THE VILLAGE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

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to all those children who prefer
their stories a little bit darker

‘The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear,
and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear
of the unknown.’
H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

1

The Village

ALEXANDER HAD LEFT HOME – THE HOTEL that he had been living in for the last three months – knowing that this mission with the Professor might well be his last. Now, lurching from side to side, the carriage's large wooden wheels seemed to find every dip and hole in the rutted track. Their journey from the town of Cardiby had been pleasant for the most part – smooth roads and blue skies. Villages on their journey had been warm and welcoming to them, perhaps thinking that they were father and son, happy to offer the two travellers lodging and food, at least until Alexander accidently mentioned their destination – the village of Bleakhope. Smiles that initially greeted them suddenly turned to tight-lipped grimaces when Alexander let slip where their business led them. The warm, sparkling eyes of tavern owners shrank to suspicious slits and friendly nods and raised glasses to toast their health were replaced with stony silences, cold looks and women who hastily ushered their children away. But since their task had pulled them north, the hospitality was not the only thing to have turned cold. Just a day before,

Alexander had worried that his pale, freckled skin would burn under a bright summer sun untouched by even the smallest cloud. Now it was as if this part of England had decided to skip the end of summer and the whole of autumn altogether and go straight to an early winter. A blanket of unseasonal grey covered the sky and patches of mist drifted over the moors. To compound the situation, the smooth main routes had turned into potted dirt tracks and it had slowed their progress to a crawl as their two horses struggled to find safe footing.

'Ow!' Alexander said, rubbing his elbow as the cart jolted again, banging him against one of the Professor's large, wooden cases.

'Not much further now. An hour or so I would guess,' the Professor said, not taking his eyes from the track.

Alexander knew it wasn't a guess. Professor Cordite never guessed. He meticulously calculated possibilities and made well informed hypothesses, but he never guessed.

As they swayed and bumped onwards, Alexander wiped the water away from his freckled face and off his mousy brown hair that flopped above his eyes. It had begun to rain. Not real rain. Real rain fell from the sky as drops. This was English rain – drizzle – the almost imperceptible kind of rain that hung and blew in the air, soaking you through to your bones. Alexander had packed and dressed for summer and was feeling woefully unprepared.

Professor Cordite pulled the leather collar of his full-length black coat high around his neck and dipped his brown, leather tricorn hat in front of his eyes, trying to keep the water from his grizzled face. He looked more like a highwayman than a university Professor to Alexander.

'I told you to dress for winter,' he said, as if he could read Alexander's mind. 'Did you at least remember to pack the crystals?'

'Yes,' Alexander answered confidently, trying to remember if he had in fact packed them.

'And you have your violin?'

'Yes,' Alexander answered, unsure why he would need his violin on such a mission.

'Good,' the Professor said, nodding to himself. They rode on for a while longer, the farms and villages left far behind, the land becoming ragged and rocky with wild heather adding some muted colour to the bleak, grey countryside. 'Damn, I didn't pack the iron bolts!'

'I packed them. And the silver crossbow bolts. Just in case,' Alexander added proudly. The Professor turned and gave Alexander a tiny nod and an almost imperceptible smile.

'Good lad. Your father would have been proud.' This compliment warmed Alexander more than any winter coat would have. At least for a while.

The roads and the weather continued to worsen the further north they travelled. The patches of mist had banded together and were now merging into a thick fog. Goose flesh appeared on Alexander's arms and he hugged himself tighter, although he wasn't entirely sure it was just because of the cold. An uneasy feeling had begun to grow deep within his stomach. The feeling slithered up his spine and he shivered, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up like the hackles on a startled cat. The horizon had long since disappeared behind a thick veil of grey and with

each minute his world seemed to shrink. For a while before the mist consumed them completely, he could see partway across the moors. Strange standing stones stood like huge, solemn sentries watching over the few leafless and skeletal trees that had managed to find enough good earth to take root in. The putrid smelling fog grew thicker still and even the edges of the road were not clear in some parts.

'This is too dangerous. We should stop,' the Professor said. 'If the road turns sharply we could go crashing down into a ditch.' But Professor Cordite didn't stop. Alexander guessed that, like himself, the Professor carried that growing fear inside him too and didn't want to hang around longer than he had to.

