—now regular fixtures of the small hours on the site.

Crosswick lit the lamp and carried its glow to the door, opened it, and peered out into the yard. A group of four men were trudging toward his hut, armed with an assortment of shotguns, hammers, and pickaxes.

'You there! What the devil is going on?! He called to them. 'What's all that shouting?!

'There's something loose on the site, Mr Crosswick,' one of the men—Tom Worthington—replied, as the men gathered around the door of the hut.

'What do you mean, *something*? An *animal*?' Crosswick asked.

The men exchanged worried looks.

'We're not rightly sure, Mr Crosswick,' Tom replied.

'What's happened?' Crosswick asked.

'The noise coming from the pit—it shook the barracks and woke some of the lads. Will Hewitson swore that when he opened his eyes...there was something in there with us, standing over him in the dark. He said it slipped out under the door as soon as he saw it.'

'Is it him out there, causing that racket?' Crosswick asked.

'Aye,' Tom said.

'And what are you all doing outside?'

'Looking for it... to kill it.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake! The man had a nightmare... or has taken leave of his senses—listen to him!'

'No, he said he saw something,' Tom insisted.

'There is *nothing*! It's another case of imaginations running wild!' Crosswick barked.

‘I saw it too,’ one of the other men said, his voice trembling. ‘After Will woke me up with his screaming and shouting... it was looking back in through the window.’

Crosswick took the measure of the man—palpable fear in his eyes. Whatever was going on here, he certainly believed what he was saying.

‘What was it?’ Crosswick forced himself to ask.

The man winced, and shook his head.

‘Some sort of animal?’ Crosswick offered.

‘A dark shape. I couldn’t see it clearly... it had... it had a *mouth*...’ The man trailed off, apparently unable to say anything more.

Crosswick looked out across the darkened site, and said, ‘Let me get my boots on.’

He put on his boots and his coat, and took his percussion pistol from the desk draw. He and the men then set out, spending the next few hours patrolling the site, following the sound of Will Hewitson screaming and wailing—he had apparently gone running off into the night shortly after seeing whatever it was that he saw. But the anguished cries remained somewhere in the distance, wherever they searched. And, after a time, the sounds grew faint, before dying out completely.

They called off the search and retired for what was left of the night. In the morning a quantity of blood and viscera was discovered in a number of locations around the site, some of it certainly from animals—a part from a hare was identified. The rest was of unknown origin. Will Hewitson still hadn’t been found, and word was sent to the town to report back if he turned up there.

Crosswick received two telegrams. The first was from his doctor, who he had sent for a few days earlier, informing him that he had been delayed due to severe storms that had turned the roads into impassable bogs. The second was from Lord Richard, expressing concern over ‘disquieting rumours’ that, contrary to the progress reports that Crosswick had been sending, the excavation was actually behind schedule, with no chance of reaching the target depth on time. And also that the engine was ‘unreliable to the point of becoming a hindrance to our objective’.

Rumours... from *where*? Crosswick pondered. Was there someone else on the site who was in contact with Lord Richard? Did he have spies among the men? Who? The *engineers*? Crosswick suddenly felt exposed—as though all of his fears and doubts had been played out on some grand stage before a mocking audience. Did Lord Richard know everything that was happening here? Crosswick lit a cigarette while staring into space. He had received no letter from Charlotte.

Drilling.

‘Recalibrate, then we’ll push for another four feet,’ Crosswick ordered. The pitmen shuffled over to the drilling engine, hauling it back on its wheels so that the engineers could adjust its settings.

Rudge walked back from the group of men, and quietly said, ‘The lads have been working for more than thirty hours, Mr Crosswick.’

'I've been up for two days without a wink of sleep. If I can do it, so can they,' Crosswick replied in a flat emotionless tone.

Charlie stepped away from the engine and nodded at Crosswick, signalling that the recalibration had been completed. The hissing, and shunting, and screeching of metal started again. Pitiful creatures shuffled over to the engine, groaning as they pushed it forward, until the grinding sound of the rock being turned to gravel and dust overpowered everything else.

