

Dedication

I dedicate this book to people world wide, and to those of you who love sci-fi I hope this book will enlighten your life.

Phil Phoenix.

Contents

The Next Century	Page	4
The Chair	Page	37
Galactic Summons	Page	69
Mods	Page	138
The Giants Causeway	Page	181
The Liar	Page	199
Stainless Steel	Page	227

Foreword

Have you ever felt that things were spiralling out of your control, ever downward like a vortex downward? I know I have. The stories in this book are such that, events leading up to that very situation will, I hope, give you that impression. The Chair especially, and The Giants Causeway are indicative of what can happen when you think you are invincible!

Happy reading,

Phil Phoenix.

The Next Century

Chapter One

Next to Janey Dave Sheppard had two loves, one being his bike, and the other shooting. Although owning just one rifle he was proud of his Remington M24, and as a member of his local gun club attended competitions regularly. There were half a dozen in the club better than he, but to Dave it didn't matter as he just enjoyed playing the game and meeting his fellow marksmen. After marrying Janey he'd given up road racing, as the expense of running a home and his bike was too much. Although Dave loved racing, especially at his local circuit Castle Combe, he loved Janey that much he'd have given up anything for her. His life was settled now, and felt that by marrying Janey it now had a fuller meaning, a sort of credence.

Already feeling groggy on his way to work, by eleven o'clock his foreman had told him to go home. 'I'm not having you here infecting the workforce, so if medical says your temperature is a hundred and one, you're on you're bike! Oh, sorry about the pun!' Grinning weakly Dave knew Bert was right, and apart from that he really did feel like shit!

Killing the engine he coasted into the driveway, and his head thumped abominably as he put the bike on its stand. In a dream-like state everything seemed somehow unreal as the influenza started biting home. Unlocking the front door he removed his helmet and put it on the hall table, then looking in the kitchen as there was no sign of Janey decided

he'd go straight to bed. It occurred to him then that Janey might also be in bed with flu, and half expected to find her asleep when he opened the bedroom door, but what met his eyes was something that held him in suspended animation for a few seconds. Two very surprised faces stared at him, one being Janey's, and the other belonged to a guy he'd never seen before! Although it was obvious to the world what they were doing, for a second Dave was dumbstruck and didn't know quite what to do! Like everyone confronted with that situation he stood paralysed for what seemed like a millennium, then his anger spilt like a ruptured damn. Running to the spare room he pulled the Remington from its rack, and as he always kept a full clip he quickly inserted the magazine into the gun. Opening the bolt Dave closed a round into the breech then returned to confront the man who had taken his wife.

'Don't be stupid Dave,' screamed Janey in fear of her life, 'if you kill us you'll spend the rest of your life inside!'

'Look mate,' said the usurper pulling up his pants, 'I don't want any part of this, it was her idea - *she was the one that pushed it!*'

'*Oh yeah*, well let's change the words of the song then shall we, *stand by your woman!* At least have the guts to admit you're half the problem!'

'Dave, just put the gun down love, that is not the answer is it?' pleaded Janey again.

'*Shut up!*' barked Dave angrily, his throat now raw with flu, 'I'm not sure what I'm gonna do yet... I might kill you both!'

'Look Dave I think you-'

'I said *shut up!* I decide what happens now, I can't believe you've done this to me Janey, after all I've done for you, and this is the way you repay me... you lousy stinking bitch!'

'Tell you what mate, why don't I just go, after all this is between you and your missus now isn't it?'

'No, I'll tell you *if* and *when* you go, you poked your nose into my marriage, and as I don't have the right of redress under the law, I'll have to think of some way of making you pay!'

'Look mate, I won't say anything... honest, no one will find out from me-'

'I told her, now I'm telling you - *shut up!* shouted Dave angrily laying the rifle on the bed.

'*Why?*' he asked looking at Janey, and couldn't believe the love of his life, the woman he'd idolised had done this to him!

'I was bored, I felt trapped, I..' replied Janey breaking down, sitting on the bed she sobbed heavily and her body jerked uncontrollably with every tear.

'*You felt trapped?*' I don't believe what I'm hearing! Why did you feel trapped? You have everything you want, you've always had my love, I've looked after you, I never denied you going out with your mates whenever you want, I bought you things... and you tell me you feel trapped? *Bullshit!*' Putting his hands on her shoulders he tried looking into her eyes, but Janey's gaze remained on the floor.

'Well?'

'Well what?' asked Janey, wondering what he was talking about.

'*What are you going to do about it?*' he shouted at

her, but wracked with guilt she was unable to answer.

‘I think it might be best if you go Roy, said Janey hesitantly, ‘he won’t shoot, I promise you that.’

However, thinking it would give him the escape he needed Roy lunged forward and grabbed the gun, but Dave was quicker and reached the gun a split second earlier. Colliding on the bed Dave pinned the gun down on the duvet, and not being as strong as Dave Roy failed to prise it from his grip. Suddenly head-butting Roy, Dave knocked him off the bed so fast his backward momentum triggered the gun. The crack resounded across the room, and suddenly Roy lay moaning in a pool of blood flowing copiously from a wound in the side of his head.

‘F---in’ Hell Dave, you’ve done it now!’ screamed Janey hysterically.

‘Shut up you hysterical bitch, what d’you mean I’ve done it now, if he hadn’t been here in the first place none of this would have happened - cause and effect Janey!’

‘I’d better check his pulse,’ said Dave suddenly, thinking he might still be alive, ‘Christ he’s brown bread!’ Picking up the gun Dave walked to the cabinet and pulled out his cleaning kit, and giving the piece a thorough clean returned it to the rack.

‘What happens now?’ asked Janey sheepishly.

‘I don’t know... I’ll have to get rid of the body somehow, I’ll go out on the bike and scout around for somewhere to dump it.

‘You’ll still get caught,’ insisted Janey, ‘they’re bound to find out it was you.’

‘Not if you keep your mouth shut!’ snapped Dave.

Zippering his leathers he pulled on his helmet and ran downstairs to pick up his gloves, but now the initial shock of the situation had passed Dave suddenly felt weak from the effects of his flu. Slamming the front door Dave started his bike, then snicking it into first gear pulled out from the driveway, a fist full of throttle and the front wheel came swiftly up, and returned to the tarmac as he reached the end of the road. Braking hard he looked quickly to his right, the road was clear, so turning left he opened it up hard in first and screamed to the main road. Turning left again he pulled out in front of a car that was too close for the driver's liking, but Dave stuck two fingers up at him as the car driver blasted his horn. Fourteen seconds later doing 140 miles an hour, the wind found every nook and cranny around his helmet and leathers, but the road was straight and had a good surface, and his speed allowed him to vent his anger.