The horses were walking so slowly they had almost come to a stop. Every step into the wall of mist took an agonisingly long time as the horses paused to survey their footing. The Professor looked around him – eyes darting to every shadow that moved in the mist. The horses grew increasingly skittish, snuffling and whinnying, taking bad steps and jerking the cart around. With growing dread Alexander wondered what could be scaring the horses that had been so placid until now, and realised that he had not seen another animal for some miles. Rabbits, deer, pheasants and sparrows, so abundant back near the last village, were now nowhere to be seen or heard. In fact, apart from the panting of the horses, the clopping of hooves and wheels of their cart, their world was silent.

As if in mockery of these thoughts, a loud cawing burst out from the back of the cart. Alexander jumped and spun around. A black crow the size of a house cat was sitting on the back of

the cart staring at the Professor and Alexander, tilting its head to one side then the other. The Professor looked panicked at the sight of it but he tore his eyes away knowing that to lose concentration now as he tried to guide the horses down the last few miles of the lane could be fatal.

'Shoo, get out of here,' Alexander said, waving the bird away with his hands. The crow didn't flinch and cawed again, raising its head to the sky.

'Caw! Caw! Caw!' it taunted.

His heart now racing, Alexander tried to flick at the bird, desperate for the creature to fly off and leave them alone. It pecked out at Alexander's hand in protest, its glassy eyes cold and calculating and then flew off, disappearing into the grey, its raspy cawing echoing off the mist, making it sound as if crows were all around them.

'Whatever happens, don't run off. Stay with me and the cart,' Professor Cordite said, not making Alexander feel any better about their situation. Why would he run off?

The Professor stared behind them for a moment and then spun back around, whipping the reins.

'Ya! Ya!' he shouted, the horses springing into a blind canter.

Alexander turned and looked behind the cart to see what had terrified the Professor so much. Tall silhouettes of men loomed in the mist behind the cart. The horses broke into a gallop, lurching the cart into the air. Grabbing the side of the carriage, Alexander held on as they bucked and twisted this way and that, nearly throwing him from his seat. Finding the courage, Alexander looked behind him again and saw the silhouettes were

still there. Somehow they were effortlessly keeping pace with the cart even though they didn't seem to be running or even moving at all. It was as if they were gliding upright towards them, totally unaffected by the uneven road.

'There's the inn, up ahead. Hold on!' the Professor cried out.

Although the building was still hidden by the fog, Alexander could see orange lights coming from windows some distance down the road. Gripping on as tightly as he could, he pushed his feet into the corners of the footwell, trying desperately to wedge himself in. A silhouette appeared in front of them and it seemed suddenly to Alexander that these were not shadows of men at all. The shadows' arms were too long, their heads too thin. The shadow that blocked their way in the thick mist ahead terrified the horses as much as it did Alexander. It sent the two mares careering off the road, their eyes bulging and desperate. They neighed and bucked, trying to shake off the cart, foam flying from their mouths. Alexander was shaken like a rag doll, smashing wildly from side to side as the cart snapped and cracked. There was an almighty splash as the horses led the doomed cart hurtling into a pond. Alexander's grip was broken as the cart was thrown onto its side and he plunged headfirst into the water, one of the wooden chests striking his head as he fell. Blackness engulfed him and he sank without a struggle to the bottom of the pond.

Seconds or maybe even minutes later – Alexander would never know how long he was under the water for – the Professor grabbed hold of the back of his shirt and yanked him up. Brown water exploded from Alexander's pale lips and he heaved in great

lungfuls of air. His body fought with itself, wanting to breathe, be sick, and cough up the gunk that sat in his lungs all at once. There was an almighty pain from the side of his head and his eyes stung. Looking about himself stupidly, his head swimming and spinning, he thought he might black out. He surveyed the scene around him as if in a dream where he was merely a helpless onlooker. The Professor was trying to keep hold of one of the horses, but it rose up and tore the reins from his hands, turning and scrambling out of the pond to disappear into the fog. The Professor was now facing Alexander and shouting at him. He was shouting and yet it sounded so quiet. The whole world seemed soundless. Alexander tried to focus on the Professor's lips.

