

Infernal Devices

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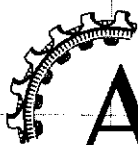
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Extract

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THE SLEEPER AWAKES



At first there was nothing. Then came a spark; a sizzling sound that stirred frayed webs of dream and memory. And then, with a crackle, a roar, a blue-white rush of electricity was surging through him, bursting into the dry passages of his brain like the tide pouring back into a sea-cave. His body jerked so taut that for a moment he was balanced only on his heels and the back of his armoured skull. He screamed, and awoke to a sleet of static, and a falling feeling.

He remembered dying. He remembered a girl's scarred face gazing down at him as he lay in wet grass. She was someone important, someone he cared about more than any Stalker should care about anything, and there had been something he had wanted to tell her, but he couldn't. Now there was only the after-image of her ruined face.

What was her name? His mouth remembered.

"H. . ."

"It's alive!" said a voice.

"HES. . ."

"Again, please. Quickly."

"Charging. . ."

"HESTER. . ."

"Stand clear!"

And then another lash of electricity scoured away even those last strands of memory, and he knew only that he was the Stalker Shrike. One of his eyes started to work again. He saw vague shapes moving through an ice-storm of interference, and watched while they slowly congealed into human figures, torch-lit against a sky full



of scurrying, moonlit clouds. It was raining steadily. Once-born, wearing goggles and uniforms and plastic capes, were gathering around his open grave. Some carried quartz-iodine lanterns; others tended machines with rows of glowing valves and gleaming dials. Cables from the machines trailed down into his body. He sensed that his steel skull-piece had been removed and that the top of his head was open, exposing the Stalker-brain nested inside.

“Mr Shrike? Can you hear me?”

A very young woman was looking down at him. He had a faint, tantalizing memory of a girl, and wondered if this might be her. But no: there had been something broken about the face in his dreams, and this face was perfect; an eastern face with high cheekbones and pale skin, the black eyes framed by heavy black spectacles. Her short hair had been dyed green. Beneath her transparent cape she wore a black uniform, with winged skulls embroidered in silver thread on the high, black collar.

She set a hand on the corroded metal of his chest and said, “Don’t be afraid, Mr Shrike. I know this must be confusing for you. You’ve been dead for more than eighteen years.”

“DEAD,” he said.

The young woman smiled. Her teeth were white and crooked, slightly too big for her small mouth. “Maybe ‘dormant’ is a better word. Old Stalkers never really die, Mr Shrike. . .”

There was a rumbling sound, too rhythmic to be thunder. Pulses of orange light flickered on the clouds, throwing the crags that towered above Shrike’s resting place into silhouette. Some of the soldiers looked up

nervously. One said, "Snout guns. They have broken through the marsh-forts. Their amphibious suburbs will be here within the hour."

The woman glanced over her shoulder and said, "Thank you, Captain," then turned her attention to Shrike again, her hands working quickly inside his skull. "You were badly damaged, and you shut down, but we are going to repair you. I am Doctor Oenone Zero of the Resurrection Corps."

"I DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING," Shrike told her.

"Your memory was damaged," she replied. "I cannot restore it. I'm sorry."

Anger and a sort of panic rose in him. He felt that this woman had stolen something from him, although he no longer knew what it had been. He tried to bare his claws, but he could not move. He might as well have been just an eye, lying there on the wet earth.

"Don't worry," Dr Zero said. "Your past is not important. You will be working for the Green Storm now. You will soon have new memories."

In the sky behind her smiling face something began to explode in silent smears of red and yellow light. One of the soldiers shouted, "They're coming! General Naga's division is counter-attacking with Tumblers, but that won't hold them for long. . ."

Dr Zero nodded and scrambled up out of the grave, brushing mud from her hands. "We must move Mr Shrike out of here at once." She looked down at Shrike again, smiled. "Don't worry, Mr Shrike. An airship is waiting for us. We are taking you to the central Stalker Works at Batmunkh Tsaka. We shall soon have you up and about again. . ."

She stepped aside to let two bulky figures through.