Fifteen minutes later he was seventeen miles from home, so pulling up on the sea front he parked the bike and removed his helmet, then sitting sideways on the bike he faced out to sea and lit a cigarette. Unaware of his surroundings he stared ahead thinking about this Roy bloke, who ever he was, and found it hard to comprehend what had happened in the last half an hour. It all seemed like a bad dream, but his nightmare question was how would he dispose of the body? Too many questions and too few answers! Who did he know who might be able to help? It would have to be someone who could keep their mouths shut for sure! Wondering what he should do first and unable to concentrate.

his mind wandered back and forth over his megalithic problem. Having finally thought it through he made up his mind to clean up the mess himself, first he would get the body out of the bedroom, then after that make a decision as to what he would do next. Taking a last puff from his spent smoke he stubbed it under his heel, then pulling on his helmet he started the bike and drove home at a more steady pace. His speed on the way out had left him wide open, and he didn't need to fall foul of the law now - at any cost! Pulling up in the driveway the engine died, but thinking about his future, if he still had one, Dave sat on the bike for a minute. No! He was not going to get caught, anyhow this Roy bloke meant nothing to him. Swinging his leg over the bike he walked to house, and it suddenly occurred to him he should get rid of the gun, after all it *was* the only evidence against him! Walking into the house Janey sat in the lounge staring at the wall as the unwatched TV blared loudly.

'I'm going to get rid of the gun,' said Dave coldly, 'it's the only evidence against me... I never knew this Roy bloke anyway. We can start again, I'll forgive you this time, what d'you think... give it a go?'

'I rang the police.' said Janey in a low flat voice.

'*You what? Are you mad?* How long ago?'

'A few minutes.' she replied flatly.

'You f-----' evil bitch!' There was no way he would throw the gun away now, so running up the stairs three at a time he tore open the cabinet, and taking out the gun he grabbed several boxes of ammunition. Returning to the top of the stairs he

heard the telltale sign of approaching police. With his helmet back on he snatched up the rifle with his ignition key. Opening the front door he fired two warning shots, one at the Range Rover, and one at the police car parked across his driveway. Both had the intended effect as they backed away at high speed, so sitting astride the big Suzuki Dave turned the key and heard the powerful engine roar into life. Slinging the Remington over his shoulder he drove away to freedom.

Chapter Two

Obeying the twist grip the eleven hundred engine roared from the driveway, and as the front wheel again pawed the air he made for the end of his road. As soon as Dave was mobile the police gave chase, but not wanting to aggravate the situation they kept a discreet distance, as far as they were concerned Dave was capable of anything! The other factor was that their vehicles were no match for Dave's bike, and Dave being an ex-racer had a distinct advantage over them, and was now getting away at a rate of knots. The sergeant in the lead car radioed ahead for back up and the chopper. Readily agreeing the chief inspector also decided he'd send in an armed squad, just to make sure the situation didn't get out of control. As Dave was now way ahead the police backed off, and hoped they would be able to keep in touch, and checking his mirror Dave could see the blue lights were struggling to keep up. Beginning to enjoy the chase no one saw him grin inside his helmet, but to ensure his get away he knew he would have to devise a strategy.

Taking a slip road he left the dual carriageway, then taking the main road headed for the city, there at least he might be able to lose the police in traffic. With the road stretching out in front he wound the throttle to the stop, then riding like the devil he watched with fascination as the verge blurred on both sides of the road. Pulling out from a half hidden turning a small car caused a him a near accident, but hardly slowing Dave expertly swung the bike around it as he sped headlong to the city.

The thirty sign told him he'd reached his goal, it was time to slow down as anonymity was what he needed now, as the powerful brakes slowed him sharply he wound his way easily through the crawling city traffic. Half an hour and he'd be clear away.

Tom's house! Yes that was it, he would go and see his old mate Tom, who he hadn't seen in nearly four years! They'd always been good mates, and having been members of the same club had even raced together, until a serious crash had forced him to retire from racing. Having cleared the city traffic he rode like the wind again, then turning left at the intersection he took a dual carriageway to the next town, and knew that in thirty five minutes he would be knocking on Tom's front door. It was then he heard a noise, although it sounded like a loud diesel it occurred to him the noise was coming from above, and looking aloft his worst fears were confirmed as he saw the police helicopter. This thought Dave would take some thinking out, and knowing they were equipped with heat seeking devices he knew he would have to get clean away before dark, or that would be it! He would have to outrun them, and he was heading for the road ideally suited for that purpose right now - a motorway! Riding on he hoped to lull them in to a false sense of security as the chopper kept pace with him from above, but he also knew they would pass information on his progress to the ground mobiles. Thinking briefly he would take the next slip road from the dual carriageway, it occurred to him that that would only alarm the chopper crew, and it might also put him in

an invidious position where his escape was concerned. *The tunnel!* Yes of course, he'd almost forgotten, about a mile up the motorway was a tunnel, this would be where he would give them the slip! Once in the tunnel he would turn the bike around and come out the in the opposite direction, but the problem him was how he would get his bike over the Armco barrier, and given the traffic volume on that road it would be a major problem. Short of lifting it over which was practically impossible there didn't appear to be a way 'round it! All he knew right then was he had to let the chopper crew think he was coming out the other end, and that meant going in without slowing. However, all he could think of now was getting into the tunnel, and he would sort the rest out later!

The road he was now on he knew would connect with the motorway fairly soon, so taking a fistful of throttle he felt the bike surge forward, and seconds later the chopper crew immediately radioed that he was up to something! Riding onto the roundabout at breakneck speed, one motorist who appeared to be suffering from "wanderitis" eventually decided he was going the same way as Dave, who was rapidly approaching from his left. Making a quick manoeuvre around it Dave shouted a few choice words as he sped by.

'Daft bastard!' He was on the motorway! This pleased Dave, as he was now able to get into the tunnel without losing too much time to the police, and finding the road relatively empty he breathed a sigh of relief, so wasting no time he got into the outside lane. As the chopper watched from above it

wasn't long before he saw a hundred and sixty on the clock, but he didn't care about anything now except getting away. The motorway travelled downhill and to the left in a sweeping arc, and the light late morning traffic didn't bother him. His speed was far superior to anything else, and with his race skills he treated them as mobile chicanes. The road ahead was clear, so winding the throttle back he watched the rev counter move rapidly clockwise. Coming off the curve at a hundred and seventy five the road straightened, and he knew he was close to the tunnel. If he entered the tunnel without slowing, it should fool them into thinking he was coming out the other end. Slow down and they might just back-pedal to see what he was up to, however, going in fast meant he would travel farther into the tunnel before he was able to turn the bike around, ah well, death or glory! Entering the tunnel he saw something he just couldn't ignore, at first thinking it was a nuisance driver that would get in his way, he suddenly saw it in a different perspective. In the outside lane doing the legal limit was a VW Beetle, and the carriageway in the opposite direction was empty!