Crosswick began to recite the numbers in his head; another four now. Then they would push for the same progress for the next three days, and then, for the remaining time, no breaks at all. There would be a fifty hour push with no mechanical failures, and they would reach the target depth on time. It was within his grasp.

The grinding sound suddenly changed in tone, becoming higher in pitch—almost a hiss. 'Whoa!' Crosswick called, signalling with his hand to Crepsley, who darted forward and stopped the engine. Charlie wedged himself alongside the drill and examined the rock.

'What have we got up there, Charlie?' Crosswick asked.

'Feels like a deposit of loose rock, Mr Crosswick. It's like *sand!*' Charlie called back.

He pulled his arm out from between the rock and the drill tip, and looked at the handful of material he had scraped out. 'It's as fine as dust!' he said, rubbing it between his fingers.

He then looked over at Crosswick, confusion, possibly even *fear* in his eyes, and said, 'It's like... *ash.*'

A deep rumbling sound filled the tunnel. Crosswick looked over at Rudge. No one said a word, the rest of the men stared at each other, at Rudge, at Crosswick, their eyes wide and gleaming in the lamp light. 'Rudge?' Crosswick said.

'Wait,' Rudge answered. 'give it a—'

A thundering roar came up from deep within the rock, with a hideous, almost vocal quality, like an ancient throat letting out a gasp for the first time in a million years. And, in that moment, Crosswick's awareness felt disconnected from his body. There was a sense of terrifying clarity. The rock had churned, and melted, and cooled for unfathomable spans of time. Everything that had ever lived had consumed some other terrified creature, before falling prey to the fangs, or the jaws, or the venom, of something else. We were the children of the oldest and most terrible thing of all—something that humanity had tried to seal off, but was now rising again, reborn in this modern era. And now it would make us its clever new pets, its resourceful soldiers, its skilled butchers.

'Everyone out!' Rudge shouted.

Hearing Rudge's order, one of the boys began to ring a brass handbell.

The men went scurrying up the tunnel, lamps and pickaxes clanking and knocking against the prop beams. A murmur of fear and curses carried along the mine shaft, along with appeals from the back of the line for the men in front to hurry forward.

As Crosswick took the breathing equipment from his bag and began strapping on the air tanks, in case any gas had been released, he tapped Rudge on the shoulder. 'There haven't been any tremors... are you *sure?*'

'We can't take chances with cave-ins, Mr Crosswick.' As Rudge said this, something appeared to catch his eye, and he craned his neck to see over Crosswick's shoulder.

Crosswick turned around and saw that Charlie was still standing alongside the drill, rubbing the dust around on his fingers.

'Charlie! Charlie, you dozy bugger! Get a move on!' Rudge shouted.

Charlie didn't react at all. Squeezing passed Crosswick, Rudge went back down the tunnel, calling, 'Charlie!' as he went.

The engine began to rattle suddenly; black smoke pouring from the seals around the exhaust vents, as it somehow rolled itself back a few feet. The drill started spinning.

'What the devil is going on?!' Crosswick shouted, as he went running down the tunnel after Rudge. Charlie had stopped looking at the dust, and now seemed focused on the engine. And just as Rudge made it to the end of the tunnel, and reached out for him, Charlie stepped in front of the spinning drill. The engine and the clouds of smoke obscured Crosswick's view. There was a sound like wet rags being wrung out and torn. Crosswick reached the engine, and slammed the lever forward to stop it. Rudge was stumbling back from the drill tip, rubbing at his eyes—his face and the front of his shirt slick with blood.

'Good *god!*' Crosswick cried out.

Rudge turned and looked at him, appearing confused and disoriented.

'What—' Crosswick began.

'He walked right into it,' Rudge mumbled, still trying to wipe the gore from his eyes. The sour iron smell of fresh blood filled the air. Rudge looked back at the drill tip—a blur of red becoming a flicker, as the rotation slowed. Crosswick grabbed his arm. 'For God's sake, man! We have to get above ground!'