'Run!' he seemed to mouth. 'Run!' And the dream was suddenly broken and the world exploded around him with sound and clarity. The terrible whines of the horses as they disappeared off into the mist, the ghostly, shrill screams coming from all around the pond and the Professor yelling at him as he tried to free a case from the sinking cart. 'Run, Alex!'

Alexander tried to run towards the glowing yellow lights of the tavern, an oasis in the sea of mist, but the bottom of the pond was thick with silt and every step was a slippery effort. From both sides of the pond, the grotesque shadows appeared again, gliding towards Alexander, their impossibly long, dark arms stretching out towards him. He slipped, falling to his knees and swallowed another mouthful of gritty water. He spat and spluttered, turning to face his dark pursuers who were only a few feet away, their spiny fingers of shadow stretching towards

his neck. Rolling fully onto his back to face them, he could do nothing to escape now. His eyes closed reflexively, his soaking arms shielding his face.

A blinding light in the dark burnt through the mist. Even with his eyes squeezed tightly shut he could see the light. An angel, Alexander thought. An angel here to save him.

'Get up!' a familiar voice boomed. The Professor, brilliantly lit, stood above him, a sulphur lamp burning impossibly bright in his hand. 'Run! Run and don't look back!'

Alexander did not have to be told again. He waded through the pond, scrambled up the bank and sprinted onto the dirt track, tearing headlong towards the lights.

The mist seemed to be closing in on him, dark shadows crawling from the corners of his vision. His pondwater-filled lungs burned and he thought his heart might give out, but he never slowed, not until the tavern seemed to jump out of the fog in front of him and he crashed into a large oak door. With its whitewashed walls and bright fires within, the tavern seemed to ward off the mist. Alexander allowed himself to look back, hoping to see the Professor behind him, but he was nowhere to be seen. He leant back against the tavern door, reassuring in its solidness, and tried to catch his breath. The oak door opened behind him and Alexander staggered, then tumbled back into a heap on a stone tiled floor. Blinding light from lamps around the walls filled his vision and he squinted up, feeling his head swim in the sudden heat of the tavern. Figures loomed over him and his vision slowly shrank to a pinhole.

2

The Tavern

VOICES. FROM SOMEWHERE FAR AWAY, ALEXANDER could hear voices. He struggled to open his eyes and shake away the grogginess. He sat up, feeling stiff and bruised and registered a faint light coming through thin, tatty curtains that danced gently in a draft at the end of the bed he found himself in. He was in a small room. There were two other empty beds and a small table in one corner that had the melted remains of a candle on it. Dreams, because they must have been dreams and not memories, of his journey began to creep from the shadows of his mind. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up feeling every muscle in his body shout out in protest. Dark yellow and blue bruises covered his arms and legs and he had one screamer of a headache. He reached up to rub at his temples and felt a lump the size of a small egg. He vaguely remembered a trunk smacking into him before he hit the pond. His heart began to race again as the realisation that the horrors of their journey had been all too real.

Someone had taken most of his clothes off and hung them in

front of the fire, which had burned down to dim embers in the hearth. He wondered if it had been the Professor that had helped him, and dried his clothes, and then he began to panic. He had no idea if the Professor had even survived. Limping to the window, he threw back the stained curtains and looked out. It was impossible to tell what time of day it was because the grey mist still hung in the air. It could have been early morning, midday or late evening – Alexander had no idea. The sun could not be seen behind the slate grey clouds. There was no sign of their cart or horses below and no one seemed to be around outside. The track past the tavern stretched off until it was bleached to the same grey as the mist and was lost from sight.

From the window he could just about make out the dark shapes of trees, shed of their leaves and looking damp and weary. The grass was a muted yellow, as if the colour had been drained by the mist. In the distance, about a quarter of a mile away, were the faint, dark shapes of a village. Bleakhope, Alexander guessed. This was the village they had set out to save. The end of their journey. Their final destination. A pool of fog covered most of the village, but the tops of odd houses, a church spire and a tower rose above the grey sea and, higher up on the hill, just the faintest of grey silhouettes against a grey background, was the manor house. What unsettled Alexander more than any of these featureless shadows was the stillness. Nothing moved. There were no lights on in the village, no animals moved, barely a gust of wind. There seemed to be no life at all. The world outside looked like a sepia photograph: frozen, lifeless and almost monochrome. But that wasn't quite true, Alexander noticed after a moment.