They were Stalkers; their armour stencilled with a green lightning-bolt symbol which Shrike didn't recognize. They had blank steel faces like the blades of shovels, featureless except for narrow eye-slits, which shone green as they heaved Shrike out of the earth and laid him on a stretcher. The men with the machines hurried alongside as the silent Stalkers carried him down a track towards a fortified air-caravanserai where ship after ship was lifting into the wet sky. Dr Zero ran ahead, shouting, "Quickly! Quickly! Be careful! He's an antique."

The path grew steeper, and Shrike understood the reason for her haste and her men's uneasiness. Through gaps in the crags he glimpsed a great body of water glittering under the steady flashes of gunfire. Upon the water, and far off across it on the flat, dark land, giant shapes were moving. By the light of the blazing airships which speckled the sky above them, and the pale, slow-falling glare of parachute-flares, he could see their armoured tracks, their vast jaws and tier upon tier of iron-clad forts and gun-emplacements.

Traction Cities. An army of them, grinding their way across the marshes. The sight of them stirred faint memories in Shrike. He remembered cities like that. At least, he remembered the idea of them. Whether he had ever been aboard one, and what he had done there, he did not recall.

As his rescuers hurried him towards the waiting airship he saw for just an instant a girl's broken face look up trustingly at him, awaiting something he had promised her.

But who she was, and what her face was doing in his mind, he no longer knew.

AT ANCHORAGE-IN-VINELAND



Several months later, and half a world away, Wren Natsworthy lay in bed and watched a sliver of moonlight move slowly across the ceiling of her room. It was past midnight, and she could hear nothing but the sounds of her own body and the soft, occasional creaks as the old house settled. She doubted that there was anywhere in the world as quiet as the place she lived in: Anchorage-in-Vineland, a derelict ice city dug into the rocky southern shore of an unknown island, on a lost lake, in a forgotten corner of the Dead Continent.

But quiet as it was, she could not sleep. She turned on her side and tried to get comfortable, the hot sheets tangling round her. She had had another row with Mum at supper time. It had been one of those rows which started with a tiny seed of disagreement (about Wren wanting to go out with Tildy Smew and the Sastrugi boys instead of washing up), and grew quickly into a terrible battle, with tears and accusations, and age-old grudges being dredged up and lobbed about the house like hand-grenades, while poor Dad stood on the sidelines saying helplessly, "Wren, calm down," and "Hester, please!"

Wren had lost in the end, of course. She had done the washing up, and stomped up to bed as loudly as she could. Ever since, her brain had been hard at work, coming up with hurtful comments which she wished she had made earlier. Mum didn't have any idea what it was like being fifteen. Mum was so ugly that she probably never had any friends when she was a girl, and certainly not friends like Nate Sastrugi, whom all the girls in Anchorage fancied, and who had told Tildy that he really

liked Wren. Probably no boy had *ever* liked Mum, except for Dad, of course – and what Dad saw in her was one of The Great Unsolved Mysteries of Vineland, in Wren's opinion.

She rolled over again and tried to stop thinking about it, then gave up and scrambled out of bed. Maybe a walk would clear her head. And if her parents woke and found her gone, and worried that she had drowned herself or run away, well, that would teach Mum not to treat her like a child, wouldn't it? She pulled on her clothes, her socks and boots, and crept downstairs through the breathing silence of the house.

Mum and Dad had chosen this house for themselves sixteen years before, when Anchorage had only just crawled ashore and Wren was nothing but a little curl of flesh adrift in Mum's womb. It was family history; a bedtime story Wren remembered from when she was small. Freya Rasmussen had told Mum and Dad that they might take their pick of the empty houses in the upper city. They had chosen this one, a merchant's villa on a street called Dog Star Court, overlooking the air-harbour. A good house, snug and well-built, with tiled floors and fat ceramic heating ducts, walls panelled in wood and bronze. Over the years Mum and Dad had filled it with furniture they found among the other empty houses round about, and decorated it with pictures and hangings, with driftwood dragged up from the shore, and with some of the antiques Dad unearthed on his expeditions into the Dead Hills.