Chapter 15

Fear.

In front of the hoist house, Crosswick told the assembled men to go back to their barracks, and to prepare a survey team that would go back down in one hour. They would have to check the stability of the mine, and recover Charlie's body, before work could resume. Rudge had stopped speaking and appeared dazed, as though he was lost in some sort of dream. Crosswick led him back to his hut, where Rudge swilled the worst of the blood off at his wash barrel. Crosswick gave him Charlotte's blanket to put around his shoulders, while his shirt soaked in the water—no clothes belonging to Crosswick would have been big enough for the man. Finally, Crosswick poured them both large brandies, and they sat at his desk.

'There. You take a moment to gather yourself, old boy. You've had a nasty shock,' Crosswick said.

Rudge sipped from the glass. 'Didn't you see it too?' he asked, his voice thin and faint.

'I was spared the worst of it,' Crosswick replied.

Rudge threw back the rest of the brandy, his hand shaking lightly. He seemed to stare at nothing. The colour had drained from his face, the bristles on his cheeks and jaw seeming darker and longer in contrast. His eyes gazed out from dark pits. The reaction he was having to the awful event seemed to be getting worse.

Crosswick leaned over and poured another large measure into the glass that Rudge still clutched in his hand, before asking, 'Cigarette?'

Rudge stared at the silver case that Crosswick held in front of him, appearing to be baffled by the sight of it. After a moment, he took one and placed it loosely between his lips, leaving faint red fingerprints on the paper. Crosswick lit it for him, and watched as he took a long drag.

'Terrible business,' Crosswick said. 'But accidents are unavoidable in this line of work. You're a seasoned pitman, I don't have to explain that to you.'

Rudge appeared to be both looking at Crosswick, and straight through him. Or perhaps he was staring at something being played out in the interior of his mind—it wasn't clear. But Crosswick was already finding the pretence that everything was normal a difficult act to maintain, and Rudge's strange disconnected gaze wasn't making it any easier.

'And you have done a *first rate* job of running things down there,' Crosswick continued. 'I'm sure a lot of the men owe life and limb to you. No doubt there would have been many more unfortunate events if we didn't have such a competent foreman.'

Rudge just stared at him blankly.

'Well, of course. Anyone would have the wind knocked out of them... seeing a thing like that,' Crosswick hesitated, then cautiously asked, 'What do you think possessed the man?'

'Didn't you see it too?' Rudge asked, again.

'I was trailing behind you, old boy—the engine shielded me from the ghastly moment.'

Rudge flinched slightly, and then lowered his head, closing his eyes. Then, in a whisper, asked, 'Didn't you *hear* it?'

'Hear what?'

'The voice... coming up from below.'

Crosswick felt the clutch of fear tightening. 'I'm sure I don't know what you could mean,' he replied.

'Didn't you feel it? The *truth* of it?' Rudge asked.

Crosswick didn't answer.

'I see it now—I see how it is,' Rudge said. 'The lads have been scared of this dig because they think the rock doesn't want to be moved... but they're wrong. It *wants* us down there. Every inch we dig, every drop of sweat, every cut and bruise, and every broken bone... every *death*—it feeds on it all. It wants us to forget the sun, and the world above ground, and that we're *men*, with *minds* and *hearts*. We're not driving the drill down there...we're being *pulled*, god help us!'

'Steady on, old boy,' Crosswick said, his voice shaking. 'You've had a nasty shock, that's all.'

'Didn't you feel it?' Rudge asked, his eyes tightening—imploring.

Crosswick had to look away. He stood up and turned to the progress chart. Trying to control his voice, he managed to croak out, 'We just have to subdue it... push it down,' and then, after a moment, 'Nearly there now.'

Chapter 16

Death.

When Rudge had seemed in a fit state to leave, Crosswick had seen him out, and then decided to finally sit down and write to Charlotte. He woke up slumped over his desk, with his forehead pressed against a blank sheet of paper, and the pen still between his fingers. He had a pulsing headache and there was a dullness and a weight to his senses, like his skull was packed with cotton wool. His chest was burning.