This was it, knowing a chance like this would never come again his decision was quick, he would make use of the opportunity. Slowing to seventy five he moved to the road markings at the nearside of the out side lane, then brought his front wheel in line with the nearside of the Beetle. Gauging his distance to seven cars lengths he changed down a gear, and giving it two thirds throttle he dropped the clutch, although his speed was scintillating Dave realised it

wasn't quite fast enough, and in the last second opened the throttle further to give him more speed. The front wheel pawed the air, and the driver of the beetle didn't know what hit him! Using it as a ramp Dave's front wheel ran up the sloping rear of the car, then canting the bike on the roof gave him enough momentum to vault the barrier. His heart in his mouth Dave flew for a while, but miscalculating his speed nearly threw him off as he scraped the Armco barrier the other side! His reactions being quick, Dave stabbed the rear brake sharply and brought the machine under control, but now he had to turn the bike - and fast! With white man van fast approaching in the nearside lane, and doing about eighty miles an hour he stuck his foot down and spun the bike, then half a doughnut later laid a snaking black ribbon on the tarmac as it resisted his rubber. As the front wheel pawed the air once more the big Suzuki got him out of trouble again, although white van man blasted his horn Dave was now pulling away at a rate of knots he had no way of matching! His next question was had his ruse worked, had he fooled the crew of that chopper? Exiting the tunnel in the opposite direction he was already doing a hundred and twenty, with the road now banking to the right. Suddenly seeing a slip road to his left Dave yanked the bike over and took it at high speed, and almost hit a car dawdling in the nearside lane. Again he manoeuvred successfully around it, but travelling too fast at the end of the slip road he overshot on the approach to the "A" road; a car already on the road nearly collided with Dave's rear wheel. Using his considerable skills he got out

of trouble once again, but now he had to take stock of the situation and check his fuel supply! Having found somewhere safe to stop he'd ridden for half a mile, but the old derelict house he'd spotted was ideal, and apart from being detached the garage doors had been left open, so riding straight in he killed the engine; silence!

Chapter Three

Removing his helmet Dave remained seated for a few minutes, and thinking about the whole situation wondered if he should he give himself up? Should he tell them what had really happened, tell them about Janey and what she had done? Surely they wouldn't blame him for that, another man had taken his wife! No - that wouldn't happen! Sure, they would be sympathetic, but they would still charge him with murder! He had to stop thinking this imaginary scenario of clemency, that somehow the police would say "That's alright mate, we would have done the same in your shoes", it wouldn't be that way. He had to continue, go on, as bleak as it was escape was his only hope. Kicking down the stand he swung his leg over the bike, and with his fuel gauge still showing half full there was no panic to find a filling station, but knowing he would have to fill up soon he hoped it would be before the police caught him, and caught he would be; he knew that. Lighting a cigarette he drew deeply, and wondered briefly what Janey would be doing now, of course, she would be pouring her heart out to her mother, telling her how badly he'd treated her, and Dave bet himself a tenner she wouldn't tell her mother the truth. His name would be mud by now, no change there then!

There was no sign or sound of the chopper, nor the sentinel sounds of sirens on the air. He was safe for now, but vigilance would have to be his watchword. Hunger was his next challenge, it hadn't dawned on him in the excitement of the chase, but

right now he wished he were at home, with Janey cooking his dinner. He killed that thought straight away, that was a different life, he was someone else now and had changed from a normal domestic husband into a hunted criminal, yes, he Dave Sheppard was a criminal, a murderer! Looking back briefly it all happened so quickly, so easily, if only he'd left the gun in the cabinet, if only he'd talked instead of losing his temper. Too late now, he would pay the price for his crime one day, and it would probably be very soon! Not if he could help it! His next thought was to change his identity, change the registration of the bike, and do a paint job on it! His first task was to get to Tom's place, there at least he could lay low for a while and get himself together, and remembered that old Nissen hut of Tom's full of bike parts and other artefacts, but amongst all that was there enough room to hide his bike? All he had to do was wait 'til dark, and his chances of making it would increase dramatically. His watch read one forty five, and Dave knew he'd have a long wait. The old joke about going to the stores for a long wait suddenly entered his mind, and grinning briefly remembered when he'd been caught out as an apprentice, but the boredom factor was what worried him most. What in Hell's name would he do 'til dark?

'Oi! What you doin' in there?' asked a surly voice suddenly. Dave's head shot 'round.

'Why, what's it to you?' replied Dave likewise, hoping the intruder would shut up.

'That's my garage... I sleep in there... so piss off!' came the vagrant's retort.

'If you don't piss of I'll give you something to really piss you off!' replied Dave glaring at him angrily. It worked! The vagrant walked back up the driveway, but reaching the gate he turned and stared at Dave, who wondered if he'd seen the gun propped against the bike, but as Dave was standing in front of it he probably hadn't. Perhaps he should have bumped him off as well, after all who would miss a vagrant? Supposing he told someone, as by now his case must have reached the local rags, and possibly even TV! No, he'd killed one person, and that was enough. He wasn't a killer, and he couldn't take the poor guys life in cold blood. Anyhow reasoned Dave, after a bottle of meths or a few beers he would probably forget anyway. If he was caught at least he could claim diminished responsibility, or even "crime of passion" where Roy was concerned, but to kill again would make matters ten times worse! The hours ticked slowly by, and Dave was out of cigarettes. Needing to get more he checked the time, but it was only three thirty and still had a three hour wait! Desperate for a smoke he risked a walk down the road, wisely he thought it better to leave the bike in the garage, rather than take a chance on being recognised. There was nothing in the direction he'd come, so maybe there was a village or town in the other direction. Chancing his luck he turned left and set off at a brisk pace, but not fast enough to attract the wrong sort of attention, then half a mile down the road he found a village shop accompanied by a couple of dozen houses; just what he needed! Opening the door the bell jangled, and Dave's eyes locked on to the display behind the

counter. Having waited for nearly thirty seconds a middle aged man finally appeared eyeing him suspiciously.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked courteously.

‘Yeah, twenty Marlboro please mate?’ asked Dave politely. The man reached for his brand from the display.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude,’ said the man suddenly, having sensed Dave had noticed his look, ‘it’s just that quite often we get some funny types in here.’

‘Oh right, yeah, I see what you mean.’ replied Dave deliberately avoiding conversation. Paying the shopkeeper he collected his change and left. Tearing the wrapper from the pack he pulled out a cigarette and lit up, then taking a deep drag he got the nicotine into his system. Walking back up the road he heard the sound a car approaching from behind, and turning automatically seeing a crime car Dave nearly had a heart attack, but assuming it was from the local force they didn’t appear recognise him as they drove passed. So walking as if everything was well with the world Dave thanked God he’d had the good sense not to over-react. Enjoying his smoke Dave watched as the police car rounded a bend and disappeared from view, and it was then he also thanked God he’d had the good sense to leave the garage doors open. Being local plods they would have noticed something unusual like that, if they had gone in to investigate and seen the bike his goose would have been well and truly cooked! Slowing his pace slightly he glanced down the driveway, but everything was as he’d left it! Looking casually up

and down the road he walked down the driveway and into the garage, then sitting on the bike blew heavily through his lips. The pressure was beginning to tell, and with the time just before five Dave realised he still had an hour and a half to wait, but at least now he had something to smoke.

