

BLACKOUT

by Katie Riddell

INTRODUCTION

“It’s early November, 2010, and the nights have drawn in. The residents of Whitefroth have lost all of their power for the past 36 hours, and there’s no sign of repair. The most outraged members of the community have organised a meeting outside the Town Hall at 7pm. They don’t want another candlelit, cold evening with no telly.

Local councillors are trying to calm the dispute. “We are waiting on damage to be repaired at the pylons to the north of the town, everybody stay calm and be patient! The repair team is here and working through the night!” announces the Provost, Archibald MacDougal.

Residents begrudgingly share tips on bonfire building and swap board games, but not everyone is satisfied with this conclusion.

Our group is gathered together, united by an awareness that, as they look north, there are no construction vehicles, no torches, no workers on ladders, nothing to be seen, just darkness. They decide to investigate.”

PLOT

The blackout has left residents in a state of panic, confusion, and frustration. Players will need to venture to the edge of town to discover that the pylons have completely disappeared.

The Pylons are actually sentient creatures, once guardians of the town. They have been mysteriously uprooted from their designated locations by a shapeshifter called Marlik (NPC), luring them away by their wiring. These formidable constructs actually serve a dual purpose, standing as towering scarecrows that watch over the town, as well as transmitting vital power. Throughout this tide, as long as the pylons are not back where they belong, locals will go missing, unsavoury creatures will more frequently appear in the town, and an air of panic will increase across Whitefroth.

This nefarious plot has been devised by Pamela Brady (NPC), and the Provost (NPC) is involved. Pamela wants the highly suspicious AC Engineering to observe the town without the pylons for “research purposes” (Pamela requires human experiments, and after struggling to recruit she plans on capturing people under the cover of darkness and chaos). She has agreed to sponsor the Provost’s political interests in return for him arranging to get rid of the pylons for a while.

The future of the town hangs in the balance, as it grapples with the absence of the Pylons. Their vanishment has left the town exposed to threats, and has cast an air of uncertainty over the community. It falls upon the players to locate the missing pylons, and restore power and security to the town.

FIRST OBSERVATIONS

NPCs Outside the Town Hall - or add your own. (see Glossary for further information on individual NPCs)

- Provost Archibald MacDougal and councillors
- Eve Myles
- Gerard Knocks
- Sergeant Blackthorne

Town Centre

- Groups of locals gossiping about the lack of power
- Police protecting the Provost from angry individuals
- The rest of the town is dark with an air of uncertainty and stress
- Looking North, toward the area where workmen are supposed to be fixing the pylons, everything is dark and still. They need to move closer to get a better look.

DISCOVERIES

Should players attempt to interrogate the Provost, they will be asked to move on and threatened with police action. Success in rolls will lead to overhearing the Provost chatting to a councillor, saying *“the plan is enacted”*, in a hushed tone.

The group will need to prepare with torches or other light sources to explore, and can ask locals for help with this, or go to get supplies. Should they progress without light sources, their exploration will be trickier.

As the players make their way through the town, choose some experiences to stumble across to demonstrate a level of unusual danger in Whitefroth. For example, is there an NPC looking for their child who has mysteriously vanished? Does a strange creature attack as the group walks? Are there reports and gossip of accidents? Check the Glossaries for inspiration.

Strange blacked-out vans seem to be sitting in every other street in the town. Players can encounter/observe people being taken away, and official-looking people chatting on walkie-talkies in them. Breaking into a van, players might find a sedated individual, scientific-looking equipment, power sources, and AC Engineering branded items.

If players head to the field north of the town where the work should be happening:

“You make your way under the railway bridge at the edge of town, and into a lumpy, grassy field looking for the work happening to fix the town's power issue. A brisk and chilling wind whips around you. The smell of manure from a nearby farm swirls with the fresh sea air. It's cold, dark, and still but for an odd rumble from a passing car, a squawk from a seagull, or a gentle groan from a cow somewhere nearby.”

If players inspect the field where the pylons are supposed to be standing, they discover that the pylons are not there. 3 are missing in total. Gaping holes are embedded in the grassy ground where they once stood.

The pylons are hidden in the abandoned fairground behind the campsite to the north of Whitefroth. They are tangled among old ride parts at the very rear of the area. In order to get the pylons to reveal themselves as creatures:

- Players successfully manage to observe that the tracks of the run-down ride seem nonsensical
- A player gets an electric shock from spotting and touching a wire in the mass of metal
- Players successfully manually push a carriage to crash into another track, that reveals itself to be a pylon creature, as this disturbance will have the pylons stand and walk toward the group:

“A fierce, earth-moving rumble echoes in all directions. With an enormous creak and screech, a huge metal structure erupts upward, breaking pieces of old track and wood into shards in its wake. A pylon stands, looming over you. Out of the rubble appears a second, a third, and a fourth. With slow, shattering thuds, they take huge lumbering steps and stand proud in a circle surrounding you.”