Looking around the hut, he found it impossible to get a sense of how much time had passed. He reached into his waistcoat pocket and found his watch, but instinctively released it—his fingertips registering heat. He disconnected the watch from the button hole, and held it up by its chain—it had stopped. Carefully pinching it between his fingers, he found that the gold was burning hot. He lowered the watch onto his desk and looked at it, confused. Perhaps this would all make sense when he had shaken off the drowsiness.

He pushed himself up, and growled as the pain in his head surged. When he took a step back from the desk, his boot heel made contact with something soft. More of the mud had come up through the boards—it was pooled half an inch deep across the entire floor.

Crosswick stepped out of the hut, hoping to get an idea of the time, but the small amount of cold light, working its way through the overcast sky, gave little indication. It could have been early morning, it could just as likely have been dusk. His head swam as he precariously made his way across the yard—the fall of his boots against the wooden boards sounding muffled. He hadn't drunk enough brandy to feel as bad as he did. Something was wrong. The thick mud was alive with a mass of bloated slugs. He put his mind to reaching the barracks. Rudge would know what time it was. Rudge would be abreast of the situation at the mine.

When Crosswick pushed open the door of one of the barracks, Harry Rance was bumbling around inside, snuffing out the lamps in the small adjoining room that was used for leaving laundry and boots.

'What the devil are you doing?!' Crosswick asked. 'It's pitch dark in here as it is!'

Rance snapped his head around, startled by Crosswick's voice. 'Gas!' he whispered, there's been a leak from the pit!

'Gas?!'

'It's a badden, Mr Crosswick! All the lads have been knocked out for hours, we must have hit a big pocket down there—it's gassed the whole site!'

'I don't smell anything...'

'Sometimes you can't—that's what the lads told me.'

‘We’re safe now, if everyone has come round, surely?’ Crosswick stopped, and then said, ‘Knocked out for *hours*? What time is it?’

‘I don’t know...’ Rance said, his eyes beginning to flood.

‘What on earth’s wrong, man?! What’s happened?’ Crosswick asked.

Rance looked up at him fearfully, tears forging clean lines through the grime on his face. ‘Something’s gone on in there,’ he whimpered.

‘Where? In the dormitory?’ Crosswick asked.

He stepped toward the door, but lingered when he noticed a dark red smear across the floorboards.

‘Wait, Mr Crosswick!’ Rance said. ‘It’s not something a gentleman like yourself should see!’

Crosswick pushed passed him and went into the dormitory. Inside, the row of bunks stood empty. The dormitory was completely deserted. His eyes followed the trail of blood to one of the bunks—it was soaked red, slathered with gore and intestines. It looked like a man had been butchered while he slept and then dragged out of the barrack.

Crosswick stared at the bunk. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rance said.

‘Who’s bunk is that?’

‘It’s Jack Braddon’s bunk.’

‘Is this from him?’ Crosswick asked, pointing at the smear of blood on the floor.

‘I think it is, Mr Crosswick.’

‘You *think* it is?’

‘His wedding ring,’ Rance said, his voice breaking up as he started to cry again.

He pointed at the bunk without looking at it—there was a plain gold band streaked with blood next to the pillow.

‘Who did this?! Who was here?!’ Crosswick shouted.

‘Potter, and Jimmy Swinson... and Peter Addington...’

‘Was it one of them?!’

‘They were asleep. I woke up first, and I... they heard me shouting about it,’ Rance said.

‘Where are they? They saw this?!’

‘Aye, they saw it.’

‘Well, where are they?’

‘They ran off—said they’d had enough. They won’t work here anymore.’

‘Who else has seen this?’

‘Nobody.’

‘You’re sure?!’

‘Aye! I’m sure!’

‘Braddon was caught in the drill, in the accident...with Charlie, do you understand?’

‘But, he—’

‘He was *caught in the drill*! I’ll write to his family, you get his things together!’ Crosswick barked.