In one of the manor house windows, a faint light flickered, then went out.

He pulled on his clothes, which had dried out nicely, and went to the bedroom door. For a horrible moment he was convinced that he would try the door and it would be locked, but it opened easily and he wondered why he would have thought such a strange thing. Outside was a narrow corridor which, Alexander found out as he began to walk around, had been made by only using the noisiest floorboards possible. Murmuring and talking below began to die down as he squeaked his way to the top of the staircase. The near silence that suddenly fell on everyone was louder than if everyone had been singing. Even the whispers stopped as he made his way down the wooden stairs and all faces turned to look. Men, women and children, all huddled around tables or gathered at the tavern bar, stood still and stared. The tavern was made from thick, black timbers and white plaster that had stained a dirty yellow from clouds of pipe smoke. The whole building slanted at odd angles with walls that were far taller at one end than the other. The villagers looked downtrodden, weary and haggard – like at the end of a very long wake after a funeral. Their clothes were simple, creased and dirty. Bags hung under their eyes, as if none of them had properly slept for a very long time.

The aching in his head flared up again and he gave his audience a pained nod. 'Good day,' he said. No one responded. They didn't even look uncomfortable just staring at him in silence, as if they were watching a particularly sombre scene being acted out from a play.

'I travelled with an older man. I would very much like to know if he is safe. Did he manage to make it here?'

An elderly man, who was balding on top but had mad, wispy hair flying about his ears and a wild, white beard, made his way towards him. He wore a fur-trimmed black coat and baggy, brown trousers.

'Welcome to the village of Bleakhope, young man,' the gentleman said and held out his hand for Alexander to shake. 'The Professor is fine. I'm sure it'll take more than a few shadows and a dip in our pond to keep him down if the stories about him are true.'

'Alexander. Pleased to meet you,' Alexander managed to say, and shook the man's hand. It was a rough, firm handshake that took Alexander by surprise. It was a far stronger grip than his balding grey head suggested he would be able to muster.

'The name's Mr Peter Parnell, and I have the ill fortune of being this damned tavern's landlord. I'm not blaspheming when I say that either, boy. I won't have blasphemy in my inn. The village of Bleakhope is truly damned. We have been forsaken and the village left for goodness knows what devilry. I'm thankful the Professor answered our pleas, but why he'd bring a young lad like you into this mess I don't know,' Mr Parnell said looking around at everyone in the tavern, still all watching in silence. 'You took quite a knock to the head, my boy. You alright?'

'I think so,' Alexander said, rubbing his temple again and running his fingers over the bump. 'Is the Professor here?'

Right on cue, Professor Cordite burst through the giant oak front door and everyone jumped.

'Alex, you are alive. Good,' he said with no hint of a smile. 'Help me with this case. I managed to drag it from the pond,' he said, dropping the large chest to the ground with a squelching thud. 'Go through it and see what materials we have lost and what can be saved.'

'For goodness sake, Professor Cordite. The boy has just woken up. Let him eat some breakfast first and get something to drink,' the landlord said.

Alexander had been about to do exactly as the Professor had asked – there had been no thought of refusing. The Professor seemed to think about Mr Parnell's request for a moment, rubbing his stubble-covered chin, and then shook his head – not in refusal, but as if to shake some sense into himself.

'You are quite right,' he said with a nod. 'Eat quickly, then give me a hand.'

Alexander nodded, secretly relieved. He suddenly realised how hungry he was. Holding his rumbling belly, he looked around for somewhere to sit. Free spaces seemed to magically disappear as bottoms shuffled closer together whenever he took a step towards them. He had got used to not being welcome in the towns they had passed through, but the villagers assembled in this tavern in Bleakhope were taking passive hostility to a brand new level. Alexander felt as welcome as a terrier at a rat's picnic, but he said nothing and felt the heat of his swallowed emotions begin to turn his pale cheeks red. The Professor had warned him to expect a reaction like this, but it was still hard to take. They were there to help. The villagers had written to them, why were they being so cold?

In the end a bearded, ruddy-faced man dressed in a simple greying shirt and grey woollen tunic made some room for him at a bench at the bar. He sat over a bowl of food as if he were guarding it. Alexander was not sure how much of the food the man had actually eaten as most of the meal seemed to have been caught in his beard and moustache.

