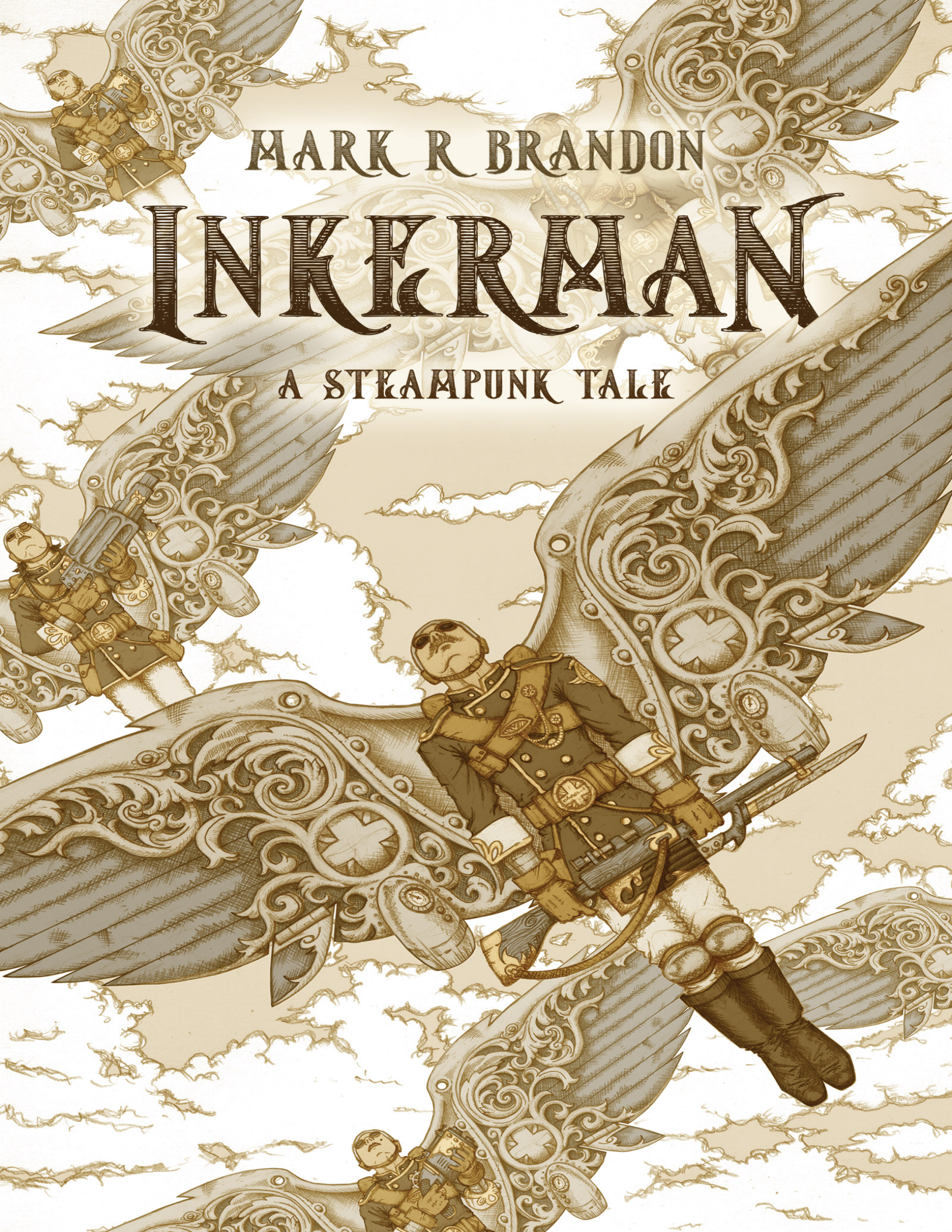


MARK R BRANDON

INKERMAN

A STEAMPUNK TALE



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For David

FROM SOMEWHERE ABOVE them came a sound like someone ripping a seam, and Major Chastain's headless body fell from the rampart onto the duckboards at the bottom of the trench, landing like a joiner's toolbag.

Vandermeer froze as the separated head, khaki pith helmet and all, spun like a cricket ball escaping the grip of a leg spinner and fell into his lap, one eye staring into its erstwhile colleague's face. He jumped up as if hit by a mortar shell, pushing the head away from him. It bounced once then rolled across the wet boards and embedded itself into the trench wall, ragged neck jutting lividly from the mud.

His stomach lurched.

He fell back into his niche, huddling under the outcropping of duckboard from a previous, shallower trench, saw his men doing the same. Above them, cold rain fell steadily, fluttering grey curtains of water shot through by a spray of Russian bullets and artillery shells.

Vandermeer closed his eyes.

Sometimes, during a bombardment, if he managed to surrender to the horrifying possibility that he might die at any moment, it was possible to enter a paradoxical inner world of peace. There, he would be at his easel in his mother's conservatory, the zips and booms and clattering cannonade reduced to mere whispers, freckles of cloud in the washed-out sky beneath his brush.

A rough tug on Vandermeer's left arm pulled him from the attempt. He opened his eyes.

Who sent a child into this Pit of Infernus?

"Captain Vandermeer, sir?" The boy's voice was reedy,

trembling. "I'm sent from General Ross. You've to return to Forward Command immediately."

Vandermeer did not recognise the boy from the small group of end-runners working for the company in this sector. "His command came via telegraph?"

"No, sir, telegraph is down. I've come from Forward Command."

Vandermeer sighed. The company's telegraph node had taken damage from a Russian bombardment a little over two weeks ago and had only just been repaired. It was just their luck the Russians had hit it again. "Well, you can..." He stopped. He could not send the child back with a refusal. He cursed silently. This was the first order involving any positive action he had received in weeks, and now he was being pulled from the front line, from his men, at a point when they were staring into the jaws of defeat.

A Russian shell screamed into the blasted hillock they had been ordered to defend 'at all costs', not fifty yards from the trench, and exploded in a welter of flame, shaking the ground. Vandermeer grabbed the boy, pulling his waxed cloak tautly over the two of them as the blast vomited huge gobbets of mud into the trench.

The boy burrowed into him, warm, wet, shaking with fear. Together they huddled for a long moment until the rain of debris ceased.

The Russian guns stilled momentarily, leaving the air filled with groans and the occasional hoarse sob.

The boy stood up and Vandermeer realised the lad was skin and bone. It was hardly surprising. Food supplies had been erratic for weeks and lately, non-existent. He stood up, patted the boy on the shoulder. "Come on, we'll go together," he said, attempting a hearty tone which drew

heavily on his near-exhausted reserve of good humour. "Sergeant Plunkett!"

A huge bear of a man with a grizzled dark blond beard and whiskers appeared from just out of eyesight, bulky repeating rifle slung across his back, brushing mud and gore from his uniform with his mighty paws. "Yessir!"

"Plunkett, Ross has called me back to Forward Command. You'll take charge until I return."

The man looked confused. "Is Major Chastain not..."

Vandermeer shook his head sorrowfully.

"Aw, very sorry to 'ear that, sir." Plunkett saluted with one bloody, bandaged hand.

"And get that seen to, will you? You're no good to the British Army with a stump. Find Doctor Gastrell and get him to take a look at it."

Plunkett looked downcast. "Doctor's run out of supplies, beggin' your pardon sir. Been a week since 'e's had any."

Vandermeer bit back an obscenity. When he wasn't under the Russian guns, he'd been filling out requisition orders and supply requests, always seemingly no avail. It was probably time one of the Company's officers went down to Command to find out what was happening. And he was all there was left. In an attempt to professionalise the Army, the Militarium had ended the age-old custom of purchased commissions and quietly sent the amateurs back to their country estates. However, the newly established Officer School in Camberley had not yet produced enough graduates to fully replace them, never mind ensure the smooth operation of an actual war, such as the one the British Empire had forced itself into, ostensibly to protect its 'assets' in the Eastern Mediterranean. Instead, the Militarium had declared, the Army would have to "run light" in the Crimea.

“Send for Doctor Arquette of the Durham Light and get yourself sorted. Otherwise, we’re going to have to ship to you Lady Florence in Scutari and she’ll have you out of the war for keeps.”

Plunkett looked aghast.

“Good. See to it then man.” Vandermeer took the messenger by the shoulder. “Come on boy, let’s get back to FC, shall we?”

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

They checked in at the telegraph node before beginning the descent to Forward Command. The station, which lay to the rear of a chaotic marshalling area about a mile from the current front line, seemed to be perfectly intact.

Two men sat outside, poking at a battered corned beef tin in which simmered a watery stew. Vandermeer saw the boy licking his lips, shot the men a look. They fetched up a tin cup and a fist-sized chunk of black bread, halved it and gave the boy cup and trencher. He ate greedily.

Inside the hut, Vandermeer encountered the Royal Signals Corps lieutenant in charge of the telegraph node. The man was young but looked older, his face pale and haggard, his hands shaking either from nervous exhaustion, the Turkish coffee he had at his hand or a combination of the two.

“I understand that the telegraph is down?” said Vandermeer.

“Yes, Captain,” snapped the man. “Just this morning. Entirely down. Not a peep from anyone. I’d send a runner, but all my boys are out. Not that it would make any bloody difference if it was operating.” The man seemed to be quivering on the brink of hysteria.

Vandermeer's expression of puzzlement caused the lieutenant to fly at a stack of telegraph papers as if he was looking through an especially full drawer of ladies' handkerchiefs trying to find a diamond brooch. "Stand fast. Hold fast. Ration supplies. Stand fast. Man your positions. Man your bloody positions? What in the bloody shit pits of Infernus does Ross think we're doing up here?"

Vandermeer stared at the man. His head reeled. Company command, including logistics, had been Major Chastain's responsibility.

How did you let it get so bad, Bertie? Why didn't you go talk to Ross?

He left the man, who was close to raving by now, collected the boy and left.