A lone tin of yellow paint stood on a shelf at the rear of the garage, and was accompanied by the usual jam jar crammed with brushes. Looking as if they'd been there since the last millennium, they did however give him an idea, and luckily one of the brushes was just about usable. Looking at his number plate RYC 439 F Dave decided he would change the R into an F, and the 4 into a 1, that might just give him an edge in his bid to escape! Having already decided to wait 'til dark it occurred to Dave there were no street lights on this road, so not wanting anyone seeing him drive from the garage he thought it better to drive out at dusk with no lights, that way he would at least have him a modicum of anonymity. At ten past six the pending darkness arrived early with gathering cloud, and thinking it prudent to take advantage of the extra time it would afford him, he impatiently pulled on his helmet. Slapping the visor down he turned the key, the engine roared into life once more, and hopefully would take him to his destination and liberty. Letting the engine idle the bike rolled down the driveway, looking in both directions and seeing nothing suspicious he pulled slowly out. A light dusting of the throttle and the bike pulled effortlessly forward, then reaching the roundabout he switched his lights on to dipped beam, and knew

well it was that time of day when drivers noticed others on the road without lights, “There goes another one!” Dave imagined them shouting. Taking the second exit he headed north to the dual carriageway that would take him to Tom’s place, and so as not to arouse suspicion he kept to the inside lane and kept his speed strictly at seventy. Knowing the plods might be tucked up anywhere it was best he kept a low profile, in half an hour he would be knocking on Tom’s front door, so now more than ever he had to avoid confrontation. Riding at this pace gave him plenty of time to think, and Dave thought how good it would be to see Tom again, it had been too long since they’d last got together. Life he realised had a bad habit of getting in the way of important things like visiting friends! Dave had always liked Tom’s place, it was one of those ramshackle places that seemed to spread across the countryside, and being right out in the sticks you could stay there for weeks at a time and not see a soul! It was perfect for what he wanted; no one would see him there.

Chapter Four

The rest of his trip was uneventful, and luckily he'd only seen one patrol car in his half-hour journey. Turning into the lane that led to Tom's place he cut his engine and coasted the last fifty feet. Squeezing the front brake he killed the lights, then removing his helmet and gloves lit a cigarette and walked to Tom's front door. A bell, bloody Hell, he had gone down in the world! There was a time when such an uninteresting item didn't exist in Tom's world. The door opened, and a young woman smiled inquiringly at him. Explaining who he was she turned and made a signal to someone in the sitting room, there was silence for a moment before Tom stuck his head 'round the door.

'Christ mate! I didn't realise it was you, come in, come in! Shit! I thought you'd gone abroad or something.'

No, uh... look, could I speak to you for a minute - alone?'

'Yeah sure,' replied Tom, his face clouding immediately, then shouting over his shoulder, 'Trish, I'll be back in a few minutes Ok?' If she'd answered he hadn't heard, so closing the front door they headed for the Nissen hut along a well-trodden mud path. The long grass brushed their legs as Dave started relaying the whole gruesome episode. Reaching the door Tom pulled a set of keys from his pocket, and glinting in the half light of late dusk they jangled as he searched for the right one, and after several attempts found the one that would

allow them in. Reaching 'round the door Tom threw a switch and the place lit up like Blackpool in mid-season, the lights blazed down on all manner of bike parts, frames, forks, engines, and petrol tanks, some with good paint work, and others covered with rust. Accompanied by an old table covered in battle scars from the many jobs Tom had carried out on it, there were a couple of old red tubular steel community centre chairs with moulded five ply seats. Taking a seat apiece Tom opened his fridge and pulled out two cans of lager.

'So this Roy bloke is definitely dead... you know that for a fact.' asked Tom after a few minutes silence.

'Yeah, brown bread mate, the slug went straight through his head.' said Dave, 'anyhow I checked his pulse and...'

'Is that the gun?' asked Tom pointing at Dave's rifle.

'Yeah, that's it,' replied Dave, casting his eyes over the offending firearm, 'I cleaned it out after I shot him... but I have fired it a couple of times since, you know... warning shots at the plods.'

'It's all over the news mate,' said Tom, 'you're famous, or should I say *in-famous!*' They laughed, and Dave realised after all these years Tom still had the same sense of humour.

'Infamous!' repeated Dave, 'God what a mess... I have to ask you... is it alright if I doss here for a while?'

'As far as I'm concerned yeah, not a problem... but I'll have to ask Trish, you know, see if she's Ok with it.'

‘Look I don’t want to be a problem mate,’ interrupted Dave, ‘if she says no... that’s Ok.’
‘We’ll worry about that in the morning, you’re definitely staying tonight,’ said Tom, ‘I’ll sort out the rest in the morning.’

Sleeping fitfully every noise Dave heard had him thinking the police were closing in to make an arrest, and if it was them they would undoubtedly be armed. If that situation arose Dave knew he’d have to draw them away from the house, having decided he wasn’t going quietly he didn’t want Tom and Trish getting involved in a fusillade of flying lead. The thought of going to prison he couldn’t even manage, as being caged like an animal would drive him insane, and he wondered about life for those in prison, “lifers” as they were commonly known, how did they cope? However they coped Dave knew he wouldn’t, and that was an end to it! Hearing a twig crack outside early the next morning he peered carefully through the window, and putting the gun back by the bed he laughed. He should have remembered, Tom was never one for repairs unless it had two wheels and an engine! A cow had come through the broken fence, and was munching the deliciously long grass in Tom’s back garden; hardly a threat to him, but it was enough to get him out of bed! Lighting a cigarette Dave sat on the bed, but being unable to settle again he began thinking about his next move. He had to change his appearance, and would ask Tom to get him a good quality hair colouring. At eight o’clock the smell of frying food brought him swiftly to the kitchen, Trish had cooked him a full English - he hadn’t expected that!

‘Thanks Trish, that was really great,’ said Dave happily, then turning to Tom, ‘I can see why Tom picked you out.’ Tom grinned.

‘She’s the best thing that’s happened to me,’ said Tom sincerely. Was this the Tom he knew talking? Seeing Dave’s raised eyebrows. ‘Really, she is... I don’t know what I’d do without her now.’

‘Ah go on, I’ll bet you say that to all the girls!’ cut in Trish, then walked over and put her arms ’round his neck. Leaning forward Tom picked up the remote for his battered old TV. The BBC news had just started, and it was about Dave.

‘Police involved in the chase said they are completely baffled as to the whereabouts of Dave Sheppard, our crime reporter Barry Hanham has Sergeant John Pritchard with him now.

‘How did Dave Sheppard manage to evade your net, as you had the police helicopter I thought that would have guaranteed his apprehension.’

‘Yes that is correct, however, we think he’s been very clever in-as-much-as it seems he disappeared in the tunnel on the M4, but from information received, we now believe he used the rear of another vehicle to propel his machine over the centre reservation. Then turning his bike around he came out in the opposite direction. After that we lost him, but he will be caught eventually.’

‘Thankyou sergeant Pritchard, and now back to you in the studio - Peter!’

‘Thankyou Barry, in the House of Commons today-’ Tom killed the sound and watched briefly as the newscaster mouthed his muted report.

‘So they think they’ll catch you, I don’t think so!’

said Tom emphatically.

'I'm not so sure,' replied Dave ponderously, 'I'm bound to be spotted one day... I suppose.'