Wren padded across the hall to take down her coat from the rack by the front door, and did not spare a glance or a thought for the prints on the walls or the precious bits of ancient food-processors and telephones in

the glass-fronted display case. She had grown up with all this stuff, and it bored her. This past year the whole house had begun to feel too small, as if she had out-grown it. The familiar smells of dust and wood-polish and Dad's books were comforting, but somehow stifling too. She was fifteen years old and her life pinched her like an ill-fitting shoe.

She closed the door behind her as quietly as she could, and hurried along Dog Star Court. Mist hung like smoke over the Dead Hills, and Wren's breath came out as mist, too. It was only early September, but she could already smell winter in the night air.

The moon was low, but the stars were bright and overhead the aurora was shimmering. At the heart of the city the rusty spires of the Winter Palace towered black against the glowing sky, shaggy with ivy. The Winter Palace had been home to Anchorage's rulers once, but the only person who lived there now was Miss Freya, who had been the city's last margravine, and was now its schoolteacher. On every winter weekday since her fifth birthday Wren had gone to the schoolroom on the ground floor of the palace to listen to Miss Freya explaining about geography and logarithms and Municipal Darwinism and a lot of other things that would probably never be any use to her at all. It had bored her at the time, but now that she was fifteen, and too old for school, she missed it horribly. She would never sit in the dear old schoolroom again, unless she did as Miss Freya had asked and went back to help teach the younger children.

Miss Freya had made that offer weeks ago, and she would need an answer soon, for once the harvests were in the children of Anchorage would be going back to

their lessons. But Wren didn't know if she wanted to be Miss Freya's assistant or not. She didn't even want to think about it. Not tonight.

At the end of Dog Star Court a stairway led down through the deckplates into the engine district. As Wren went clanging down the stairs a summery smell came up at her, and she heard flakes of rust dislodged by her boots falling among the heaped hay below. Once this part of the city would have been full of life and noise as Anchorage's engines sent it skating over the ice at the top of the world in search of trade. But the city's travels had ended before Wren was born, and the engine districts had been turned into stores for hay and root vegetables, and winter quarters for the cattle. Faint shafts of moonlight, slanting through skylights and holes in the deckplates overhead, showed her the bales stacked up between the empty fuel tanks.

When Wren was younger these abandoned levels had been her playground, and she still liked to walk here when she was feeling sad or bored, imagining what fun it must have been to live aboard a city that moved. The grown-ups were always talking about the bad old days, and how frightening it had been to live in constant danger of being swallowed up by some larger, faster city, but Wren would have loved to see the towering Traction Cities, or to fly from one to another aboard an airship, as Mum and Dad had done before she was born. Dad kept a photograph on his desk that showed them standing on a docking pan aboard a city called San Juan De Los Motores, in front of their pretty little red airship *Jenny Haniver*, but they never talked about the adventures they must have had. All she knew was that they had ended up landing on Anchorage, where the villainous Professor



Pennyroyal had stolen the ship from them, and after that they had settled down, content to play their roles in the cosy, dozy life of Vineland.

Just my luck, thought Wren, breathing in the warm, flowery scent of the baled hay. She would have liked to be an air-trader's daughter. It sounded a glamorous sort of life, and much more interesting than the one she had, stuck on this lonely island, among people whose idea of excitement was a rowing-boat race or a good apple harvest.

A door closed somewhere in the darkness ahead, making her jump. She'd grown so used to the quiet and her own company that the idea of someone else moving around down here was almost frightening. Then she remembered where she was. Busy with her thoughts, she'd walked all the way to the heart of the district, where Caul, Anchorage's engineer, lived alone in an old shed between two tier supports. He was the only inhabitant of Anchorage's lower levels, since nobody else would choose to live down here among the rust and shadows when there were pretty mansions standing empty in the sunlight up above. But Caul was an eccentric. He didn't like sunlight, having been brought up in the undersea thief-hole of Grimsby, and he didn't like company either. He'd been friendly once with old Mr Scabious, the city's former engineer, but since the old man died he had kept himself to himself down here in the depths.

So why would he be wandering about in the engine district at this hour? Intrigued, Wren crept up a ladder on to one of the overhead walkways, from where she had a good view across the old engine pits to Caul's shack. Caul was standing outside the door. He had an electric

lantern, and he had raised it up so that he could study a scrap of paper which he held in his other hand. After a moment he pocketed the paper and set off towards the city's edge.