'Sit here, boy. Don't mind us folk. If you'd seen half the things we have, you wouldn't trust strangers either,' the man said, with a mouth full.

'Thank you. The name's Alexander,' he said, holding out his hand. The man simply looked at it, nodded and continued eating his breakfast which consisted almost entirely of sausages.

'Lord knows what you and that charlatan are going to do when you see what's really out there. Have an accident in your trousers and run all the way home, I suspect,' the man said, staring ahead at nothing in particular then back to his breakfast. 'I'm Arty by the way.'

'Pleased to meet you, Arty,' Alexander said, not at all sure that he was pleased to meet him in the slightest. 'The Professor is a great man. He is very well known in India and London. There was a library in the town of Burntwood that was haunted by three ghosts and the Profess – '

'Maybe he's got you fooled as easily as Mr Parnell. Or maybe you're in on his little act. Either way, you're wasting your breath on me, boy. Whatever conjuring tricks he hopes to impress us with, it won't work on us, and it sure as heck won't work on those things out there,' he said, pointing a sausage towards the gloom outside.

A tin plate with a boiled egg, a rasher of crispy bacon and a small roll were placed in front of Alexander, and the barman walked off without saying a word.

'I saw the shadows as I came in. They chased me to the doors of this tavern,' Alexander said, keen to earn some recognition for his experience.

'Shadows? Pah! They're nothing! We let the children play with them,' Arty snorted, and Alexander knew he was being made fun of.

'Well, what have *you* seen?' Alexander asked, leaning in conspiratorially. Arty looked around him, wiping his greasy lips with the sleeve of his stained shirt.

'There are things I've seen that would make a boy like you go mad. Things that would make you scream out for your mummy and make you wish you'd never come to Bleakhope.'

'Like what?' Alexander asked, and Arty's face began to darken as he swallowed back a lump in his throat and his hand, clutching a fork with the last of his sausage on, began to shake.

'I was coming back from the village, back when things weren't so bad – when a few of us still braved going into town for supplies,' Arty said, the cockiness from his voice all gone, his tone heavy and serious. 'I was 'bout halfway back when I heard this sniffing and scratching sound in the grass to my right. Sounded big. I thought it must be a pig, or a boar, but I look around and I can't see anything. So, I follow the sound and wander off the path a little. It's getting louder and louder so I start to slow up, realising that I'm being a damned fool for straying so far from the path. Just as I'm about to turn back, I see where

the noise is coming from. It looks like a big rabbit hole, or a fox's den and I breathe a bit of a sigh of relief. Then I see a nose. Just the tip of a nose sticking out the hole. Big! Big and black, with thick, wiry whiskers. A fox or a badger I think. Then it crawls out a little more and I see that it has a long, brown snout. Then, before I have a chance to think or scream or run, its head comes right out. A rat's head! A rat's head as big as a dog's, with huge black eyes staring up at me. Then I see these two hands come scratching out of the hole either side of its head. Yep! You heard me right!' he said with a nod, turning to Alexander for the first time. 'Not claws. Hands. Human hands! Pale and filthy they were and they grabbed hold of the ground in front of it and started to pull its body out. And then I did scream, and I don't mind telling that to no one because its body was that of a man. Dressed like a beggar – filthy rags from head to toe with the head of a dirty great rat, crawling its way out of its burrow towards me. I dropped the supplies I was carrying as if they were on fire and ran 'til I thought my heart would give out, and all the while I can hear scampering and sniffing and biting coming from just behind me. I never turned round to look because I knew it would be the last thing I saw if I did, so I didn't stop 'til I got back to the tavern.' He paused for a moment and took a sip of some dark liquid from a tankard. 'And that's still not the worst thing I've seen.'

A chill ran down Alexander's spine and he put down the other half of his roll, his appetite suddenly gone.

'I hope you two know what you're doing. For your sakes as much as ours!' And with that, Arty got up, finished his drink, wiped the froth from his moustache and left.

A hand suddenly grabbed Alexander's shoulder and he jumped, a little whimper escaping his lips. It was the Professor.