'How?' asked Tom in his usual aggressive manner, 'no one comes here, and not many people know we live here, you couldn't have picked a better hidey hole!'

'So I have to spend the rest of my life without leaving this place? No offence mate, but come on Tom, you know that would drive me up the bleedin' wall! Let alone get in yours and Trish's way.'

'It wouldn't be the first time you've driven up a wall!' joked Tom, referring to an incident years previously when Dave had gone too fast in an attempt to overtake him, and having overshot the bend had driven up a wall on the opposite side of the road! Laughing loudly Dave felt better for the first time in ages, then leaving for town an hour later Tom told Dave they would be back soon. The next two hours were spent watching daytime TV, not something he would want to do often. By the time they'd returned he'd already smoked eight cigarettes, but was glad to see Tom hadn't forgotten his hair colouring. Leaving his upper lip whilst shaving he decided he'd sport a moustache, and after that, his hair would turn a very dark shade of black!

'I thought you'd prefer dark black rather than black black!' joked Tom.

'*You - silly - sod!*' said Trish laughing loudly.

'What d'you mean, silly sod,' cut in Dave seriously, 'the difference is immense, it could mean getting caught or staying free!' That had Trish in hysterics,

and attempted to regain her composure as she returned to the house.

‘Thanks mate!’ said Dave gratefully.

‘Don’t thank me, thank Trish, we thought it better if she chose it... that way it wouldn’t arouse any suspicion.’

‘Thanks Trish!’ shouted Dave as she ran laughing into the house.

‘That’s Ok,’ she replied gasping for breath, ‘anything for an old mate of Tom’s.’ An hour later Dave walked uncertainly into the front room.

‘Shit! Christ... do you look different or what!’ said Tom staring at Dave’s hair.

‘Yeah, you really do look different Dave.’ agreed Trish.

‘It felt weird looking in the mirror.’ declared Dave running his hands through his new black curls.

‘They’ll never recognise you looking like that!’ said Tom still gob-smacked by the transformation. Feeling restless Dave told them he would take a walk through the fields behind Tom’s place.

‘You’ll be safe up there mate,’ said Tom, ‘there won’t be anyone up there at this time of day.’ Returning an hour later Tom informed him they’d seen an update on the news, and that they were still baffled as to his whereabouts.

‘See... I told you *didn’t I?* said Tom grinning, ‘they haven’t got a clue!’

‘Listen Tom... could you get me a new set of plates... and a few aerosol cans, I ought to change the colour of the bike.’

‘Of course I can mate,’ replied Tom reassuringly, ‘but as far as paint goes I’ve got loads in the hut so

take your pick, and I'll spray it up for you.'

'You're a good mate Tom,' said Dave earnestly, 'I wish I'd found someone like Trish instead of the slag I married... look where it's got me now, and I can't impose on your hospitality much longer.'

'Hey look mate,' said Tom seriously, 'Trish's Ok about this... it's your home now, and we're your new family.' Dave's stomach knotted with emotion, and offering one to Tom he lit a cigarette to relieve his tension.

'I'm off to bed,' said Tom yawning widely, 'see you in the morning mate.' Waving goodnight Dave switched on the late news.

Crowing loudly the cock woke him earlier than he'd have liked, but remembering he was in the country that was something he'd have to put up with, but admitted it was a small price to pay for his anonymity - and freedom! Tom brought him breakfast in bed.

'Present from Trish,' he told Dave cheerfully, 'you're privileged - I don't get this!'

'I heard that you shit!' shouted Trish from the bottom of the stairs, they both laughed as Dave tucked into his egg and bacon, then ten minutes later taking a sip from his tea he lit two cigarettes and handed one to Tom.

'We'll start stripping your bike down today mate,' said Tom to cheer him up, 'I'm a top sprayer now... I do all my mates bikes.' By lunchtime they had Dave's bike in bits on the floor, and as Dave prepared the petrol tank Tom went to the back of the hut to study his row of paints. By late afternoon they had sprayed all parts with primer, and having

followed it with two undercoats had prepared them for the first coat of cellulose.

‘What d’you think of this?’ asked Tom walking out with two lit cigarettes.

‘Thanks,’ said Dave taking the offered smoke, ‘yeah... that’s a neat colour, I’ve never liked metallic green much, but that’s a real nifty shade... almost black, yeah - *let’s do it!*’

‘It’ll go with your hair!’ joked Tom pointing at Dave’s new look pate.

‘Except I’ll have to ride without my skid lid to show it off... now that’s what I call attracting attention!’ replied Dave laughing. Returning to the kitchen Tom poured three beers and gave one each to Trish and Dave.

‘Something smells good - what is it? asked Tom putting his arm around Trish.

‘It’s your favourite,’ she replied smiling, ‘I thought I’d do something special as Dave’s here.’

‘Hey, careful woman... I’ll give you the sack in a minute!’ countered Tom, then winked knowingly at Dave.

‘Never mind the wink Dave,’ said Trish over her shoulder, ‘this has got to simmer for fifteen minutes, so give us one of those fags.’ Taking a pack from his shirt pocket Tom lit one and passed it to her.

After dinner they opened another beer each and watched TV in the front room.

‘There you are Dave,’ said Tom loudly in the direction of the kitchen, ‘that’s what you call service... even though she puts me down in front of my mate!’ The evening was spent watching TV, but much to Trish’ annoyance they mostly talked over

the programmes. Deciding they'd seen enough at twelve thirty they turned in for the night, and getting into bed Dave wondered if he'd ever be free again, really free! Free to walk the streets, or ride his bike. The thought of walking into the local plods occasionally went through his mind, but Dave quickly dismissed the notion as sheer lunacy. Worry and apprehension caused him insomnia nearly every night, which subsequently meant he'd wake up feeling sluggish. Walking into the kitchen the following morning Tom remarked on Dave's pallor. 'Go back to bed and hit the sack for a few hours,' he ordered, 'I'll take care of the bike... don't worry about it.' Thanking Tom, Dave climbed the stairs for another session of unconsciousness. Sleeping soundly for more than three hours he awoke to find the time was passed eleven o'clock, so climbing swiftly out of bed he dressed and ran downstairs at breakneck speed.

'Why didn't you wake me,' he asked walking into the workshop, 'I didn't realise I'd slept so long!'

'Hey it's not a worry, it's largely done now anyhow,' replied Tom grinning, 'what d'you think?' The new paint job he had to admit looked superb, Tom really was good, very good! The dark green metallic paint gleamed like a professional had done it.

'That is... *bloody brilliant mate!*' said Dave walking around his beloved bike, 'I never thought it would come out like this, shit! this is classy... are you sure your not a professional?' Tom laughed, and was glad Dave liked his handiwork.

'Now you can go out and have a good blast without

worrying about PC49!’ said Tom grinning.

‘Yeah... I reckon.’ replied Dave pensively.

‘What are you worried about,’ asked Tom, ‘with your new hair, new paint job, and new plates they won’t recognise you in a million years, go on, it’ll do you good to get out on your bike again.’