Wren scrambled back down the ladder and started following the light. She felt quite excited. When she was younger, working her way steadily through the small stock of children's books in the margravine's library, her favourite stories had been the ones about plucky school-girl detectives who were forever foiling smugglers and unmasking Anti-Tractionist spy rings. She had always regretted that there were no criminals to detect in Vineland. But hadn't Caul been a burglar once? Maybe he was reverting to his old ways!

Except, of course, that there was no point stealing anything in Anchorage, where everyone took what they liked from the hundreds of abandoned shops and houses. As she picked her way through the heaps of half-dismantled machinery behind Caul's shack she tried to think of a more likely explanation for his night-time wanderings. Maybe he couldn't sleep, like her. Maybe he was worried about something. Wren's friend Tildy had told her that years and years ago, way back when Anchorage first came to Vineland, Caul had been in love with Miss Freya, and Miss Freya had been in love with Caul, too, but nothing had come of it because Caul had been so strange, even in those days. Maybe he wandered the streets of the engine district every night, yearning for his lost love? Or maybe he was in love with someone else, and was going to meet her for a moonlit tryst out on the city's edge?

Pleased by the idea that she would have something really juicy to tell Tildy in the morning, Wren quickened her pace.



But when he reached the city's edge Caul did not stop, just hurried down a stairway which led on to the bare earth and started up the hill, sweeping the lantern-beam ahead of him. Wren waited a moment, then followed, jumping down into the springy heather and creeping after him up the track which led to the humming dry-stone turbine house of old Mr Scabious's hydro-electricity plant. Caul did not stop there either, but kept going, climbing between the apple orchards and across the high pasture, into the woods.

At the top of the island, where the pines filled the air with the smell of resin, and crags poked up through the thin turf like the spines on a dragon's back, Caul stopped and turned his lantern off and looked around. Fifty feet behind him, Wren crouched among the criss-cross shadows. A faint wind stirred her hair, and overhead the trees moved their small hands against the sky.

Caul looked down at the sleeping city nestled in the curve of the island's southern shore. Then he turned his back on it, raised his lantern, and switched it on and off, three times. *He's gone mad*, thought Wren, and then, *No - he's signalling to someone, just like the wicked headmaster in Milly Crisp and the Twelfth Tier Mystery!*

And sure enough, down among the empty, rocky bays of the north shore, another light flashed back an answer.

Caul moved on, and Wren began to follow him again, dropping down the steep northern flank of the island, out of sight of the city. Maybe he and Miss Freya had got back together, and were too afraid of gossip to let anyone know? It was a romantic thought, and it made Wren smile to herself as she tracked Caul down the

last precipitous stretch of sheep-track, through a stand of birch trees and out on to a beach between two headlands.

Miss Freya was not waiting for him. But someone was. A man was standing at the water's edge, watching as Caul went crunching towards him down the shingle. Even from a distance, in the faint light of the aurora, Wren could tell that he was someone she had never seen before.

At first she could not believe it. There *were* no strangers in Vineland. The only people here were those who had come here aboard Anchorage, or been born here since, and Wren knew all of them. But the man on the shore was a stranger to her, and his voice when he spoke was a voice she had never heard.

"Caul, my old shipmate! Good to see you again."

"Gargle," said Caul, sounding uneasy, and not taking the hand which the stranger held out for him to shake.

They said more, but Wren was too busy wondering about the newcomer to listen. Who could he be? How had he come here? What did he want?

When the answer hit her, it was one she didn't like. *Lost Boys*. That's what they'd been called, the gang Caul had been part of, who had burgled Anchorage back in its ice-faring days with their strange, spidery machines. Caul had left them to come with Miss Freya and Mr Scabious. Or had he? Had he been secretly in contact with the Lost Boys all these years, waiting until the city was settled and prosperous before he called them in to rob it again?

But the stranger on the beach wasn't a boy. He was a grown man, with long dark hair. He wore high boots, like a pirate in a storybook, and a coat that came down to his knees. He flicked the skirts of the coat back and



stuck his thumbs through his belt, and Wren saw a gun in a holster at his side.