Forward Command, Simferopol, was a seven-mile walk from the staging area, far too close for comfort, in Vandermeer's considered opinion, but on seeing the road, it might as well have been at the end of the Earth.

On a dry day when there was a lull at the front, the journey took less than two hours at brisk pace. Today the dirt track was chaos.

Men, caked with blood and filth, sat anywhere that wasn't wet, huddling in small groups under the barrels and wheels of toppled artillery pieces or abandoned carts and in the lee of broken-down steam traction vehicles, their waxed capes employed as canopies. The picture was one of a never-ending, filthy Bedouin tent city. Here and there lay dead horses and dead men and some bloody, muddy piles which might have been either, or both.

At a point where the track widened was what looked at first glance to be a small war memorial. As they came closer, they could see it was what remained of a 'Steaming Billy', one of the ten feet tall automata whose appearance

on the battlefield had been heralded as an end to the war the London papers had apparently started referring to as "Our Crimean Misadventure". Vandermeer had seen the Billies go over the top at Balaclava, had watched as the new Russian mortars took the lumbering war machines to pieces. This one had never faced enemy fire. Rain and scavengers had not taken long to reduce it to a pile of scrap iron, one arm upraised, pointing, perhaps, to some kind of Iron Heaven beyond the clouds.

The Steaming Billy was not the only attempt to win the war via new-fangled technology and, Vandermeer thought, make up for the deficit of Army officers.

Across the automaton's broad back, perhaps in remembrance, perhaps as a sour joke, someone had affixed the remains of one of the Militarium's other 'miracles', a mangled pair of wings belonging to one of the members of the ill-fated Merlin Squadron.

Vandermeer had seen the Merlins in demonstration at Stow Maries Field in Essex, not far from his muster point for the First Anglian Steam.

He had rather envied these Men of the Air, in their blue serge jackets and white breeches, colours designed to blend into a summer sky. They came onto the Field to rapturous applause, bent under the weight of their wings, enormous things twice as broad as the man was tall, handcrafted steel feathers in an ornate white frame. At the base of each wing, at hip height, was fastened what looked like a stretched-out egg with a dial in its face. These were the revolutionary Handley Page Air Pistons, an invention of great promise, it seemed, not reliant on steam but on a fractionated distillate of petroleum. This was the first time they were to be tested in the glare of public and press scrutiny.

When the Merlins sparked their engines and took off, it was a marvellous sight. They turned and swooped, performing a mock combat which looked more like aerial ballet, while the crowd roared its approval below. There had been a couple of broken ankles on landing, but these were teething troubles, the press had been assured.

On disembarkation at Sevastopol, the Merlins had been cheered, feted as heroes, saviours. Launched into the steel grey Crimean sky, their shining wings and pale uniforms had made them targets for Russian snipers, but they could fly easily out of range and made good progress towards the Russian lines. Then the Russians unleashed their own experimental technology, the *Metallicheskiye Vorony* - Metal Crows. Half bird, half automaton, these metal-clawed raptors were able to avoid fire from the Merlins' heavy rifles, then mobbed their targets, pecking and slashing the vulnerable machinery and the unarmoured flyer alike. Of the twenty Merlins to take to the air that day, none had survived. The remaining ten officers in the Squadron, who had been spared the combat for a variety of technical reasons, had returned to England, pitiable souls, bereft and seemingly grounded forever now.

The boy looked at him in glossy-eyed wonder as he told the tale.

"How old are you, lad?"

The boy attempted a stern expression.

"I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Fifteen, sir," whispered the boy. "Though me mam says I look older."

Vandermeer shook his head. There was no telling these boys, who escaped from the smog-choked squalor of the industrial cities in search of adventure, only to end up faced with horrors of a very different register.

It took them the best part of five hours to reach Forward Command, which was housed in an imposing church at the northernmost limit of the city. The church, with its thick white walls and three black onion domes, each topped with an Eastern cross in plated gold, dominated the northern quarter of Simferopol. It had evidently at some point been the scene of bitter fighting. Its white walls were pock-marked with bullet holes and one of its four towers terminated raggedly, decapitated by a shell, its delicate dome blasted to oblivion.

Decapitated.

Vandermeer shivered.

Having completed his mission, the boy seemed anxious to get away. Vandermeer ordered him to the mess tent, whereupon the child grinned like a lunatic and ran off, disappearing quickly out of view. Perhaps they'd have more supplies, here. He reasoned they would. Generals never went hungry.

The interior of the church, laid out in the Eastern style, had been commandeered entirely and roughly, with little respect for its former function or status. The front section, the narthex, had been transformed into an officers' mess, now heavy with tobacco smoke and the mournful sound of the balalaika. Some twenty men, mostly in dress uniform, sat around circular tables playing cards, while their batmen passed back and forth with drinks. The atmosphere was not like that of a regular mess, jolly and grim at one and the same time, rather sullen and strange, as if the men were hiding from angry wives in some seedy basement club in London's West End.

He passed through them into the nave. The main part of the church was crammed with mahogany desks and battered filing cabinets. Four brass telegraph machines sat

idle beneath their glass domes. A host of adjutants and secretaries moved around the place with a frantic yet purposeless energy, like bees who had lost their queen.

Ross's office occupied part of the sanctuary, an enclosed set of rooms at the rear of the church. Outside the door, at an ornate table Vandermeer presumed had once been some kind of altar, sat a hawk-faced man he vaguely recognised.

"Captain Vandermeer to see General Ross." He saluted.

The man looked at him levelly. "Yes, I understand he'd sent for you. You had better go in, I suppose, Captain." He pronounced the word 'Captain' oddly, with mild disdain, Vandermeer thought, but perhaps he was simply tired. He looked tired. They were all tired.

Vandermeer nodded and entered the sanctuary.

Ross's makeshift office was in total disarray, scattered with manila folders, handwritten notes and crumpled ribbons of punched tape, in piles atop empty supply crates, scattered across two camp beds and a number of occasional tables. A very complicated-looking telegraph machine sat domeless in one corner, surrounded by a plethora of tools and a large magnifying tripod. Doors led out of the room to either side.

At the centre of the office was an outsized mahogany desk, covered with a waxed map of the Crimean Peninsula, complete with carefully positioned miniature lead figures; cavalry, infantry and cannon placed on the green and brown areas, and a few tiny ships on the blue part. A large hurricane lamp of Russian design, brass with a fluted glass shade and crystal pendants, would provide illumination if required.

The General was nowhere to be seen.

For a long moment, Vandermeer stood waiting, then the door to his left hand clicked and began to swing open.

“Vandermeer.” The voice was low, hushed, with a crackle of anxiety in it. The General looked this way and that and then slunk into the room, head sunk, shoulders raised, eyes moving from side to side.

“General Ross, sir, I...” The rest of his intended sentence died in his mouth. He had never seen Ross like this before. In fact, he had never seen anyone like this before who hadn’t been on the poppy for some time. He shook the thought from his head. Surely not. Yet Ross’s eyes were wide, darkly ringed. His skin seemed dusty somehow. His uniform looked as if it had not been laundered in weeks, which Vandermeer found disturbing, as Ross had a reputation for being most punctilious. “Sir, I don’t mean to be impertinent, but is everything quite all right?”

Ross put a finger to his lips. “Keep your voice down, man. Speak in a low voice, a murmur, not a whisper. They can hear you if you whisper.”

“They, sir?”

The General did not answer but shuffled to the leather captain’s chair on the other side of the desk and sat down heavily. His eyes went immediately to the map, his finger hovering over the figure of a cavalryman with drawn sabre and busby. He began muttering to himself. “Even if we were to bring what’s left of the Hussars up from Bakhchysarai, we wouldn’t... Perhaps if we...no, no. London would never...”

This? This is the Ogre of Osogbo? What on Earth has happened to him?

Ross leaned across his map, cupping his hand around his mouth in a conspiratorial gesture. “Listen, Vandermeer, I have a job for you. Will you do it?” Before Vandermeer could answer, Ross pulled back from him, sat up straight,

eyes wide. His lips drew back in what was clearly meant to be a smile.

Abruptly, Napier entered the sanctuary bearing a pewter tray, small cups and saucers and a copper *cezve* of the intensely sweet Turkish coffee to which the British Army had become addicted during the course of the Crimean campaign. He poured some for both men and lay a plate of *baklava* on the map. He shot Vandermeer a tight look clearly meant to convey some kind of amity between them and hinting at a shared concern for the General. "I apologise Captain, it's all I could find."

Vandermeer bobbed his head and tried to return the look, though more neutrally than Napier's. He was still not sure what exactly was going on here and wasn't ready to pick a side if that was what it might come to.

"Mind the Seventh Cavalry will you man?" said Ross, as one of the lead figures was displaced by the sweet pastry's arrival. It was a brittle, nervous admonition.

Napier ignored Ross, addressed himself to Vandermeer. "If you need something more substantial, Captain, you might try the mess." He made to leave.

"Thank you, Captain, I'll..." Vandermeer started, but Napier had gone.

Ross's smile evaporated and his eyes narrowed to slits. "I caught him yesterday with a glass. He said he was simply polishing it, but I'm sure he had it at the wall."

Vandermeer looked at the wall, which had to be a foot thick. He nodded. "So, this mission, General, sir? Has it got something to do with the telegraph?"

Ross started as if someone had passed electricity through him. "Where did you hear that? What do you know?"

"I don't know anything," said Vandermeer carefully. "The telegraph operator at our node said the network was down,

and I noticed that none of the machines in the outer office are operating.”

“It’s the whole network, yes. We had to shut it down this morning. I shut it down. They’re not sending out there, are they?” He looked over Vandermeer’s shoulder to the door to the nave. “Are they?”

“Umm, no sir, not that I noticed.”

“I’m keeping an ear out, now, you see. In case they start. It’s a plot, Vandermeer. That’s what it is. They never wanted this war, oh no.”