‘Yeah... why not,’ said Dave finally giving in to temptation, ‘they’ll be looking for my old bike won’t they?’

‘Of course they will!’ said Tom slapping him on the back. Sitting on the bike Dave turned the ignition key, and for the first time since he’d arrived the engine fired into life. It felt good, so selecting first gear he let out the clutch, then waving to Tom as he rode down the lane he turned left and headed for the open road. Lighting a cigarette Tom turned and walked back to the workshop, and picking up his spray gun spent ten minutes cleaning it before placing it on the bench.

‘Excuse me sir,’ said a voice suddenly from behind, ‘do you know a Mr. David Sheppard?’ Spinning ‘round Tom saw two uniformed officers in the doorway.

‘David who?’ asked Tom wearing a puzzled expression.

‘Sheppard!’ repeated the officer. ‘Apparently you and he used to race bikes together some years ago.’

‘Oh that Dave.’ said Tom still looking puzzled, ‘Christ I haven’t seen him in what... three years now I reckon. Why what’s the problem?’

‘You will have seen the news obviously,’ said the officer looking directly at Tom, ‘you know he’s wanted for murder do you?’

‘What you mean, that’s the same Dave Shep-’
‘*Exactly,*’ said the officer cynically, ‘that’s why we’re here! So you’re saying you haven’t seen him, is that right.’

‘*Exactly!*’ replied Tom emulating the officer’s sarcasm.

‘Would you mind if we had a look around sir?’ inquired the first officer. Panic almost set in for a second, then realising they’d need a court order to enter the house Tom raised his arm in approval, and prayed Dave wouldn’t return before they’d left. Finally telling Tom they were satisfied they had searched his grounds for more than ten minutes before, then taking a brief look at the house they returned to the workshop, and pretending to clean his spray gun Tom smiled at them.

‘We’ll be off now sir,’ said the officer, ‘thankyou for your co-operation... if David Sheppard should turn up here you will inform us won’t you?’

‘Yeah, I will, give me your card.’ said Tom wanting to keep the conversation short, but at the same time didn’t want to sound as if he was trying to get rid of them. However, fifteen minutes passed before Dave returned, and parking his bike he took off his helmet and lit a cigarette.

‘The plods were here a few minutes ago mate.’ said Tom looking concerned.

‘How long?’

‘About quarter of an hour I think.’ replied Tom. Looking distinctly agitated Dave took a deep drag on his cigarette and walked to the house.

‘What’re you gonna do?’ asked Tom looking worried.

'It's time for me to go,' said Dave, his face pale with worry, 'I can't drag you and Trish into this, you've both been good to me, and it wouldn't be fair on you.'

'Hey come on mate,' interrupted Tom, they won't be back... I know it!

'Have you got any idea what you can get for harbouring a wanted man? No, I can't stay, thanks for all you've done mate, but I've got to get out while I'm still one step ahead. Say thanks to Trish for me will you?'

'Of course I will mate,' replied Tom desperately, 'but where will you go?'

'That's my problem,' said Dave candidly, 'but go I must!' With the gun tucked in his jacket he sat on his bike, then wishing Tom luck for the future he rode off. With a final wave Dave disappeared down the lane as Tom listened to the sound of his engine as it died away in the distance.

Turning left onto the main road Dave sped off to put as much distance as possible between him and Tom's place, and feared that if the police were watching they might find out he'd been staying there. If he got caught now the further away he was the better, as he could always tell the police he was on his way there when he'd got lost. Something set his alarm bells ringing, and a glance in his mirror confirmed it, under flashing blue lights was a Range Rover coming up fast from behind. Knowing the mirror image was distorted he looked over his shoulder to see how close it was, and it was too close! Opening the throttle he blasted the bike down the road, then a minute later checking his mirror

again he noticed he had gained considerably on the chasing vehicle. His troubles however were far from over, as a police bike pulled out straight in front of him from a side turning, and rode back and forth across the road in an attempt to stall Dave's progress. However, Dave being an ex-racer made short work of getting passed, and opening the throttle he hurled the bike down the road in another bid for freedom. Pulling rapidly away from the police bike he was suddenly confronted by a roadblock, but thankfully just before the blockade a right turn presented itself, and Dave briefly wondered why the police hadn't covered that as well. It didn't worry Dave, it was an escape route, and taking the corner at high speed it was then he saw the two police cars blocking the road! Suddenly aware he had nowhere to go his next thought was of giving up the chase, but approaching the blockade a miracle happened as he noticed a shallow Rhyne to the right of the blockade. Thanking God he'd done some Motocross before taking up racing he rode the bike into the Rhyne, and fortunately it connected with the entrance to a farm, so lifting the front wheel slightly he mounted the ramp to the side of the farm entrance. Speeding off again Dave felt a hand brushed his helmet, but the officer was too late and he was away again! Although narrow, as a country lane it was as straight as a die, and appeared to go on forever, and seeing one hundred and sixty on the clock he passed a road sign that said something about a headland, but was going too fast to read it. It was make or break time, so opening the throttle again he sped on to make up for lost time.

The big Suzuki surged forward, and although he was doing hundred and seventy five the blue lights still haunted his mirror. Braking on the limit his tyres rasped on the road - headland! Having reached a three hundred-foot cliff Dave knew he really did have nowhere to go! Another half-doughnut and he rode back towards the police; then stopped! What now? A three hundred-foot drop behind him, or face arrest! He made his choice, but - there was only one, and he was *not* going inside! Saying a silent goodbye to Tom, Trish, and Janey, he turned the bike again and opened the throttle to the stop. 'They won't catch me!' whispered Dave inside his helmet as the evening sun dazzled his vision. Dropping the clutch his front wheel pawed the air as Dave rode straight into the middle of the next century...

The end

The Chair

Married almost a year Tony was two days over twenty one, and two years older than Lauren, so being their first anniversary the following day Lauren was busy preparing a romantic dinner for two. Knowing what it was like where Tony worked she prayed fervently he wouldn't be late home that evening, but having a very busy schedule his employers expected him to achieve his targets on time. The subtle pressure they used to squeeze that extra hour out of him was well known, and like a piece of new elastic it often stretched to two. As soon as he came through the door she would make sure he remembered what day it was tomorrow, not that he was likely to forget. Very much in love with his bride of one year Tony was had been busy making plans of his own, but Lauren worried he would give in to their pressure when they put their "teaser" in front of him.

Monday evening was quiet, and was spent at their local enjoying the company of a few friends, being preoccupied with following day's celebration Lauren said little that evening.

'You're not saying much tonight,' said Tony loudly over the bar noise, 'is it something I've said?'

'No I'm just a bit tired.' she replied fobbing him off, and not wishing to give anything away.

'I thought for a minute you wanted a divorce!' joked Tony.

'Idiot!' replied Lauren, then dug her index finger sharply into his ribs, then jerking sideways Tony

spilt his cider down her dress.

'Oh look at that... sod it!' she said spitting the words at him.

'That's what you get for poking the superior species!' retorted Tony.