She knew that she was out of her depth. She wanted to run home and tell Mum and Dad of the danger. But the two men had wandered closer to her, and if she ran she would be seen. She wriggled deeper into the low gorse-bushes behind the beach, timing each movement to coincide with the rasp of the little waves breaking on the shingle.

The man called Gargle was speaking, sounding as if he were making some kind of joke, but Caul suddenly cut him off. "What have you come here for, Gargle? I thought I'd seen the last of Lost Boys. It was a bit of a shock to find your message under my door. How long have you been creeping around Anchorage?"

"Since yesterday," said Gargle. "We just dropped by to say hello, and see how you were doing, friendly-like."

"Then why not show yourselves? Why not come and talk to me in daylight? Why leave messages and drag me out here in the middle of the night?"

"Honest, Caul, I wanted to. I'd planned to land my limpet on the mooring beach, all open and above-board, but I sent a few crab-cams in first, of course, just to be sure. Good thing I did, ain't it? What's happened, Caul? I thought you were going to be a big man in this place! Look at you; oily overalls and raggedy hair and a week's worth of beard. Is the Mad Tramp look big in Anchorage this season? I thought you were going to marry their margravine, that Freya What's-her-name."

"Rasmussen," said Caul unhappily. He turned away from the other man. "I thought so too. It didn't work out, Gargle. It's complicated. It's not like you think it's

going to be when you just watch it through the crab-cameras. I never really fitted in here."

"I should have thought the Drys would welcome you with open arms," said Gargle, sounding shocked. "After you brung them that map and everything."

Caul shrugged. "They were all kind enough. I just don't fit. I don't know how to talk to them, and talking's important to the Drys. When Mr Scabious was alive it was all right. We worked together, and we didn't need to talk, we had the work instead of words. But now he's gone. . . What about you, anyway? And what about Uncle? How is Uncle?"

"Like you care!"

"I do. I think of him often. Is he -?"

"The old man's still there, Caul," said Gargle.

"Last time I spoke to you, you had plans to get rid of him, take over. . ."

"And I have taken over," said Gargle, with a grin that Wren saw as a white blur in the dark. "Uncle's not as sharp as he was. He never really got over that business at Rogues' Roost. So many of his best boys lost, and all his fault. It nearly did him in, that. He relies on me for nearly everything nowadays. The boys look up to me."

"I bet they do," said Caul, and there was some meaning in his words that Wren couldn't understand, as if they were picking up a conversation that they'd started long ago, before she was even born.

"You said you need my help," said Caul.

"Just thought I'd ask," said Gargle. "For old time's sake."

"What's the plan?"

"There's no plan, exactly." Gargle sounded hurt. "Caul, I didn't come here on a burgling mission. I don't



want to rob your nice Dry friends. I'm just after one thing, one little thing, a particular small thing that no one will miss. I've looked with the crab-cams, I've sent my best burglar in, but we can't see it. So I thought, 'What we need is a man on the inside.' And here you are. I told my crew, we can rely on Caul."

"Well, you were wrong," said Caul. His voice was trembly. "I may not fit in here, but I'm not a Lost Boy either. Not any more. I'm not going to help you rob Freya. I want you gone. I won't tell anyone you were here, but I'll be keeping my eyes and ears open. If I hear a crab-cam nosing about, or see that something's gone missing, I'll let the Drys know all about you. I'll make sure they're waiting for you next time you come sneaking into Anchorage."

He turned and strode up the beach, crashing through the gorse barely a foot from the place where Wren was hiding. She heard him fall and curse as he started up the hill, and then the sounds of his going growing fainter and fainter as he climbed. "*Caul!*" called Gargle, but not too loud, a sort of whispering cry, with hurt in it, and disappointment. "*Caul!*" Then he gave up and stood still and pensive, running a hand through his hair.

Wren began to move, very carefully and quietly, getting ready for the moment when he would turn his back on her and she could creep away between the trees. But Gargle did not turn. Instead he raised his head and looked straight at her hiding place and said, "My eyes and ears are sharper than old Caul's, my friend. You can come out now."