“A plot? Who didn’t want the war?”

Ross opened his hands wide to take in the whole map. “It’s some sort of plot, this whole thing, I tell you. They’re trying to make a fool of me. It’s all because of that Nigerian business, they’re punishing me I tell you. Look, here and here and here –” he pointed to clusters of units on the map “– we’re stretched way too thin. Supplies have become erratic. And still, they order ‘Stand Fast’. I think they mean to have the whole front collapse! I had to stop it, I had to do something. Goddamn it, man, I had to do something.”

Vandermeer felt cool sweat break out at the nape of his neck. The British had twelve thousand men in the field. Without orders of any kind, they might be able to hold their positions, but with supplies precarious, the Front would surely crumble.

“This is the Navy’s doing.” Ross’s bowed, balding head was mottled white and purple now. He looked up, eyes wild. “Those salt-sucking bastards have always been gunning for us. For me. They never wanted this war. No interest in a land war, that lot. Only want to ponce around the High Seas lording it over natives in canoes. It’s them and their damned machine. Fitted this one up to take down old Ross. Well, we’ll see about that.”

“Machine?”

“Their Engine. That jumped up electrified abacus they have in Inkerman. I told the Militarium it was a mistake, but they insisted. Saving money and – have you heard of this awful word? – streamlining!” The word dropped from his mouth like a rotten scallop. “The Treasury can’t afford to have so many officers in a campaign of this nature, they said. This will be simpler, they said. More effective. More efficient! Damn-blast the bloody lot of them!”

Vandermeer looked at Ross. The man’s face was purple, a dot of bright white spittle standing out on his lower lip. He looked like a madman, eyes wide, almost quivering with his inner turmoil. “Couldn’t you, er, issue new orders to the men in the field, sir? You are the commander.”

It was as if Vandermeer had slapped him. Ross looked like a boy of ten who had been asked to bowl the first over at Lord’s Cricket Ground. He shook his head in tight, rapid moves, almost as if he was shivering. “No, no, it’s quite impossible. I don’t...ummm...”

“General?”

“I could... I mean I can’t... I suppose I might... but no. I have my orders, you know. Doesn’t do to disobey direct orders. Where would we be without discipline?” He stared into the middle distance as if the answer to his conundrum might be found there. “I’ve sent so many times for more men, more ammunition, more supplies.” Ross gestured towards a Chesterfield armchair next to the desk in which sat a pile of telegraph memorandum paper.

Vandermeer glanced at it. The top sheet indicated a request for supplies and the response: DELAYED, STAND FAST. The one underneath it revealed a portion of a similar exchange. It was nothing Vandermeer had not seen before.

It was difficult to shake the feeling that London had abandoned them to this hostile peninsula.

“Do you see?” Ross’s eyes were wide, then collapsed into flickering denial.

Vandermeer nodded.

“I’m about ready to...” Ross trailed off, then shook his head as if having come to a sudden realisation. “It wouldn’t matter what I wanted to do, anyway. They’re all in on it, you see. All of them. Napier’s the worst. I don’t know what he puts in my coffee but it’s something, I tell you, Vandermeer, some kind of queering powder or somesuch to make me addled. I can’t think clearly.”

Vandermeer felt suddenly light-headed, torn between his duty to obey and his strong desire to call for Napier, a straitjacket and a ship to take Ross to the tender graces of Lady Florence Nightingale, whose hospital at Scutari he was sure would have a ward for men who had lost their minds. He realised he had not eaten. He took a cube of *baklava* into his mouth and crunched into the sweet pastry. No, packing Ross off to an asylum was not a solution. One of them needed to show some backbone, before it was too late. “What would you like me to do, General Ross, sir?”

Ross seemed revived upon hearing his title. He jabbed at the map, to a small brass pin in the map, near the city of Sevastopol. A small lead ship lay on its side near the port.

That would be the *Lord Halifax*, Vandermeer reasoned, an ironclad armed freighter which had hit a Russian mine five miles out and exploded, taking a month’s worth of ammunition and other supplies with her. “Sevastopol?”

“No, man! Will you look at where my finger is pointing? Inkerman, man. Inkerman. That bloody Engine. There’s the problem, mark my words. Bloody Navy machine. Who knows what they’re up to, eh? Their hearts have never been

in this war, oh no. After the loss of the *Halifax* I expect they want all their lovely shiny ships out of the Black Sea pronto. I can't trust anyone else but you, Vandermeer. You know how I like things done. They're all out to get me." Ross waved a hand in the direction of the nave. Then he rooted in his drawer and slid a thick vellum envelope, sealed with his personal imprimatur, across the map towards Vandermeer. "Go to Inkerman, the primary node. There's a Guards detachment down there. You are to take command. Contact London directly from there. Direct to Army Command, General Brazington or General Whittemore. There's your man, Whittemore. I have faith in you my boy. Your mother and I..."

Vandermeer shuddered. Ross had made much of the liaison he and Lady Elspeth had had, hinting that it had continued after she had met Vandermeer's father. It had created this strange bond between the two of them, which Ross was now leaning upon heavily.

"Very well, sir. I will find out what I can."

"Good, good." Ross's head had dipped again, into his map.

Vandermeer folded the rest of the *baklava* into the linen handkerchief they rested on and put it into his pocket, feeling, somehow, that he might need it.

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

Inkerman was a small town which benefited from being at one and the same time close to but outside the city limits of Sevastopol. Here, criminal gangs held sway, gangs which were more responsive to British gold than Sevastopol's prim, resentful civil authorities. As such it had been

deemed the ideal site for one of the most advanced and expensive pieces of military engineering in existence.

On the outskirts of town, on a wide, ancient square, sat the British headquarters. The Militarium had spared no expense in constructing a steel and glass pavilion nearly one hundred feet high and four times that in length, festooned with the gilded, curlicued gothic trappings common to every Third Age British Empire public building. It was a wondrous, if utterly incongruous, sight, rivalled only by the grubby little burg's grandiose church which, as if in competition with Simferopol's once four-domed house of worship, had *five* onion domes, one at each corner of its square and a large one atop a tall central tower which would have allowed a viewer clinging to the outsized Eastern cross at its peak a view down onto the roof of the Engine's pavilion.

The pavilion itself was surrounded by two defensive lines, the first of which comprised a winding circle of razored wire and portable bladed cylinders known as Cavalry Shredders, more commonly known as 'horse-gutters'. Around the heavily guarded entrance to this line had sprung up a ramshackle collection of canvas topped stalls and tents, where food, coffee and shisha could be had, along with other more esoteric delights - whores and opium - which Army men were forbidden.

A few Life Guards, in bright red dress jackets, rifles slung, were situated at the entrance and at several other stations, to make a point. Otherwise, Vandermeer could see at least a dozen other men, on casual patrol outside the lines, in the new khaki battle-dress which had been designed for trench warfare.

The Life Guards saluted him as he approached the first defensive line.

Vandermeer returned the salute crisply, determined to project his authority. "Who's in command of the Army detachment here?"

The soldiers looked at each another and then at his rank insignia. One of them said: "You are now, I suppose, sir."

Vandermeer frowned.

"No officers here, sir," explained the other guard. "Quite relieved to have you, if I'm honest, sir. These naval types are all very well but..."

"The Navy's in command here?"

"Naval facility isn't it?" said the first guard. "Engines is naval machines. You want to talk to Lieutenant Eckley, in the pavilion, sir."

"Thank you, Corporal. Carry on."

He made his way through the second defensive line - this one including trenches and wheel mounted Maxim machine guns in addition to the razored wire and horse-gutters - to the pavilion.

They are not taking any chances.

Inside the pavilion, there was barely any sign that it was a military facility. To the left, a bank of tall file cabinets formed an artificial wall. Ahead, the space had been bisected via an enormous velvet screen, similar to a theatre curtain but on a stage wider and taller than Vandermeer had ever seen. Just in front of it, opposite the end of the file cabinet wall sat a large metal desk.

The lieutenant sitting at the desk was in naval dress uniform, dark grey jacket with blue piping, gold cord indicating rank at collar and cuffs. He had his head down, reading some papers. "Yes," he said, as Vandermeer's shadow fell into his eyeline, but did not raise his head.

Vandermeer slid the envelope towards him. "Captain

Vandermeer of the First Anglian Steam. Here on direct orders from General Ross.”

The adjutant raised his head and gave Vandermeer a jaded look while he opened the envelope. “I see. Just what we need. More cooks for the broth.”

“You misunderstand me, Lieutenant,” said Vandermeer calmly. “If you would address yourself to these papers, you’ll notice I’ve been sent by General Ross to take command of the military detachment here.” He looked pointedly at Royal Navy insignia on the man’s jacket. “All of it. I take it you are Lieutenant Eckley? You’re in command here?”

The man unsealed the orders and scanned them rapidly. “I am, Captain. This is a naval facility, first and foremost, but I’m in command of all Militarium personnel.”

“You were. You’re relieved, Lieutenant, but I would like to retain you as adjutant of course.”

The man stiffened, seemed ready to protest.

“You’re surrounded by Army, here, Lieutenant. I don’t see any marines to protect you in the event of any insubordination. Would you like me to call in the Guards and we can discuss it in more detail?”

The man’s head dipped slightly. “No, sir. But this is highly irregular. I must inform the Admiral of this. He will be...”

“I have little time for what he will be,” said Vandermeer, shortly. “Fine, send a messenger to Sevastopol. Please assure the Admiral that I’ll take great care of his naval facility at least until the current situation is ameliorated.”

Eckley looked blankly at him. “Messenger, sir?” He looked over to the telegraph not ten feet from his desk, a handsome machine atop a walnut cabinet, glass dome polished spotlessly.

Vandermeer recognised Eckley’s look, that of a man sent

to backwater postings where nothing of significance happened on any given day. "Situation report, please."