'Forget checking the supplies for a moment. Mr Parnell wants to give us some more information about the village. You must listen carefully. What he says may save our lives at some point. Forewarned is forearmed!' he said, and walked to the far end of the tavern. That was one of the Professor's favourite mantras. 'Forewarned is forearmed, Alexander!' along with 'Fail to prepare and prepare to fail.' After what Arty had just told him, he didn't want to prepare for anything. He just wanted to tuck himself back into bed and stay there until the Professor had finished doing whatever it was he planned to do.

He hurried after the Professor and Mr Parnell the landlord who were chatting to a group of villagers gathered around a table.

'Nathan, you should probably join us too,' Mr Parnell said to a tanned, swarthy gentleman with close-cropped hair and a scar that ran from his forehead almost around to the top of his neck. He stood up and the Professor, a tall man by anyone's standards, just came up to his shoulders. Nathan followed obediently and they made their way into a back parlour where two younger men were playing cards at the room's only table.

'We'll just be a few minutes more. I'm having quite the lucky streak,' one young man said smugly, leaning back in his chair. Nathan calmly walked over to the young man and kicked the chair out from under him, sending his cards flying into the air.

'Looks like Lady Luck just left. You'd better follow her out,' Nathan said, in a well-spoken voice that did not fit his brutish appearance. Picking the fellow up off the floor, Nathan shoved

him out of the door. His card-playing companion threw his cards down in panic and hurried out the room after him.

'Well, thank you Nathan. Subtlety has never been your strong suit, has it?' Mr Parnell said, lowering himself into a chair at the far end of the table. Nathan did not reply, but sat down to one side of Mr Parnell. Alexander let the Professor sit first, then went to shut the door, the rest of the tavern staring after them. Just as the door was nearly closed it burst open again and Arty pushed his way into the room.

'If there's to be a secret meeting, I want be involved!' he bellowed, standing with his fists on his hips.

'Stone the crows, Arty, it's not a secret meeting. You're welcome to join us if you wish. We just wanted to speak where the children couldn't hear,' Mr Parnell said, exhausted with Arty already.

'Good. Well let's get started,' Arty said sitting down next to the Professor, eyeing him up and down. 'So, I guess this is the charlatan we just paid half the village's gold to?'

'Professor James Cordite at your service. And this is Alexander,' the Professor said, as way of an introduction. 'You may have met him already, maybe even helped him last night, for which I am thankful. I have been his guardian the past five years. He is my assistant and will accompany me on this contract. I realise that it may seem to you that I have charged a lot of money, but I can assure you that my fee only covers my materials, my tools, etc. I can give you the contact details of two French sisters who might consider attempting this job, but they charge at least twice as much as I do and will not do the job half as well.'

'I could have lived on that amount for a year! We don't have to listen to this. I want my money back!' Arty ranted, rising from the table.

'Sit down, Arty. We voted and decided. That part is agreed. This meeting is to tell Professor Cordite all we can to aid him in ridding Bleakhope of this evil. If you can't be of any help, get back to propping up the bar and leave us be,' Mr Parnell said, rubbing his forehead. Arty scowled and looked to Nathan for support. None came.

'Fine,' Arty said with a huff.

'Although, I must say, I didn't realise that you would be bringing a child into such danger,' Mr Parnell said, nodding in Alexander's direction.

'I will need his help. He must accompany me,' the Professor said with such finality that it looked as if Mr Parnell might just leave it at that.

'But he's just a boy. He could get hurt, or worse. Nathan here can accompany you. He has the strength of two men!' Mr Parnell said and Nathan raised one eyebrow and looked up at the Professor.

'I do not doubt his strength, or his bravery. But what I need is someone who can distil pure sulphuric acid from some very basic ingredients. I need an assistant who knows the difference between Cornswood Herb, which will rid a person of creeping paralysis and the almost identical looking Fox-Tooth weed, which will leave a person blind if eaten. But, most importantly for this mission, I need someone who can play the violin. Now, Alexander can do all this. And he does it well. So *he* accompanies me and let that be the end of it.'

Everyone turned to look Alexander up and down. He felt himself flush, his face reddening. No one said any more.