The pain in his chest surged powerfully. There was a sensation like something pushing out from inside, trying to break open his ribcage, and he doubled over in agony.

'Mr Crosswick!' Rance cried out, helping to steady Crosswick on his feet.

'I'm fine!' Crosswick growled through locked teeth.

'What's wrong?! Shall I send for someone?!'

'I'm perfectly well!' Crosswick straightened up, as the terrible spasms subsided to a degree. He took a deep breath, and then held tightly onto the doorframe when there was another swell of pain. 'Go and find Rudge!'

Rance went for the outer door, but it opened in front of him as Rudge walked into the barrack.

'Were have you been?!' Crosswick asked, holding his chest.

'I... passed out,' Rudge said. 'I think I took a funny turn. What's going on? What's the matter?'

'Nothing... just a touch of... indigestion,' Crosswick said breathlessly.

'What—' Rudge stopped as he noticed the blood on the floor, and then looked into the dormitory.

'We don't know,' Crosswick said, waving his hand. 'We're trying to get to the bottom of it.'

'Who's blood is it?' Rudge asked.

'Jack Braddon's... we think,' Crosswick replied.

'Jack... is he *dead*?!'

'I don't know.' Crosswick sighed, and then asked, 'Where are the rest of the men?'

Rudge shook his head, bewildered. 'I've been looking around the site for them. So far we're missing about half.'

'What in god's name is going on?!' Crosswick asked.

'*God* only knows! I think we must have hit a pocket of gas—I woke up on the floor of the hoist house. The other lads I found said they were out cold too,' Rudge explained.

Rance nodded to Crosswick.

Rudge continued, 'I've sent a few of the lads down with air tanks and a canary to test for it. Told them to check on the stability of the tunnel while they're there.'

'We'd better hear from them as soon as possible, who knows what time we've lost,' Crosswick said.

He forced himself out into the yard, followed by Rudge and Rance. They trudged and slipped through the mud, heading for the hoist house. The sky was a blank grey void. Cuttle came loping across the yard toward them, calling, 'Mr Crosswick!'

He reached into his satchel and pulled out a telegram.

Crosswick took it from him, and stuffed it into his coat pocket, without stopping.

'You get off now, lad,' Rudge said to Cuttle, patting him on the shoulder. 'We might have hit some gas.'

Cuttle nodded and went bounding off.

They continued to walk, and when they were a short distance from the hoist house, the pulley wheel began turning as the cage travelled back up.

'Here they come,' Rudge pointed out.

The pulley wheel stopped.

'Perhaps now, we'll get some answers,' Crosswick said.

There was a deafening blast from the hoist house, like the foghorn of a great ship. Crosswick and the others pressed their hands over their ears, as the dreadful sound roared even louder, the ground shaking. Crosswick felt like he'd been hit over the head. He stumbled back, the noise vibrating through his bones. In some way that required no words, he heard it speak to him—the quenchless hunger of existence, everything sucked down into a monstrous black whirlpool and disassembled by the force of the currents. Everything pulled apart, and every part broken in two, over and over. Destruction. Annihilation. Nothing.

When the moaning sound relented the three men looked at each other, afraid and confused. Then, from the tall black doorway of the hoist house, a man came running toward them, slipping over in the mud, scrambling to get back to his feet. Alf then came scurrying out after him. Both men had blood weeping from their ears. 'Get the blasting charges!' the man screamed wildly, when he saw Crosswick and the others. 'Blow the fuckin' mine up!'

Another roar came from the pit, causing the sides of the hoist house to crack and split, the whole structure sagging. Then the noise surged intensely, rocking the surrounding area. The pulley wheel and the roof of the hoist house were sent flying off into the air, as the cage smashed through and thudded down into the mud behind the supply huts. 'They'll eat every one of us!' the man wailed at Crosswick, just as some invisible force picked him off his feet, like a powerful gust of wind that only he could feel, and threw him and Alf back into the ruins of the hoist house. Their ghastly screams faded as they were pulled down the production shaft.