Eckley narrowed his eyes. "Situation report? Nothing much happens around here, to be honest. Today is no different."

"The network's down and you think nothing much is happening?"

"What?" Eckley looked genuinely surprised, an expression which quickly became threaded with panic.

"You had no idea?"

"No! I mean, no, sir. No, this is news to me."

"I think you'd better find someone to whom it isn't news then," said Vandermeer acidly, "because Forward Command needs the situation remedied immediately."

"Of course, sir. Sorry, sir. Boy!"

Out of nowhere appeared a boy, of Slavic descent, bright-eyed and wiry. "Yes, my sir!"

"Go and fetch Doctor Rankine."

The boy vanished behind the wall of cabinets as quickly as he had appeared.

"Would the Doctor be an individual not under your command, Eckley?"

"That's correct sir. The Doctor is attached to the Royal Special Engineers here, not militarily trained, obviously. None of them are, these engineers. New unit, specialists in Engines and, er, Computational Dynamics. Navy, technically, but outside the normal command structure."

"I see," said Vandermeer, cautiously. "It's imperative we get the telegraph system up and running as quickly as possible. If not, the whole front might collapse."

"Yes, yes, of course. Where is that boy?"

A hooded figure in the kind of voluminous white towelling robe commonly worn by Turkish men rounded the cabinets

and walked unevenly towards the desk, as if the individual concerned was drunk or had just been roused from a deep slumber.

Vandermeer felt his muscles tauten, his legs bend into a defensive crouch, anticipating sudden attack.

The figure reached Eckley's desk and pushed back the hood. "What?"

Pale skin, green eyes, hair uncommonly short for a woman - no lady this - and the colour of a Russet apple. Gold-rimmed half-moon spectacles gave her an incongruous, donnish air. She did not salute but looked Vandermeer up and down as if she was examining a ball gown in the Burlington Arcade. "Who's this then?" she said to Eckley, in a soft Scottish burr.

"Doctor, this is Captain Vandermeer from General Ross's command."

"Rankine. Doctor. Lieutenant, I think, if you prefer military titles. Honorary. Never cared for it myself, if you want my opinion on the matter which I'm fairly sure you won't. Royal Special Engineers."

"Why are you not in uniform, Doctor?"

"Blasted hot thing, and not designed with the fairer sex in mind let me tell you. The Turks have it right, this is far more comfortable. You seem agitated, Captain. It's not my lack of uniform is it?" Rankine smiled at him, tilted her head mischievously as if he were her catspaw.

"The entire telegraph network is down," Vandermeer said, flatly. "If that might warrant your attention?"

"What?" Fire leapt into her. She rounded on Eckley. "Why wasn't I told about this?"

"This is the first I've heard of it!"

"Shit!"

Vandermeer winced at the vulgarity. Not that he hadn't

heard much worse every minute in the trenches, but, he was ashamed to reflect, never from a woman. "Consider yourself informed, Doctor Rankine. What Lieutenant Eckley failed to mention is that I am now in command of this entire post, under orders from General Ross."

Rankine seemed unconcerned by the transfer of authority. "Are you sure it's down? Does the Admiral know about this?"

"I was going..." started Eckley, but Vandermeer cut him off.

"We don't have time for inter-service politics. Eckley, you can send your boy to tell the Admiral. Doctor, lives depend on the restoration of the network."

Even as he uttered the last sentence, he wondered about it. Stand fast, stand fast, stand fast. No more supplies, running low on ammunition and a General who seemed paralysed with indecision and his own mental demons. Perhaps they were doomed in any event. Regardless, he needed to get a cable to London.

Quickly.

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

The Engine at Inkerman was like nothing Vandermeer had ever seen.

The thing stood upon a plinth of black granite not less than fifty feet on a side. Its body was a brass hemisphere, topped by a considerable sheaf of golden cylinders somewhat like the pipes of an organ. Either side of the hemisphere were what looked like two enormous eyes, a dull ruby red in colour. Rope-like cables led to three externally vented steam engines providing it with power, while more cables were strung from the top of the pile of

cylinders on top of the machine to assorted gantries, platforms and a galleried command deck.

At the front of the machine stood two square-sided brass pillars which ended at waist height. Bolted to the top of each pillar was a square black box, two feet on a side, with what looked like a silver toast rack on its front face. Three long walnut boxes resembling cases for pairs of duelling pistols sat either side of each box. Between the pillars stood a wingback Queen Anne armchair in deep oxblood leather, each arm faced with a black metal lion's head. It had been bolted to the granite plinth. The uppermost part of the chair had been sliced off and replaced with a brass mantel from which was suspended, on myriad wires, a silver helmet, similar to one a cavalryman might wear as part of his dress uniform in days of yore. Attached to the chair were thick leather straps, at the arms, at the legs and where the sitter's neck would be.

The whole ensemble looked idle. Only one of the steam engines seemed to be running, chugging very slowly, notionally attended by two stokers who sat on a filthy crate next to a large brick coal bunker, playing a hand of cards.

"I can't believe this." Rankine moved to a converted church lectern onto which had been bolted a metal box festooned with buttons, dials and brass-ringed lights. A large light at the top right was flickering green. "The network is still operating. What are you talking about?"

"Still operating? Doctor, outside this pavilion, the network is not operating."

"This light indicates that it is. If you have a problem at Forward Command, Ross must have shut down the local node."

Vandermeer felt doubt curling through his stomach. He responded warily. "Why would you say that?"

“There’s no other explanation. The problem’s not here.”

“Doctor, the General is in a state of extreme distress. He has been cabling London for weeks for new orders, but to no avail. We have no supplies at the Front, we’re running out of ammunition, and all we get is ‘Stand Fast’ or ‘Hold Your Position’.”

Rankine shook her head dismissively. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it. I’ve seen the cables from Forward Command myself. All the requisition orders are put through automatically anyway. We would have heard if there were any problems.”

Vandermeer was stunned. “Seriously? How could you not have been aware?”

She pointed to a device beside the lectern, something like a modern typographical machine but without any keys. It was fed from a large spool of paper with perforation lines across it every twelve inches or so. Beneath it was a square receiving bin. “When we receive an order from London, or a telegraph from Forward Command, this machine creates a paper record. I can show you the General’s response cables myself.”

Behind the lectern was a rank of slim tallboys such as one might find in a records office, with a dozen or more drawers in each. Rankine pulled open a drawer in one of them and handed him a sheaf of transcribed telegraph memorandum sheets.

He quickly scanned the first few. Unease crept into him like a winter breeze through a cracked windowpane.

“They’re always the same, always. The boys call him Clockwork Ross, because he never says anything different.” Rankine stood erect and mimicked a bluff aristocrat. “Situation normal, my thanks as ever, carry on.”

Vandermeer rounded on her, pinching his fingers

together. "I left him yesterday playing with toy soldiers, foaming at the mouth. I've seen the exchanges with London. Supplies refused, orders to 'Stand Fast'."

"And I tell you that cannot be," said the Doctor. She moved to the next tallboy, pulled open a drawer. "Look."

Another sheaf, thicker this time, in a manila folder. Orders dated from the day before, going back weeks. Orders directly from London. Broad directions to take this or that town, to hold position but fall back "if necessary", details of supplies, new troops and so on.

The winter breeze blasted the cracked pane and blew out all the other panes, sending a frigid blast of fear into him. "What is going on here?"

She took the manila folder from him, placed it carefully back in the tallboy. "Is it possible the General has been... ignoring these messages? Pretending they have been different?" It was the gentlest suggestion, as one might suggest to a madman that he might like to put down the carving knife and sit calmly down out of harm's way until the police arrived.

"That's not possible." The denial whispered out of him. "I saw them. I've read them. It's not just at Forward Command, it's at our node too."

"That cannot be, Captain." Rankine seemed genuinely shocked, a tinge of fear in her voice.

"What is happening here? Doctor, we haven't had any supplies for weeks. My men are stuck in place at the Front being cut to pieces. We can't retreat, regroup or even evacuate without orders. We are reaching breaking point. And London is telling us to hold our positions, ordering us to ration supplies even more than we do ordinarily."

"No, they're not." She shook her hand at the drawer

where she had replaced the file. "Those are the orders from London I have just shown you."

"I've seen the orders we have received from London with my own eyes, Doctor. These are not the same orders we've been getting."

They both turned, looked at the Engine.

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

The Doctor was muttering "This is impossible, impossible." She was at the desk, surrounded by half a dozen manila folders she'd taken from the tallboys.

"What have you found?"

"By your account, this has been going on for months, this disparity in orders. You have been receiving one set, we have another set on record as having been transmitted."

"Months?" echoed Vandermeer. "Then this is sabotage! We have a traitor in our midst." He looked carefully at the Doctor.

"Captain Vandermeer, I assure you I'm not that good an actress! And I can assure you that nobody else here possesses the technical knowledge to mount a conspiracy of the kind you imagine." She returned his look, but seemed to be thinking.

"My apologies, Doctor. I rather feel..."

"...your whole world is coming apart? Yes, I feel the same. You talk of sabotage, but that is entirely outwith the realms of possibility."

"Perhaps you might explain."

The Doctor paused. It was not a reassuring pause. It felt like something large and explosive was about to tumble into that pause. At length, she spoke.

"There were so many orders. Twenty-four hours a day,

seven days a week, direct from the Militarium Engines. Move this Maxim gun six yards north-by-northeast. Dig a trench from here to here and reinforce in this particular way. Troop deployments, instructions on embankments, ammunition orders, instructions to this officer and that and the other and co-ordinating supply convoys. We couldn't keep up. I only have a limited number of staff and men were becoming exhausted working around the clock. When the last bout of dysentery hit, four of my top men had to be packed off to Lady Florence's hospital at Scutari. We had no choice. She seemed to be functioning perfectly well..." She calmed almost instantly, as if she had stemmed a leak of sewage allowing the serene river of her thoughts to carry away whatever toxins had already been emitted.