Alexander's cheeks burned long after the compliment had been paid. The Professor never gave him cheap praise. Never gave anyone any praise at all really. Although, now that Alexander thought about it, he did remember the Professor saying to him once that he made a fair cup of tea for a young man, but that really was about it. 'Praise thrown like confetti is worthless. A man should do well for himself, not to please others,' the Professor had once chided after Alexander had asked if, after performing a particularly difficult experiment to brew a sleeping draught, he had done well. So, for Alexander to hear him speak so highly of him made him want to burst into tears of happiness and rush over and hug him. Of course he did no such thing and sat in silence and hoped no one noticed how red he had gone.

'Fine. If you can vouch for his safety.'

'I do. And thank you, Mr Parnell, for trusting us to solve this most terrible of cases. When did it all begin?' the Professor asked, taking out an old, leather-bound ledger from his inside pocket and opening it on the table. He then took a quill and a small bottle of ink out of another pocket, placing them both on the table. As Nathan began to speak, the Professor opened the bottle and dipped the quill into the ink.

'It started about six months ago when a fog descended onto the village – ' Nathan began.

'Rubbish,' Arty scoffed. 'You're a fool if you think that's when it began. Strange things started when his Lordship's son disappeared last winter.' Nathan slammed his fists onto the table

and began to slowly stand, glaring at Arty. 'Now I'm not saying *you're* a fool, I, I, I just meant – '

'Nathan knows what you mean, Arty. And I don't say it often, Nathan, but Arty is right about when things began,' Mr Parnell said, putting a hand on Nathan's arm. Nathan stared at the hand that held him back for a moment then settled back into his seat. Arty exhaled the breath he had been holding, relieved to have avoided what was sure to have been a very short confrontation with Nathan. 'It did all start when Lord Bleakhope's son, Master Edgar, disappeared – '

'How old was his son Edgar?' the Professor interrupted.

'He was just five years old,' Mr Parnell replied. 'Such a sweet boy. When he disappeared, his father near bankrupted the household. Spent every penny they had hiring soldiers and trackers and poachers to find him. Old Dan, the barman here, and his family are the best trackers in the county, but there was simply no sign of him. They never found so much as a hair. It was as if he had just vanished. Having lost his wife the year before as well, it was all too much for his mind to take. He hid himself away.'

'Then the mist came,' Nathan continued.

'No. Not quite. Then Lord Bleakhope couldn't afford to keep his staff on. Had to let them all go – all of them except for this new doctor that showed up. He stayed on. There are rumours he convinced Lord Bleakhope that he could bring his son back somehow,' Mr Parnell continued.

'Right. So Lord Bleakhope's son disappeared, a strange man arrived, Lord Bleakhope dismissed all the staff, then the mist

came,' Nathan tried again. There were nods from all around the table. 'Then other people started going missing.'

'Who?' the Professor said, dipping his quill into the ink pot again. 'I will need names, occupations, descriptions.'

'Well, the first to go missing after Lord Bleakhope's son Edgar was little Bobby Quinn. He was only a wee lad, nine years old or such. Thin as a stick. Is that the kind of thing you wanted?' Nathan asked.

'Perfect. Where was he last seen?'

'The night he went missing he went to go fishing by the lake before the sun went down, right around supper time. Never came back. Then Lucy went missing, Old Dan's daughter. She was as good a tracker as her uncles were and she was looking for Bobby in the orchard when she was last seen, but she never came home,' Nathan continued.

'Description?' the Professor simply asked.

'Older girl, almost a woman I suppose. Auburn hair. Kind hearted. Never troubled no one.'

'Then my Sarah, my wife disappeared,' Nathan said coldly. 'We were all still living in the village then. She went out to fetch water from the well. Never returned. I looked everywhere. Not a sign.'

'Aye. He looked non-stop for two whole days. By the time he stopped two more people had vanished,' Mr Parnell said. 'After that the order becomes a bit of a blur. But we know that before this nightmare began, the village, plus those at Bleakhope Manor, the two farms and out here as far as the tavern, was home to three hundred and twenty-seven people. Only fifty-eight of us remain.'

Alexander gasped.

'Now, not all of those unaccounted for have vanished by any means,' Mr Parnell continued. 'Most people went to live with family in neighbouring villages. Some of the younger folk, who didn't have relatives nearby, went to find work in one of the big towns further south. But a lot, maybe even as many as twenty men, women and children have vanished.' Mr Parnell shook his head solemnly and stared at his own hands which were clenched on the table in front of him. 'As each person went missing the mist grew thicker and the sightings began. Shadows and giant creatures. It was the unknown that terrified us. We never knew what would be waiting for us out in the fog.'