Rance went running off between the barracks—in the direction of the open fields. 'Come on, Mr Crosswick!' Rudge shouted, putting his hand on Crosswick's shoulder, pulling him back from the mine.

They hurried back across the site, toward Crosswick's hut as best they could—he was still slowed by the pain in his chest. The terrifying sounds from below rose and fell, louder each time. The ground shook, becoming uneven, splitting and yawning open.

'Crosswick! Mr Crosswick!' A horrified voice called out.

It was Tom Worthington, buried up to his shoulders in the sludge, his raised arms reaching out for them, and clawing at the mud around him desperately.

Crosswick and Rudge ran over to him, grabbing an arm each.

'Help me! Don't let it take me down!' he begged.

'It's alright, lad! You're alright! We've got you!' Rudge shouted.

The mud spat and bubbled around them, letting out a wet groan, and Tom was suddenly pulled into it, his arms slipping the grasps of Crosswick and Rudge, the mud and the slugs filling his screaming mouth as he went under. Rudge reached his arm in, searching for him, 'Tom!' he roared. 'Tom!' Pounding his fist into the sludge again and again, splashing it up across his chest.

'He's gone!' Crosswick shouted, pulling him back.

'We can't leave him!' Rudge whimpered, futilely.

'He is *gone*! We have to keep going!'

They pressed on. Crosswick's hut just ahead, there were terror-stricken cries in the distance—the only words that Crosswick heard clearly were; 'Devils coming out of the pit!'

They crashed through the door of the hut, Crosswick falling to his knees. Rudge helped him up and slammed the door shut behind them. Almost as soon as he did so, the room fell silent. Whatever was happening outside seemed to have stopped, and their panting breaths were the only sounds.

From nowhere, Crosswick remembered the telegram. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the crumpled card—it was from Lord Richard. ‘Delighted to hear of success. Will drink to your achievement. Do everything possible to disappear efficiently without leaving an excess of bodily remains around site. Trust you will carry out this final duty as diligently as you have all previous—Lord Richard Sailsbury’.

Crosswick let the card fall from his hand. He felt lightheaded, but suddenly the pain in his chest had gone. He took a deep breath, feeling as though the capacity of his lungs had doubled. And, momentarily, there was a great sense of relief. Something strangling him inside had been dislodged.

The room shook slightly, then settled, before the whole hut violently tilted a few degrees. Crosswick held onto his desk to steady himself, while Rudge lurched forward before regaining his balance. The orange gem rolled off the desk and across the room—knocking to a stop against the bottom of the door. And then Crosswick saw it; something through the gaps in the doorframe, some huge shifting form pressed up against the front of the hut.

Rudge turned and looked at Crosswick, speechless, sharp animal terror in his eyes. He dashed across the room, locked the heavy wrought iron bolt on the door, and then carefully stepped away from it. The front of the hut crunched, as the thing tried to push its way in. Both men reflexively jumped back, hurrying to the other side of the room. Crosswick got down on his knees, rummaged in the desk draw, and grabbed his percussion pistol. He quickly pushed a ball down the barrel with the ramrod, then pulled back the hammer and aimed the gun at the door. At the same time, Rudge took down the pickaxe, that Crosswick had mounted on the wall, and held it ready.

There was another thud—this one sending a large crack running through the wall. The door was beginning to buckle. Crosswick kept the pistol aimed as steadily as he could while taking the brandy bottle from his desk and uncorking it with his teeth. He drank deeply from the bottle, let out a gasp, and slid it across the desk to Rudge—who caught hold of it and desperately gulped down most of what remained.

The door snapped loudly, the gap around it growing larger, some kind of mass trying to reach in. ‘My wife has stopped writing to me,’ Crosswick said, his eyes fixed on the door. ‘I kept meaning to write back, but... there always seemed to be something more pressing at hand. But for the life of me, at *this* moment—’ He turned to Rudge and gave him a sad smile. ‘I can’t remember what any of it was.’

The door splintered and was torn from the hinges.