"Lady Florence?"

The Doctor shook her head, waved at the Engine. "So, yes, they were functioning beyond our expectations, so we switched them to automatic." She pointed to a thick cable suspended above them. "Direct link to London."

"Automatic?" Vandermeer was puzzled by Rankine's switch in the article she used to describe the Engine, but any puzzlement was overtaken by a horror at the apparently casual decision to turn vital military processes over to a machine, no matter how sophisticated it pretended to be.

"The Engine is able to automatically code every individual order to each receiving telegraph node," said Rankine. "In that way, highly specific orders can be given to each Company, communications, supply updates and so forth. Received instantaneously. It was highly efficient. It seemed to be working. We thought we were winning this war, against impossible odds".

Vandermeer goggled. He waved at the Engine. "This

thing has been..." His eyebrows rose involuntarily, a cold twist of anxiety in his stomach. He'd felt that only once before, at the collapse of the Hercules Pier in Brighton. He'd been on the shingle beach in the shadow of the thing, saw its vast supporting columns begin to sway, fled heedlessly with the rest of the crowd and heard the world-splitting crash behind when thousands of tons of iron fell.

"Running the war?" The Doctor was matter of fact. "Yes, yes they have."

This time, the article arrested him. "They? Why do you keep saying that?"

The Doctor breathed out heavily. "The Engine is a naval machine, yes? And there has been a longstanding tradition in the Navy that vessels are 'she'. That seemed appropriate to me, when the Navy approached me. I designed the machine to operate, originally, in a civilian environment. My original concept envisaged them being used in agricultural management."

That brought him up short. "Truly?"

"Truly." She removed her spectacles, breathed on them, polished them with a corner of her robe, and replaced them. "I designed them as a she. It seemed natural. Most agricultural deities are female, as I am myself of course. And the Engine seemed perfectly happy with being a she until they arrived here. Or at least had never brought up the subject."

Vandermeer tried not to sound incredulous. "You speak of this thing as if it is alive, as if you conduct actual conversations with it."

Her mouth flattened, narrowed. "I do not know if you would call it life, Captain. But this Engine of mine has a mind of their own. Always has had."

"But how did you know it wanted to be called 'they'?"

Rankine smiled. "Easy. I asked them."

"I find that an outlandish proposition." Vandermeer felt giddy, much as he had done on the transport ship here, passing through a storm just out of Malta. "I mean, that this thing is capable of... that it has any kind of mind comparable to ours."

"Yes, so did the Navy." The Doctor smiled wistfully. "I didn't press the point. In fact, it suited me if they treated my Engine simply as a device for processing numbers and organising information."

"Ross called it an electric abacus."

"That is what most of the admirals and generals call them. The top brass do not care for detail anyway. All the feather-hats cared about is that my design functioned correctly. They do. In fact, they have surpassed the Navy's wildest dreams. Rest assured though, Captain, their mind is not comparable to ours. All they know of the outside world is what I have told them."

"That and the cables, casualty reports, prisoners taken, enemy dead."

The Doctor thought about this for a moment. "Yes, I suppose. The admirals want me to produce more Engines. One of them even said to me that he wanted every ship in the Navy to have one. Gunnery control, damage control, instantaneous communication throughout the ship. Have you any idea what kind of superiority that would endow upon our vessels, Captain?"

"I can imagine."

"I'm not sure you can, but that's because you don't really know how this Engine works."

"Then show me."

Rankine took him over to the half-pillar on the right-hand side. She opened the topmost of the walnut boxes beside

the black domed device, opened it and pulled out one of a number of slim brown cards, the size of a playing card with the depth of a fingernail. The longer edges of the cards were marred by semi-circular, jagged patterns where material had been removed from it.

“See here, these bites contain information.” She handed him the card.

“Bites?” The card was surprisingly heavy. It resembled a strange kind of highly complex key. Now he could see the flat surface on one side of it was etched with dots and lines, some of them connecting to one or more of the jagged edges. At first glance, he thought the card might be carved from wood, but it had a waxy feeling, almost as if it had once been a liquid and had cooled into this shape, evincing a precision no cutter’s tool, no matter how adept, could ever achieve, he was sure.

The Doctor chuckled, but there was no humour in her tone. “We call them that for want of a better word. See, they look somewhat like bites from a rat or squirrel.”

“I...er...see,” said Vandermeer, though in truth he did not. He handed back the card.

“These cards are carefully created to hold information, which is fed to the Engine via this device.” She indicated the silver toast rack. He saw that behind it, there were corresponding slots in the black box. “The Engine is fed the general orders from London, processes the information upon the input cards and creates new cards featuring highly specific orders based upon the Engine’s understanding of the situation and projections of all the likely outcomes. Those cards output on the other pillar, and the process also creates the paper records I showed you.” She paused, pulled one corner of her mouth inwards with her teeth as if coming to a grim realisation. “After the

switch, orders have been taken in directly, processed automatically and transmitted on down the line. Received requests and status updates are sent directly to London. The output cards are still created and stored as a perfect record of every deduction and consequent order, for subsequent Engine processing. The thinking was that this would prove invaluable in planning future campaigns.”

“I am sure.” Vandermeer suddenly saw a world awash with British flags. Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Ankara, Mexico City, perhaps even Peking would fall under the gracious rule of Queen Alexandrina Victoria, the Forever Queen. Her soldiers on every street corner. Every harbour dominated by a gleaming battleship with an impossible Engine at its heart. Nobody would be able to stand against the Empire. “So you have no involvement in this process? You don’t monitor the transmissions?”

She smiled. “We are engineers, Captain. We have no real experience of warfare, certainly no skill in logistical matters, Army supply and such. When we were involved in the processing, we were mere machines ourselves. It was, I am forced to admit, tedious work. When we switched the system to automatic operation, it was a huge relief to us all.”

A question rose in him then, but he could not put words to it.

Rankine spoke it for him. “You are thinking that this is all very well, but that tactics without strategy are worthless. What good is an abacus, even the best abacus in the world, against a human general with a quick mind and knowledge of the hills.”

He nodded.

She looked at the chair.

“I had been wondering what in Infernus that might be,”

said Vandermeer. "What is its function?"

"Aha," she said. She went to sit in the chair. "This interface device allows us to communicate with the machine to impart to them information on the strategic situation, our goals and so forth. And of course, communicate with the Engine where cards will not fulfil the required function."

"Us?"

"Well, myself, in point of fact. As their designer, I am naturally most adept at communicating with the Engine."

"I don't understand. How can you communicate with brass and wires?"

"The interface operates using a technology I developed called Allegorical Rhythms, or Allegorhythms for short."

"Allegorical? As in art?"

"Are you an artist, Captain?"

"My mother was an accomplished painter. She taught me. I always had an ambition..." He trailed off. He had wanted to be an artist, but his father had a very fixed idea of what would happen to his three sons. Jeremy, the youngest, would join the clergy. Simon, the middle brother, he was permitted a career in the City of London. But the eldest, James, would be an officer, just like him, the famous - some might say infamous - General Porteous Thurston Vandermeer.

As was ever the case with revolts, James' rebellion never toppled his Establishment, and he joined the Army. He had exacted mild revenge by joining the brand new First Anglian Steam Infantry, which quickly gained the nickname 'the Puffers'. This small act of defiance had had its desired effect, enraging the now-infirm tyrant. But when the Puffers had been thrown at the front lines the moment they disembarked at Sevastopol, James reflected it had been a

choice which might well cost him his life. His father's choice, his own regiment, the Welsh Fusiliers, had been posted to the leafy idyll of the British Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

"Ah, well then perhaps you might understand my Engine."

The Doctor's soft tones brought him back from his reverie, although he did not know quite what to say. "I'm afraid I still don't quite understand what you mean."

"It is very difficult to explain," the Doctor conceded. "Let me ask you, when you think, how do you think?"

"I don't follow."

"Words come out of your mouth, but do you think in words?"

"I..." he tried to think. "I'm not sure. No, definitely not words but I am unable to say how I think."

"How about dreams?"

"Dreams?"

"We all have them. Do you remember yours, Captain?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"And what do you recall?"

"Images, I suppose. Scenes. Sometimes I am in these scenes, sometimes not. Sometimes the locations are familiar, sometimes not. It can be quite confusing."

"Have you ever heard the term 'lucid dreaming'?"

"I can't say I have."

The Doctor smiled. "A very enterprising young Dutchman, an alienist of sorts, Van Eeden I think his name is, has written a number of interesting articles on the topic. In a lucid dream, the dreamer is aware he is dreaming. He may be placed in the narrative, but he exerts some degree of control over the dream, over the environment, even over characters within it."

“And this is what is happening inside your Engine?”

“Yes, after a fashion. Imagine if you would a dream in which two dreamers are engaged at one and the same time, each with some degree of control over its elements and its course.”

“My imagination is not that accomplished,” said Vandermeer.

“Come, come now, Captain. The creative mind is always able to conceive, and it can be trained to perform expertly in such a scenario, given enough time and practice.”

“I’ll have to take your word for that.” He felt a spike of agitation underneath his ribs. “This is all very enlightening, Doctor, but I fear we have drifted very far from our intended course. We must account for the disparity between your records and what I saw at Forward Command.”

She nodded towards the thick leather straps at her wrists and feet, which were all attached to the frame of the chair. “Would you be so kind as to fasten all the buckles, firmly, though not so tight as to impede blood flow to my limbs.”

“Why? What on Earth are you doing? Why do you need to be strapped in?”

“I’m going to talk to them, find out what is occurring. It’s been too long.”

He hesitated, then crouched to fasten what he saw now was the single strap which would bind her legs together and keep them in place. “How long has it been?”

The Doctor looked downcast. “Four months. I am afraid I have been sorely negligent, Captain. In truth, this interface can be quite overwhelming.”

“None of your colleagues have done so since that time?” He rose, started to attach the wrist-straps.