'Oh well, it's time we went home anyhow.' she said studying the wet patch on her dress, 'and you're not the superior species, anyone who is superior would have controlled himself better than that!'

'You can believe that if you want,' he said in mock condescension, 'far be it from me to coerce you to my way of thinking.'

'You sod,' said Lauren laughing, and knew he enjoyed a bit of sexual rivalry. Having said goodbye to their friends they left the sounds of the pub behind, and walked the half a mile home to their flat near the city centre. Climbing the stairs to the second storey of the Victorian terraced building Tony made a cup of coffee, then switching on their bedside lamps they climbed under the duvet.

At six thirty the next morning Tony switched off his alarm, then turning over stroked Laurens hair.

'I'm off now love, happy anniversary.' he whispered in her ear.

'Don't be late tonight lover, and a happy anniversary to you too.' she replied in a sleepy voice.

'I'll give it my best shot.' he replied, then slid out from underneath the duvet. After he'd gone Lauren slept in for another hour, then as her alarm sounded she suddenly catapulted out of bed. This being their first wedding anniversary was going to be the best day of her life, and she was determined everything would go according to plan!

At work that day Lauren finally got up the courage to ask her boss for the afternoon off.

'You've left it a bit late haven't you?' he asked without looking up from his desk.

'Yes I know, it's just that it's our wedding anniversary today and...'

'Yes I know,' he replied, then finally placing his pen on the desk he looked up from his paper work wearing a broad grin.

'You might as well go now, I've got Ivy to cover for you, oh uh, by the way... when you go down to reception could you give this to Sandra Tanner?'

'Yes of course I can,' she replied readily, it was the least she could do as he was letting her go now, 'and thanks Jim it's very kind of you...'

'Go on bugger off,' he joked, 'before I change my mind!' Smiling at him she picked up her handbag with the letter and headed for the lift that would take her down to reception. Walking briskly from the lift she handed the envelope to Sandra, and headed to the main doors in the large foyer.

'Hang on a minute Lauren,' said Sandra urgently, 'this might just be important.' Reading the letter as slowly as she could Sandra kept Lauren waiting deliberately. 'That's funny, there's nothing in it!' she said finally, and watched the look of mild annoyance on Lauren's face. Reaching under the counter she suddenly produced a gigantic bouquet of flowers, and standing transfixed for several seconds it had taken Lauren completely by surprise.

'It's from all of us.' announced Sandra, and handed her the cellophane wrap.

'I'm gob-smacked!' declared Lauren as her eyes

gyrated on ten-inch stalks. Smiling broadly Sandra waved goodbye as she walked through the main door, and knew it would be a perfect day.

Having polished the table until everything she placed on it reflected a perfect image, Lauren watched the silver gleam in the light from the candelabra, which included two silver bowls with red roses, she had placed either side of the table between the two place settings. A one-litre bottle of Bulgarian Oak aged Merlot stood airing on the table, so switching off the lights the room was then lit only by the candles, and everything, including the dinner was ready. Finally checking her make up in the hall mirror Lauren was ready, and all that remained now was for Tony to walk through the front door. Having nothing to do she had a last check around, then satisfied that everything was ok she picked up a copy of Country Living, and decided she'd read until she heard his car on the driveway. Unable to concentrate within a few minutes the magazine was back on the coffee table, as every sound she heard was a distraction, was that him now? Suddenly she had a sneaky feeling this might be one of his "late" nights!

'Sorry love, you know what it's like in there!' she could hear him say. Then without warning his key turned in the latch, and the door slammed shut. Hearing his footfalls ascend the stairs, she ran behind the door of their flat, then as the door swung open in walked Tony brandishing a bottle of wine in his left hand.

'Happy anniversary darling.' said Lauren beaming all over her face.

'And a happy anniversary to you my little chickadee!' replied Tony parodying W.C.Fields, 'I thought I'd better get some wine on the way home just in case.'

'Oh, so that's why you're late,' replied Lauren laughing, 'but I've already got some!'

'Oh well, looks like we're gonna get a bit legless tonight!' replied Tony grinning, then walked to the bedroom to change his clothes. Taking her cue Lauren returned to the kitchen, and pulling a large oval stoneware dish from the oven served two large portions of Courgettes-au-Gratin, then placing a huge baked potato on each plate, she picked them up with her oven cloth and took them into the dining room. Placing them on the table she cut two knobs of butter and spread them over the top of each of the potatoes. After his change of clothes Tony came down in a pair of slacks and an open-necked shirt.

'Blimey, something smells good, are you trying to seduce me?' he asked with a wicked glint in his eye.

CHAPTER TWO

Hardly a word was spoken by Tony during the meal, and his silence told her he was enjoying her culinary skills.

'Well... you've succeeded!' he announced, wiping his lips ceremoniously with his napkin.

'Succeeded in what?' inquired Lauren, her brow slightly furrowed.

'Don't play coy with me young lady,' he returned quickly, 'you know what I'm talking about.' She grinned wickedly at him.

'So, you enjoyed it then?' asked Lauren deliberately putting on a husky voice.

'No, it was awful... I had to eat it as fast as I could just to get rid of it!'

'You bastard!' Came her retort as she threw her napkin at him. 'So you did enjoy it then?'

'Yeah, it was lip-smacking good!' replied Tony smiling as Lauren poured them another glass of wine, then pushing his chair back with his feet he got up and walked in the direction of the bedroom. Returning a few seconds later with a buff folder, he tossed it casually on the coffee table as they sat in front of the gas fire.

'While you were busy preparing that gorgeous meal for us, I've been busy preparing something as well.' he said nodding in the direction of the folder. Taking her cue Lauren picked it up, and watching her study it for a few moments Tony began to wonder if she was afraid of it!

'Open it up then, it won't bite you.' said Tony

humorously.

'What is it?'

'If you look inside you'll find out!' he replied slightly annoyed.

'Ok ok,' said Lauren testily, 'no need to get up tight!'

'Well... you sit there asking "what is it?" instead of finding out by simply opening it up!'

'Sorry!' replied Lauren laconically, then opening the flap she withdrew the contents and spread them over the coffee table. Her eyes picked up the words from the estate agents brochure, "This lovely seventeenth century listed farmhouse has several attractive features, but is in need of some renovation", as her eyes met Tony's he smiled lovingly at her, but Lauren was wearing a look of total disbelief.

'This isn't ours is it?' she asked, her face a picture of wonderment.

'No... I just brought it home for fun,' he mocked her, then pausing for moment he added, 'you remember a few months ago you told me you'd love to live in the country, well this place is only twelve miles from here... and there is no motorway anywhere near it!' Staring at the photo Lauren seemed unable to take it in.

'It's just... oh, I really can't believe it, oh Tony you're a treasure, I had no idea.'

'I know, that's why it's called a surprise!'

'I think I've married the best man in the world!' she told him lovingly, and slightly breathless.

'I could have told you that.' replied Tony grinning, then puffed out his chest, 'no seriously, seeing as I drool over DIY and you love the country I thought this would be the perfect solution.'

'Oh it's lovely, and so are you!'