The pylons are metal creatures (Creatures Chapter) and therefore big and bulky. They move formidably and are temperamental. They communicate simply through behaviour and visual representation. Features of the pylons include:

- A dense composition that makes them nearly impervious to force. They are highly resilient, and if angered can flatten other structures, or carelessly cause a path of destruction over the town.
- Visible canals lead down the surface of the metal forms. They channel an energy that animates them. Should the pylons need to be stopped from causing damage, players will need to target these conduits to slow them to a stop.
- When the pylons are threatened, they can utilise retractable rods from their frames, creating weapon or cage-like structures to block attacks, trap people, and make themselves unmovable.
- Magnets will distract the pylons, and make them move with curiosity toward the magnetic item

4 pylons can be found at the fairground, indicating that all is not as it seems. Marlik, in his disguise as a pylon, will spring when struck, bend out of shape and shake as if pain has been inflicted. Players will need to aggravate this pylon enough for him to transform and reveal himself:

“Suddenly, the metal giant trembles, quaking the whole site. Its criss-cross of beams protracts inwards with an electrifying jolt, huge poles of its extremities are drawn downwards and into one misshapen metallic mass. The brutalist design shrinks, and a form starts to emerge, a figure. Slowly, great metal canes retract into arms, and legs. One bends and snaps into a neck, reversing inside out to reveal a mouth. The conduits of energy burst, and eyes bulge forward in their place. The individual collapses forward to the ground.”

Marlik is the result of a previous experiment by AC Engineering. A tall, unkept, and snarly man, he has been tasked with temporarily getting rid of the pylons for the Provost, and is aware of the pylons' dual purpose and the reasoning for the scheme. Embittered by his own experience, he cares little for the suffering of others.

Ways for the players to successfully take control/influence over the pylons include:

- Overthrowing Marlik, and stealing the pylons away by their wires. This is a bold and risky strategy for players, as they will have to cover their tracks, or make it look like an accident.
- Mimicking Marlik's commands. He grapples with the metal beasts by their dragging wires, whilst insulating himself from the voltage, and uses his weight to lunge forward and walk them in a direction. He has a large weighted magnet for magnet fishing on him that he uses to get their attention and lure them forward. Players can try to out-manoeuvre him.
- Gaining information from Marlik. Confronting or interrogating him will not go down well. In defence, Marlik will attempt to use the pylons to crush and destroy the players.

The pylons can be shepherded back by grabbing hanging wires and leading them back to the field at the edge of town, where they will walk and take their places. The players must use physical skill, dexterity, protect themselves from the live wires, and lead them by torches and magnets or forcibly drag the pylons without being trampled.

“Arriving back in the bumpy field, the dragging and signalling cease as the pylons suddenly stop. A calm passes over the field. One at a time, the 3 huge living structures purposely heave themselves forward, as though suddenly recognising they are home. They take their places, lift their arms, and the wires whip up magnificently into the air, spinning and weaving together. A sense of security is acknowledged as the guardians of the town take their place. How is it that a mysterious protection is granted by such things? And what happens on the days when they turn their backs?”

“The following morning, the residents awake to discover the power is back. In an article published that morning by the Whitefroth Gazette, it is reported that the Provost solved the Pylon situation. A great boasting image of Archibald gleams from the page.”

GAMEPLAY CLUES

People outside the Town Hall. These people are fed up by the blackout, annoyed at the lack of swift action, and some will be angry enough to attempt to confront the Provost.

NPC: Eve: Outspoken local, frustrated with the councillors and is talking heatedly to Sergeant Blackthorne. She is concerned with elderly members of the community, but Blackthorne is rude and dismissive. **Should players chat with Eve empathetically, and share her concerns, she will let the group borrow her super bright torch she carries on winter walks.** She will leave to check in with her family.

NPC: Gerard: will try to convince players that this is an act of a deity, and not to trust the Provost. He claims this is a test of our resources, and that the authorities are exploiting the

test to help his next political campaign. He leaves to film his latest online blog on the subject, only to realise there's no power and he can't upload it.

NPC: The Provost: having made his announcement, is chatting to a group of councillors and police officers who are protecting him from grumpy and shouting locals. Should the group try to come close, *Sergeant Blackthorne* will interrupt his chat with *Eve* to try to stop the players getting too close.