'And how many have been killed?' the Professor asked, turning to a new page in his ledger.

'It's hard to say,' Mr Parnell replied. 'We never recover the bodies. Often there are just ... ' he paused, thinking how best to phrase it, ' ... signs of a struggle. Quite often there is nothing at all. People are taken in some quite terrifying and violent ways, but there is never any body to be found when we go to search the next afternoon when it's lighter. Not even any blood. Not normally.'

'Give me an example,' the Professor asked. Mr Parnell was about to begin, but he caught the Professor's eye and nodded in Alexander's direction.

'Should I tell you after?' Mr Parnell said, and Alexander realised Mr Parnell was trying to shelter him from another horror story.

'Nonsense. Alex is going out with me tomorrow. Forewarned is forearmed.'

Alexander nodded and tried to smile his appreciation to the Professor. The truth was that he would have been quite happy for them to talk about this after he had gone. Ignorance is bliss, Alexander thought to himself. Ever heard of that saying, Professor?

'Fine. The last person to go missing was Jeremiah. Six of us had headed over to the woodshed, just past the orchard on the edge of the village. We have plentiful supplies of wood here for a normal summer, but the nights get so unseasonably cold and there are so many of us here now that the wood reserves were running low. We started to stock up our bags. No horse will venture there now so we have to carry everything ourselves. It was dark and misty, but things were going well until a deafening screech cried out above us. We were all blown off our feet by a sudden gust of wind, mist swirling all around us and we saw – ' he paused and shook his head as if he didn't believe what he was saying, ' – we thought we saw a bird swoop down in the darkness and take Jeremiah.'

'And Jeremiah was a full-grown man?' the Professor asked, not patronisingly or accusingly, simply clarifying a fact.

'Aye, not a small man neither,' Nathan said, taking over the story. 'Whatever took him, and I never saw it properly either, must have been huge. All I saw were these two amber eyes cutting through the mist above me. I felt a burning across my head and then it was gone. If it wasn't for this scar I wouldn't even believe it myself,' he finished, running a finger over the angry red stripe that went from between his eyebrows to the back of his head like half a red crown.

There was a strained quiet after they had finished their story. The only sound was the Professor's quill scratching over the dry pages.

'Right, thank you gentlemen for your time. Alexander and myself will need to get prepared,' the Professor said, recorking his tiny ink bottle and wiping its edges with a cloth.

'Did you not just hear what we said?' Arty shouted and leapt up, sending his chair toppling backwards behind him. 'Some hellish creature snatched a full-grown man from out of the mist. I've been chased by a man with the head of a rat. Others have seen tree roots drag a man under the soil! What's in your luggage that is going to stop that, huh? What can you and this boy,' he said pointing at Alexander, his finger only a few inches from his face, 'this boy, who is wetter than the clothes he fainted in, do?'

'I blacked-out, I never fainted,' Alexander muttered weakly.

'What are you going to do to stop that?' Arty continued, ignoring Alexander's interjection.

The Professor calmly blew on the ink on his ledger, not shutting it until he was sure it was dry. He dabbed at the page with the corner of his cloth, inspected it and closed his ledger, tucking it into an inside pocket of his jacket.

'I know you are scared. It is natural to be scared of what we do not understand. I can assure you though, whatever dark agent is pulling the strings behind this, we will find them and put an end to this. There is much to be hopeful about, Arty. I predict that within the week, your village will have returned to the quaint, rustic village that it was just last year. I will also have returned

some, if not all, of your missing,' the Professor said and rose from his seat.

There was a moment of silence from everyone who sat around the table. Mr Parnell looked around at Arty's and Nathan's stunned faces which reflected his own awed shock and disbelief.

'Are you serious?' Mr Parnell asked.

'I assume that is a rhetorical question. You did pay me to save your village did you not? A task that I agreed to do, and when I agree to do something, you can rest assured it will be done,' he said and nodded to them. 'Now, if you will excuse us, Alexander and I have much to prepare. We shall meet again tonight after supper where I will tell you more. I will set out late this afternoon to confirm my theory. If I am right, I may even return with the first of the missing.' And with this, the Professor tucked his chair under the table and left the room.