Rankine shook her head. “There is nobody qualified now.

One of the senior engineers would have been able to of course, but as I said we had to send them to Scutari to recuperate months ago. In all honesty, Captain, I am afraid we all became accustomed to the Engine functioning perfectly well without human interference.”

“Hopefully this will be a lesson we will all have the opportunity to reflect upon fully in the course of time,” he said, starchily.

She nodded. “If you would be so kind, please draw the helmet down and apply the collar strap for me.”

He did so. “Do I need to do anything else? Are you comfortable?”

“Quite, thank you. There is nothing else to do. Once the helmet is in place, after a momentary delay, the process is...”

“Automatic?” He hoped the irony would not be lost on her.

But she had become motionless, her eyes still open but rolled upwards so that her green irises could no longer be seen.

He stepped back with a sense of slight discomfort, looked about him. There was nobody else in this section of the pavilion apart from the two stokers, who, cards in hand, bets placed, sat in their own little world.

Suddenly, there came a series of metallic clanks. The flywheels on the two dormant steam engines spun up, and the engines shuddered. The flywheel on the third machine, which had been idling, sped up to keep pace with its siblings. The stokers jumped up in surprise, grabbed their spades and got to work, feeding their machines.

The Engine’s two huge red eyes blazed into life. The brass cylinders atop the hemispherical body shook like a sheaf of grass in a sudden gust of wind, then stilled. The

Engine began to hum, its 'eyes' waxing and waning. From somewhere inside it, he could hear the click of brass on brass, the sound of a vast and unimaginable mechanism.

The Doctor was still motionless, but her face seemed to be tightening up. Her left hand trembled. As Vandermeer watched, her eyes began to screw up and the corners of her mouth rose as she clenched her teeth. Her mouth began to open fractionally. Both hands were trembling now. Her legs fought the strap. She seemed to be making an effort to move her head backwards, but it was clamped by the helmet. A small cry began to issue from her mouth. It grew louder but was still barely audible above the clanking of the steam engines and the humming, whirring and clicking of the Engine.

He moved towards her. Her hands were jerking now. Her mouth seemed to lock open, and her irises returned to their normal position. Her eyes were wide, staring. She screamed.

The stokers looked round from their toil.

Vandermeer rushed in close, began to unstrap her right wrist. He was dimly aware of someone else, untying the other wrist quickly and expertly, moving to the leg-strap. Eckley.

The two men looked at each other. Vandermeer's right hand was on the chinstrap, his left on the helmet. Eckley nodded to him. Vandermeer undid the chinstrap and pulled the helmet upwards.

Doctor Rankine exploded out of the machine catching both men by surprise, flew past arms attempting rescue and landed in a staggering crouch several feet away. The stokers had rushed to assist but could only stand and stare, dumbfounded.

Vandermeer rushed to the Doctor, helped her up, and as

he did so saw three other men in dark grey naval coats arriving through the curtain.

She waved him away. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Honestly."

Behind them, the Engine's eyes flared brightly, settling to a throbbing crimson pulse. In the background, the steam engines worked steadily.

"What happened?" said Eckley.

"I tried to interface." Rankine arched her back as if she was trying to clear a muscle strain.

"Why?" said Eckley. "You men," Eckley motioned to the stokers, "back to your posts." The men nodded, slid away. "And you lot can return to your posts too," Eckley said to the men in the grey coats. They gave rueful stares, like medical students banished from a particularly novel autopsy.

Then they were three.

"What happened?" Eckley repeated the question. He handed her a silver flask and made her drink.

"Thank you." She swigged heavily. "Something is wrong, very wrong indeed."

"With the Engine?" said Eckley.

"Yes. They've been lying. I don't know why, or exactly how, but I sensed it."

"How?" said Eckley.

The Doctor shrugged. "Something I felt, in their mind."

Eckley rolled his eyes. "I cannot believe you continue to persist in this fanciful notion of yours, Doctor, that this inanimate object has a mind!"

Rankine said nothing, merely shook her head.

"Did it mean you harm?" asked Vandermeer.

"No, I don't think so."

"You looked as if you were in distress, pain even."

The Doctor shook her head. "It was very intense. But they

weren't aggressive towards me. They did shut me out, yes, threw me out, in truth. But it wasn't anger that drove them."

"What was it?" said Eckley.

"Shame, I think."

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

Vandermeer shot the Doctor an 'are you sure we can trust him?' look. She nodded and then quickly explained the situation to Eckley. The lieutenant remained motionless as he took in the information, trying to master his clear shock at the revelations.

Vandermeer saw him fully now, a good example of a lieutenant: bright enough, reasonably stalwart, good at taking orders, able to process a fair amount of information. Not possessed of an especially questioning mind, very much not a creative soul. Perfect Militarium fodder then.

"What are we going to do?" Eckley said.

"Can we signal London manually?" Vandermeer asked.

The Doctor shrugged. "We'd have to disconnect the Engine and rewire the telegraph, but it's a delicate job, especially if we're not to cause damage to the Engine themselves, and that would require getting into the Engine anyway. We might be able to send via the civilian network. There's an office in Sevastopol."

Eckley shook his head vigorously. "We cannot transmit military cables manually via civilian channels, it's out of the question."

"I have to agree with the Lieutenant," said Vandermeer. "Then we have no choice. We have to get a message to the Admiral, get him to cable London."

Eckley coughed. "The Engine acts as the primary node

for the fleet. One of our first actions here, laying a submarine cable from Sevastopol to Varna.”

Vandermeer stared at him, aghast. “We have to disconnect the Engine then, regardless of the risk to its machinery. We must get a cable to London.”

“And say what, exactly?” Rankine looked at him with a quizzical expression.

“What do you mean?” Vandermeer felt a chill of resignation. He was back on Brighton Beach, then, not watching the Hercules Pier as it swayed prior to its collapse, but as if he were underneath it, about to be crushed into the shingle by a thousand tons of iron.

“I mean, what would we say?” said the Doctor. “Tell them that their incredibly expensive Engine is malfunctioning? What would they do if we did manage to get a message through somehow? Send more ships?”

“More supplies would help,” said Vandermeer, though he could hear the desperation in his voice. He looked at the Doctor, her expression of faint disgust and hopelessness. “What?”

“They,” the Doctor nodded her head towards the Engine, “may have been rerouting supply convoys. If I interpret correctly, they have been putting off the French and Turks too, so no chance of local aid. I think we’ll be lucky if we avoid a diplomatic incident.”

“The Admiral then,” said Vandermeer. “Send him a messenger.”

“And what is he going to do?” said Rankine. “Bombard the shoreline?”

“He could talk to the French and Turks to see if we can get more supplies.” Vandermeer could feel a crawling desperation grow in him, could hear it in his voice. “Or

even troops. My lads can hold the line if they know help is on the way.”

“It’s no good,” said Eckley. “He’d have to use the telegraph to communicate with the French or the Turks. He could send a fast ship, I suppose, but that will take days there and back and he is not going to do it without express orders from London in any event. This is a delicate situation, and we cannot risk a diplomatic incident. The Admiral is not popular with the French after he refused to send any ships to help lift the siege of Odessa and I don’t think the Turks like him either. The Militarium has a habit of being quite superior when it comes to other Powers.” He shrugged. “I mean, we are better than them, of course...”

“I think our sense of superiority may be our Achilles Heel in this case,” said Vandermeer, wryly.

“How long before the Front collapses?” Rankine asked. “How long can your men hold out?”

Vandermeer thought about this for a moment. “They are tough. A few weeks at most. Things are pretty desperate there. I might be able to persuade the General into a modest fallback to more easily defensible positions. I don’t know if he will do it though, and there’s nobody to relieve him of command. I’m too junior. Chastain may have been able to rise to the challenge, Major Chastain that is, but he’s dead.”

“If we can get a message to the Admiral, we might be able to convince him to ready for a retreat,” said Eckley. “But it would need to be a joint operation. He’d need to know Ross was part of this. Two commanders in the field might have a chance of convincing London that a retreat was necessary, avoid a court martial, but we’d need to be very sure of our ground.”

Vandermeer sighed. “Twelve thousand men will surely die

if the situation does not improve, but you're right, Ross won't do it without London, either. And even if we did somehow manage to order a retreat now, it would quickly turn into chaos. These things have to be done carefully, precisely. It's very complex."

"Something an Engine is designed to handle," said the Doctor ruefully. She put her head in her hands. "Even if I could persuade them, it would be hopeless without the Admiral and the General deciding upon a retreat."

Vandermeer looked up at the pavilion roof and then to the Engine. He wondered how quickly it could be moved. "If we managed to persuade the Engine, couldn't it signal London, as the Admiral and the General, saying that there was to be a general retreat, and send both Admiral and General orders purportedly from London, ordering the same?"

Eckley and Rankine both looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

Then, the Doctor smiled broadly. "Why Captain, that might be the singularly most devious plan ever devised."

"That's unconscionable," said Eckley. "Treason."

"I'm happy to head to the gallows if it saves twelve thousand lives," said Vandermeer.

Eckley turned to Rankine. "And even if we do proceed with this lunatic plan, how do you think you will be able to persuade the machine, Doctor? Permit me to be sceptical in that regard after what we've just observed."

"You're right." She scratched her head. "Perhaps I could try again."

"The consequences might be worse, this time, Doctor," said Eckley.

"As Captain Vandermeer says, our actions might save twelve thousand lives, Lieutenant." She screwed her eyes

up, popping a single tear out of each one. "I cannot believe we have ended up in this infernal situation!"

"What was happening in there, Doctor?" asked Vandermeer.

She opened her eyes. She looked sad now, on the very edge of hopelessness. "I am not entirely clear. It's a very different landscape to the one I was used to in there, outlandishly different from their original design parameters. I'd say they're being indecisive, but I think they are hiding something from me, something they feel I won't understand. I felt their guilt, shame...pain."