Players hear the voice of the Provost through the walkie-talkie of an AC Engineering staff member. Lurking about the vans, players may overhear Archibald's voice, where he mentions Marlik, connecting him to their plan.

Gaping holes where the pylons should be. If the players inspect the holes in the ground, they will find there are more holes than there should be. If three pylons are missing, why are there so many holes leading through the field? They begin to look like footprints, and they head in the direction of the campsite north east of Whitefroth. Following the imprints on the ground by tracking will lead the players to an abandoned fairground near the campsite on the outskirts of the town

A woman in an unassuming car slows to drive past the field, before speeding off before the players can keep track of her. The players need to get the impression that they, or the situation, are being observed (by Pamela).

A young boy and girl living at the campsite. Kids are playing, acting shifty, but mucking about. They know that the pylon creatures are hiding in the fairground, in amongst an old ride. They sweetly assume that the pylons want away from the salty sea air.

THEMES

Science-fiction, Politics, Urban fantasy, Navigating darkness, Survival, Uncovering Truths, Conspiracy, Body horror

While hosting this Tide, lean into the unique perspectives of NPCs, and the frustrations growing about the lack of power. As time goes on, their grumpiness will turn to anxiety and fear as things go more and more wrong in the town.

Depicting the nature of a town in darkness, as the night gets later and later, and more and more dangerous, can be done using descriptions of an atmosphere closing in, getting more suspicious, then tired and paranoid. It's a cold night, and everyone would be much happier at home with this all over.

The Pylon creatures are enormous, and therefore weigh tonnes. When describing the motion of these beings, you can use heavy thudding created yourself or by finding sound effects. Let the table shake with the players as they move. Onomatopoeic words like boom, rumble, clatter, creak, shriek, and thump evoke presence and imagery to descriptions.

EXAMPLE ROLLS

- Players can roll to negotiate with Eve and convince her to lend her super bright torch. **Difficulty = 2**
- Players may attempt to interrogate the Provost, which will be extremely difficult to do (**7**), however, patience and stealth will mean they can eavesdrop on his conversation. **Difficulty = 4**
- Looking at the holes in the field will reveal an unusual pattern that can be recognised as footprints. They will have to move up and down the field to spot this. **Difficulty = 3**
- Successfully using perception to recognise that the players are being watched by a mysterious car. **Difficulty = 2**
- Players can roll to try and convince Marlik to cooperate and reveal information. **Difficulty = 6**
- Players roll to pull a pylon in a different direction. **Difficulty = 8**

POTENTIAL TM INTRUSIONS

- The players' torch/light source malfunctions suddenly, plunging the players into darkness. They will need to fix the problem or navigate the dark.
- An aide to Pamela overhears the players discussing their plans and becomes suspicious. The group may be questioned or followed for a time.
- A blacked-out van pulls up and attempts to capture the players.
- Provost Archibald MacDougal arrives with police officers. He will attempt to convince players that he is not involved in the plot, by thanking players for their work and trying to convince them to leave the scene.
- An attack by Hissing Sid, Pigeons, or other creatures (Creatures Glossary)
- Players lose track of the pylon footprints, distracted by potholes, puddles, tractor marks and uneven ground. They need to reassess their path.
- One of the pylons is hostile to a player/players' presence, putting them in danger. The players must find a way to calm or distract the pylon without causing more harm.
- Pamela's aide in a van produces a gadget or Knot that proves to be the perfect answer to a dilemma at hand.

EXAMPLE KNOTS (see Knot chapter for more)

- **The last pack of batteries** (*Level 1d6*) sold at McKee's Convenience shop. Only open for the next hour by a backup generator (you can buy matches and candles here, no torches left). The pack contains as many batteries as the Knot level.
- **An Interference Alarm** (*Level 1d6+2*). A short-range device that, when activated, produces a strange irritating noise that aggravates the mechanical nature of the Pylons. They have their actions hampered by 2 steps (or 3, if the Knot level is 7 or higher). The player who uses this Knot must use their action each round to manipulate the object for its effects to continue or it goes silent and loses its power. It can be used for up to 1 minute per Knot level.

- **Mind bank** (*Level 1d6+1*). You just remember a fact that is useful for your situation, for example, computer hard drives are magnetic! Usefulness of knowledge is equal to Knot level.

OPTIONAL RULE: EXISTENTIAL DREAD

Most people aren't prepared for the existence of monsters and horrors that shatter their worldview. Witnessing such impossibilities induces profound fear. The first time a character encounters something they believed was impossible, they must make a Wits defence roll against its level. On failure, they are paralyzed with fear or flee for one round.

Subsequent encounters with the same creature generally don't trigger the reaction again, but seeing many of them or witnessing something unusual might.