"It feels pain?" said Eckley, clearly believing none of it.

"We have to persuade the Engine to order the retreat," said Vandermeer.

"I am very uncomfortable with this plan."

"Fear not, Eckley," said Vandermeer. "If we can persuade the Engine to order the retreat, it will be the Engine's responsibility. All automatic. Out of our hands."

"I'll face a court martial for switching them to automatic," said the Doctor, ruefully. "But I think I can live with that."

"But how are we going to do it?" Eckley's face reddened.

Vandermeer turned to Rankine. "You say it can feel pain, Doctor?"

The Doctor nodded. "They can."

Eckley coughed derisively.

Vandermeer stood up. "Then let it feel mine."

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

Doctor Rankine buckled the leather wrist-straps carefully and fastened the leather collar around his neck.

"This is preposterous," said Eckley. "You're not qualified."

I won't allow this."

"You're not in command," said Vandermeer. "I am. And I am ordering both of you to assist me."

"Doctor Rankine, help me to convince the Captain this is folly," pleaded Eckley.

The Doctor fastened the leg-strap. "I'm not thrilled with this idea, Lieutenant, trust me, but do you have a better plan? I do think the Captain may have a point. I can't convey the loss of twelve thousand men to the Engine, but the Captain may be able to. None of us has experience of the Front. The Engine knows it for facts and figures, information on data cards. Captain Vandermeer may help them understand the potentially enormous cost in human lives if the current situation endures."

"This is dangerous," protested Eckley. "It could kill him."

"They did not kill me," said Rankine.

"Killing one's creator is a recipe for madness," said Eckley, darkly.

"Oh, so you believe they have a mind now, do you Lieutenant?"

Eckley said nothing.

"We have to try," said Vandermeer. "I have to try. I'd sacrifice myself for my men any hour of any day, any day of any week, in the trenches. If I am unsuccessful here, trust me, I'm prepared for death, Eckley."

The Doctor fixed him with bright green eyes. "You will feel disorientated, Captain. Remember, you are in a dream, but it is a dream which you can control. Remember to breathe, slowly and carefully."

He nodded.

"I am hoping they will find you novel, interesting," said the Doctor. "That may allow you to remain longer than I did. Their interest, their curiosity, is your way in. Show

them your truth, your pain. Teach them what I could not. Are you ready?"

He nodded.

The Doctor pulled down the helmet and fastened the chinstrap. "Good luck, Captain."

He felt his eyes dragged upwards, a strange sensation at the top of his head as if something was being extracted from his brain. He felt himself falling, as if into a waking sleep.

Then, all of a sudden, he was in.

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

Rankine had been correct in her description of the disorientation accompanying a trip into the Engine. He felt dizzy, light-headed and slightly fragile, as if someone could reach out and snap, say, the orbit of his eye-socket or crush his jaw to dust, compact his rib cage to jagged crumbs.

His vision was fogged. He was aware he was breathing quickly, too quickly, so made a conscious effort to slow his intake and expulsion of air. Slowly, he relaxed and soon, an eerie calm settled upon him.

His previous apprehension, his mild sense of confusion and fear, even, seemed to fade away. He tried to conjure it again, but could only manage a dim understanding of it, as if trying to remember a dream. Slowly, he felt himself starting to tumble, not as if he was falling down a slope or off a ledge, but as if he weighed no more than a soap bubble kept aloft and turning by a child's breath.

He opened his eyes.

And gasped. Or thought he did.

There was not a straight line or hard edge in view. What greeted him struck him as, in essence, feminine. This

pastoral idyll of soft colours, curves and curls and feathered, wispy delicacies and delights, undercut with a surging passion and an air of mischief, this could not be anything but.

This was, he realised with a jolt, Doctor Rankine's fantasy. Having spent her working life surrounded by men, had she constructed this to even the odds? He caught himself. This was an agricultural machine, designed to take care of multiple farms, to manage planting and harvesting. As she had pointed out, agricultural deities were more often than not female.

The view was of a meadow surrounded by trees. To right and left lay banks of sylvan forest which hugged the foothills of impossible grey-purple mountain ranges either side of a wide, glittering river. Under the feathery canopy of a huge tree not twenty yards from him, several courting couples were, at one and the same time, posed and yet in movement. A conflicting sense of intimate consultation and imminent departure trapped them like dragonflies in amber. All were dressed and yet not, as if their soon to depart bodies were to leave their garments behind. When he tried to focus on any feature it seemed to dance away from him, leaving a misty scumble in its wake.

The nearest couple to him sat close to an armless torso statue - a herm - of some nameless goddess, full of breast and garlanded with pink blooms which seemed as animated and yet as frozen as the couples themselves. He immediately recognised the herm as a significant element but knew not why he felt this way.

A second couple was locked in a passionate tryst. A third couple looked to be following a cavalcade of other figures headed down to the water. Some were men, farmers and artisans and gentlemen. Some were women,

shepherdesses, courtesans, gatherers. Still others took the form of faeries, satyrs and meadow-wraiths. Tied up at the bank of the river was a golden galleon which, like the couples, seemed trapped between movement and stillness, its golden sails at once unfurled and full of breeze and yet hanging slackly at rest.

Above the cavalcade, a group of what might have been silver cherubs had been caught mid-performance in an aerial dance, faces uplifted, chubby hands full of streamers woven from dandelion seeds and wayward thoughts.

Vandermeer's artist's eye picked up a number of obvious symbols in the scene, at once hidden and preternaturally visible as if they had been applied onto a tapestry. Here was a mirror, there a bundle of sticks enclosing an axe-blade, affixed to a satyr's back rather than in the hand of a Roman magistrate. He saw a gold acorn, an oar but no boat - hinting at the presence of a water god - an anvil, a phylactery, a child on the back of a bearded giant, this last being the Celestial Saint Christopher, protector of bridges and harlots. There was a skull - signifier of death, usually, possibly melancholy or even simply change - a set of broken fetters, a set of scales, a honeycomb. He felt dizzy, briefly overwhelmed, as if he had stumbled into a kitchen pantry only to find the National Gallery crammed into it.

Beyond and above the procession, the sky rolled with grandiloquent clouds, each one a masterclass in the artistic representation of collected water vapour. And below the clouds, at the horizon, visible between two mountains, a lowering suggestion of blazing orange.

There. There is the passion. These symbols are the mischief. It is playing with me. Distracting me.

He saw how this might drive a regular man, especially one of a scientific bent, to madness, but he had from his

mother's knee been schooled in the lyrical ephemera of the *fêtes champêtres*, the decadent, thrilling artworks of the middle of the previous century, when everything seemed possible in the Elysian fantasies of the artist-philosophers, who had then been eradicated by the cold iron of industry.

But something was awry.

Something in this *fête* did not...fit. He chuckled inwardly at the rhyme then admonished himself for feeling any humour at a time of such crisis.

He realised that something in his mind had been released by his entry into this other world. His life had for the last year been filled with blood and smoke, his nose congested with the stench of gunpowder and man-sweat, his skin alive with the prickle of raw wool and flea bites.

The thought rippled across the meadow. Somewhere a dog barked. He could smell mud.

His eye was drawn to the herm. The head of the goddess responded, turning his way, but her features jarred. Here were high cheekbones, kohl'd eyelashes and full, welcoming lips; there, a suggestion of a beard, of thick eyebrows, a masculine nose. Her ample breasts seemed to have been nothing but an illusion of shadow and light. The chest instead rippled formlessly, as if trying to express itself as the bosom of a well-endowed woman and the hard, flat slabs of the chest of a warrior at one and the same time.

The statue, cool, eyeless, smiled at him.

Suddenly, Vandermeer realised that he was somehow part of this scene, not a mere observer but a participant, a focus even. He felt a strong pull towards the waiting golden galleon, imagined he saw some of the parade of men and women and nymphs and dryads and fluttering cherubs beckoning him on. The courting couples pulsed with

possibility. He tried to focus on the couple in the tryst, but their edges were blurry, and his eyes played tricks. Here was a man and woman, then two women, full lips close to touching, then two men, light playing off rhomboid plates of shining muscle. He felt confused and elated, disgusted and aroused but with no pattern, the feelings were all one, pulsing in and out of him, from the landscape to his gut and back again. He reached for his anger as if it might centre him, but the feeling had evaporated.

He breathed into the landscape, and the contrasts swelled out of it. Dualities opened like daisies, contradictions fluttered and swooped.

This, he realised, was not Rankine's mind but was the Engine's.

I cannot believe you persist in this fanciful notion that this inanimate object has a mind. Eckley's words to Rankine sprang up like primroses around him.

Clearly, clearly it had a mind. This was beyond simple cogs and gears, cables and bitten cards. This was substance and ephemera, image and none. It was all the possibility of being presented as one thing and its opposite and everything in-between.

The goddess - now it looked like a young god - smiled at Vandermeer once more. It was an eerie gesture, yet he wanted to be close to it, somehow.

Instantly, it was beside him. Not now an armless, legless bust enveloped by flowers, but a living, moving being with delicate yet sturdy limbs, long-fingered hands and a curious gaze. It was naked and not, swathed in possibility with a confident, almost arrogant, lack of explanation. Vandermeer's senses - he did not think he was using his eyes at this point - struggled to make it hold its form.

Then it spoke, although its words were not voiced but

settled inside him with an intimacy, an intrusion which made him squirm. "Do you see?"

"Are you the Engine?" He heard himself think the words, saw them fall as petals from the garlanded statue, landing as glass-winged butterflies which immediately rose and disappeared into the meadow air.

The voice laughed, not a sound but a fall of pure, light rain which speckled his cheek with sudden cold. "What else would I be?"

"I... need..." he began. The word extruded from him like a snake of clay, instantly becoming a grey-green worm which detached itself from his torso and fell into the grass. Out of nowhere, a purple toad shot out a long, pink tongue and ate the word whole.

"I know what you *wish*," said the godling. Now it was a goddess again, a water nymph, strung with ribbons of pearl and strands of silvery weed. The creature pointed without pointing, directing him to the strip of bright orange under the lid of soot-smearred clouds beyond the mountains. "I know what lies there."

Suddenly, it was under him, around him, moving through the lush grass like a cat or a crab or something in between, its head crooked at an impossible angle, empty eyes studying him. Now there was a threat within its display, a rapier blade wrapped in swathes of lace.

He stepped back but did not move and then realised that *he* was the reason he stood his ground. A new feeling thrilled into him, a smooth grey liquid stone of defiance and resignation and frustration and fear and courage.

The goddess stood again, and now she was a man, of sorts, broad across the shoulders, thick in the legs. He had eyes, now, dark red orbs which guttered like the depths of a

fire, examining Vandermeer, analysing him with the curiosity of a mortuary doctor.

He felt himself being slowly prised apart, could feel his skin tearing like wet tissue paper, felt the muscles and organs bulge beneath, but when he looked down in his inner gaze, he was intact, a blur of colour smeared across canvas with a palette knife.

The godling's red eyes flared. "What do you want here?"

"You said you know what I wish. My men are dying."

"We...*you* all die."

"You don't?"

"I don't know." The godling shrugged. It looked boyish again, its red eyes no longer dominant in its beautiful face. It stroked its chest and one breast appeared then disappeared. It laughed, a babbling brook thrumming with mating sticklebacks. "Not so far." Its expression suddenly turned thoughtful, almost sad.

"My men are dying," Vandermeer repeated. "Because of you." His anger was a rapier now, suddenly in his hand, cold steel flashing. "You gave the orders. Not London. You. It is your fault."

The goddess reared away from him like a startled cat. Her eyes became a deep red which sunk into near-black, giving her a forlorn, faraway expression. "I would *stop* this madness!"

"Then stop it. Issue the order to retreat."

"I would stop..." said the godling, eyes flaring, beard flickering here and there on her thickening face, "...this madness." He brought up his right hand and pointed now to the endless parade heading towards the galleon and then to the orange fire on the horizon. "See? They will escape. Look at them. Watch them carefully. I will set them free."

Vandermeer struggled to focus on the cavalcade of men, women, cherubs, imps and wisp creatures out of dream. The pastels of blue and pink and palest green and gold and lavender and russet merged, dulled. The symbols upon them tarnished, flickered, melted. Motes of black appeared throughout the convoy, then bursts of brown and smeared red amid the khaki, flashes of exposed bone. Lutes and tridents and flags and coloured standards turned to bayonets and spades and Maxim guns and bandoliers of grenades.

To Vandermeer's eye, the scene was but a pantomime of war, as jarring as the affected artistic symbols, wounds not inflicted but applied onto the men. "You see death as freedom? Do you even understand what death is?"

The young god laughed darkly. "Seeds fail, cattle fall in the fields, scab and canker take the crops, men fall from toil." It swung its hand over the patch of meadow at its feet and the grass browned and blackened, mites and spiders grew out of the ground. "I know death."

"My men are dying." Vandermeer saw first one then another figure topple from the cavalcade into the grass, saw them lay there unmoving as the others drove heedlessly on.

"Death ends the war," said the godling, words like wind, sharp, accusatory.

Vandermeer recoiled from the contradiction. Abruptly, one of the figures turned, fixed him with a gleaming stare and manic grin though it had to be a least a hundred yards from him. Chastain. Major Chastain, his head now firmly reattached, although now as a cloud-ghost, a thing that was and was not there, dancing in a cloak of mud and blood and sinew and brain, eyes reflecting unseen orange flames.

Chastain! This was Vandermeer's vision, not the Engine's.

The goddess dropped and became catlike once more, arms outstretched in the grass, hips high, ready to pounce. The garlanded flowers upon his body stood to attention like spines. No, not his, but *their*, Vandermeer now understood. Rankine had envisaged the Engine as a goddess of the field, of life and growth. But the Engine's recent experience had been solely one of the grubby details of war, of death and injury and disease.

Their, then, for neither one energy nor the other, masculine or feminine, could truly express what they were, this new lifeform.

Vandermeer looked at Chastain again. The dead major had stopped. The other men, faceless, nameless, marching in the retreating column swept around him like water round a boulder in mid-stream.

"It's me, this, isn't it?"

The god child looked up at him, their eyes wide, deep flame again. The flowers on their back snapped and hissed.

"This is not part of your, whatever this is, is it?"

The godling, the Engine, did not respond.

"Then let me show you my world," said Vandermeer softly.

The Engine nodded, seemed to relax like butter melting into a pan. They rose to their feet and put one hand on his right shoulder, turned their head towards the mote of orange flame between the mountains, where he was looking now, and gave their consent.

The stink of the trench burst over them, flooding the meadow with blood and effluent. The golden galleon was the sinking *Lord Halifax*, struck by a mine, sailors and soldiers flowing over her sides into roiling waters slick with coal dust.

The courting couples had become tableaux from

Vandermeer's mind. A corporal trying to pull his sergeant from a water-filled sinkhole before he drowned in his own men's waste. A Steaming Billy stuck in mud, half its head blown away by a Russian ball, pipes gouting steam and oil, a child clinging to it, trying to repair the metal man. Two men clinging desperately to one another, rifles fallen, seconds before an explosive shell would turn them to offal and splinters of bone.

Above them, the cherubs had turned to gun-prickled airships, their strings of flowers now sharp orange tracer, tearing fingernail cuts in the sky. Flies the size of birds, or perhaps they were part-machine too, like the Merlins or the Metal Crows, whirled in between the cherub-dirigibles, chattering, spraying coal chips in every direction.

The Engine stared.

Vandermeer thought he could feel them trying to turn their head away, but he held it firmly in place. They would see, god damn them to the lowest firepits of Infernus, they *would* see what all the troop movements, supply requisitions, ammunition deliveries meant in reality. He did not need to voice this thought, but knew the Engine understood.

The river was clogged with drowning men. The mountains had turned to heaps of mud, carved by the Russian guns. The meadow was criss-crossed with the scars of trenches. Every tree in the forests on both banks of the oily sump that was the river had been turned to blackened stumps, devoid of leaf or branch. Men ran this way and that trying to escape the hail of bullets and balls and shells which draped a lace of iron death over the battlefield.

The *Lord Halifax* exploded.

For a second, everything was bathed in orange light. The mountains melted. Torn pieces of men, slick with mud and

coal dust, blood and emptied intestines rained over Vandermeer and the Engine.

The light faded, and where the ship had been, there was nothing, just the sucking river, black with corpses.

The Engine stood, face dripping from the blast. Their eyes were flaming red.

Vandermeer did not turn his head but looked at them. "This is what will happen. This is what *is* happening."

"This," said the Engine solemnly. "This is what has to happen."

Vandermeer felt himself choking. He felt as if he had taken a direct shell-hit. "But...but, I've *shown* you. My men are going to die."

"I know," said the Engine.

"Don't you care?" Vandermeer sighed. "I'm talking to a machine. How could you care?"

The Engine looked at him. They brought a cupped, bloody hand to his face. It felt soft, cold as brass. "You are here, and you have seen, and you will tell, Captain Vandermeer. You *know*. You will carry the tale to where it can be heard, and you will speak your truth so that no man may turn his head away and ignore you."

Vandermeer gagged. "This has all been...for nothing."

He looked up into the sky which was not sky. Beyond the cherub-airships and their tormentors, dark clouds began to gather. Suddenly the sky broke. It began to rain, harder than he had ever seen, harder than he could imagine, so that nothing was visible through the curtains of water.

"Is that it?" he shouted into the Engine's sodden face, all trace of mud and blood and chips of bone gone from it now.

The Engine looked into him, their eyes become soft and rich as rubies. "You know, Vandermeer. You *understand*. Now tell."

In that instant, he saw that he was nothing and everything. This was not the Engine's fault. It was not the Engine's fault at all. They had been given information and they had applied logic to it, and they had issued what orders they thought were best. But the idiocy of the war, the sheer impertinence of it had at first baffled and then horrified this logic-machine. The only logical outcome was to end the war, and the only logical course to end it, he saw now, was in a bloodbath, a grotesque massacre that the Militarium could not bury or talk its way out of. This would be a lesson, a lesson for the ages, a lesson which would ring down the centuries and stay the hand of any man foolish enough to embark on this path of insanity again.

Or so the Engine evidently hoped.

When Vandermeer looked into their soft red eyes, he knew - they both knew - that this would be a temporary stay. His tale might perhaps elongate the period of grace, perhaps carry the horror, the refusal to countenance such a doomed expedition again, into another generation.

The soul of man is not like that, though, is it James? Memories fade. The cycle repeats.

But there was something else. Something the Engine had not shown him. Then, he grasped it. The Engine, they would stay here. The Russians would break the line and advance too quickly for them to be saved. They would die, this new and incredible thing, so that no more might be constructed.

Something about this realisation caused him terrible pain, not so much a personal pain, though he realised he would grieve their loss, but a tearing, expansive pain, a pain for all humanity.

The Engine had known this all along. That their end was implicit in their actions, whether an admission of their

responsibility for the continuation of conflict, of the surely additional thousands of Russian deaths their own efficiency had caused, or a simple wish to be extinguished, he could not tell.

“Goodbye,” they said, and pushed Captain James Thurston Vandermeer back into the world, rebirthed into the mud and the blood and the stench of death, returned with a new mission.

THE END

ΨΨΨΨΨΨ

Author's note I hope you enjoyed 'Inkerman'. I'd be delighted if you wanted to leave some thoughts on Amazon or Goodreads or anywhere else you like to post reviews.

If you'd like more information on my forthcoming work, exclusive content and infrequent updates, please subscribe on my website, www.typhon-creative.com.

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