'Oh, one more thing... I've arranged with Jim for you to take tomorrow off as well, we're going to view it!' Reaching over she put her hand behind his neck and gave him a long and lingering kiss, the sort that says - tonight!

'Let's wash the dishes, and then...' he said, looking deep into her eyes.

'Let's not wash the dishes.' replied Lauren in the huskiest voice she could muster.

'Time for bed said Zebedee.' muttered Tony blowing the remains of the candles. As Tony reached the bedroom Lauren had already undressed, and was lying sideways on the bed with one leg bent at the knee, with her head resting on her left hand. Mimicking a stripper Tony slowly removed his shirt, then proceeded to his slacks and underpants.

'You stupid bugger!' she said laughing at his antics. Throwing his underpants across the room in complete abandon he slid onto the bed and touched her brow.

'I love you very, very, much.' he whispered in her ear.

'I never thought I could love anyone as much as I love you.' replied Lauren slowly. Making love in a complete frenzy Tony lay back and stared at the ceiling for a few moments.

'You know, it frightens me when I think of what I'd go through if I ever lost you!'

'I don't think there's much chance of that.' she replied stroking his cheek.

'No I mean if you died for some reason!'

'Oh come on I'm healthy enough, nothing's going to

happen to me!' she told him, and wondered what was going through his mind. Putting his hand on her left breast Tony marvelled at the firmness of it, and knowing she had a beautiful body he also knew she had a face and mind to match. Moving in close Lauren's right leg came up over his left hip, and both knew they wanted to "do it" again. This time they took it slowly, and taking the initiative Lauren sat astride him, then taking him in hand she slid slowly down and started moving rhythmically up and down, and two minutes later they came again in total unison. Collapsing on top of him and completely spent, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

After breakfast they washed up everything from the night before, then putting on their coats Tony retrieved the literature and a map from the coffee table. Jumping in the car they set off to pick up the keys from the estate agent. During the night it had rained, but with clearing skies the sun valiantly pushed its rays through the clouds, and Lauren couldn't remember being this happy in her whole life, and wondered if she'd died gone to heaven! Twenty minutes and two wrong turnings later they found the place of their dreams, and it was every bit as enchanting as the brochure described. Pulling the keys from his coat pocket Tony inserted one in the front door, but as it didn't fit he tried another and this time he got lucky, as it swung open the old studied door scraped slightly on the flagstone floor to reveal a huge tiled hallway. The lounge was laid with a parquet floor that at one time had been highly polished, but after many years of being empty was

now covered with dust. The room was massive, and they stared in awe at the sheer size of it.

'We'll get lost in here!' said Lauren finally breaking the silence.

'I think we should get a couple of mobile phones so we can find each other!' Although he didn't find his quip very funny Lauren laughed out of sheer happiness, and remembered when they'd first met she almost passed him over. Thinking his kind of wit was a bit flash she had followed the misguided advice of well meaning friends, but certain now she'd made the right decision Lauren felt ready to explode with joy.

CHAPTER THREE

Six weeks later with contracts exchanged they packed their cars to the roof with the valuables they didn't trust on the removal van, then having said goodbye to a few neighbours set off for their new home. As we all know, whenever you move it always rains, and for Tony and Lauren the weather made no exception, and rained like it hadn't rained for a thousand years! By twenty past twelve the removal van had discharged their cargo of furniture and effects and left, so for fifteen minutes they paused for lunch. After which they set about cleaning the place and setting out their furniture, should this go here, or should it go there, surely it would look better over there? The final result was two beers, a couple of arguments over two certain pieces, with Lauren winning on both counts. Having made up their differences they pressed on with the task in hand, although to them it seemed they would never finish!

'Where did this chair come from?' asked Lauren pointing at an old wooden chair in the corner of the lounge, it looked fairly heavy and was intricately carved in a slightly crude fashion, but was dark with a look of great age about it.

'What chair?' asked Tony without looking up from his task.

'There's an old chair by the window in the corner.' replied Lauren looking puzzled.

'Hang on... I'm on my way,' said Tony sighing heavily, being interrupted during his task of doing all the donkey work was testing his patience.

'What was that for?' asked Lauren feeling annoyed.

'What are you talking about?' replied Tony, and having realised she'd heard his sigh he played it down.

'You know what I'm talking about!' she replied testily.

'Sorry love,' he relented, 'it's just that I'm trying to get all the heavy furniture in place and you keep calling me to have a look at this, that, and the other.'

'Well I've only called you once! Oh never mind, it doesn't matter.'

'Yes it does, I am sorry I didn't mean to have a go at you, let's have a look at this chair then eh?' he said walking into the room.

'It wasn't here when we viewed the place was it?' he asked Lauren, and raised his eyebrows.

'I don't think so, we wouldn't have overlooked something like that. There was only dust when we came last time.' Picking up the chair with one hand Tony realised he'd need the other one to complete the manoeuvre. To put it mildly the chair was heavy, so putting its front leg on the floor he spun the chair around on it to get a good look at it from all angles, but how it had got there puzzled him completely.

'I don't know what to make of this.' he said eventually.

'Maybe we should phone the estate agent.' suggested Lauren, trying to think of some way to solve the mystery.

'Perhaps they put it here... it might be part of the deal.' replied Tony agreeably, then picking up the phone dialled the estate agent and waited for a reply.

'Oh, hello it's Tony Marchant here, I bought the old

farmhouse a couple of weeks ago.'

'Is there anything wrong Mr. Marchant?' asked the agent.

'Not exactly,' continued Tony, 'it's just that since viewing the place an old chair has made a mysterious appearance... and I wondered whether you could throw any light on it, that was all.'

'Hang on just a minute please Mr. Marchant, I'll check the file, and see if any inventory was included.' After a few moments Tony heard the phone being picked up the other end.

'Hello Mr. Marchant, no there doesn't appear to be anything included in the contract apart from the house, so if it's in the house it's yours, I should have valued if I were you, you never know, it might be worth something.' said the agent half joking. Thanking him for his help Tony replaced the receiver.

'He know nothing,' said Tony emulating Manuel from *Faulty Towers*, 'but he suggested we have it valued.'

'But it's not ours.' said Lauren honestly.

'Whose is it then?' asked Tony, 'besides, the agents just told me as it's already here it's ours.'

'Well, I don't know.' replied Lauren doubtfully.

'Well, it's ours then.' said Tony with finality, then shrugging her shoulders Lauren dropped the subject, and quickly realised any attempt to trace the owner, who may or may not still be alive would be futile. Agreeing to have it valued the following day they placed it by the window, as Tony beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen before she collared him for something else.

Almost a year had gone by, and with their second wedding anniversary rapidly approaching Tony was close to finishing the renovations on their house. Having worked like Trojans, bit by bit their dream home had come together, but the job he'd enjoyed most was installing the central heating, so having turned on the power he switched it on to see if it worked! Having declared that all the radiators were working, and hot, he cracked open a bottle of champagne.

'I name this central heating system... CENTRAL HEATING SYSTEM!' He was in a clowning mood, and Lauren was usually the butt of his practical jokes.

'You daft sod!' said Lauren going into hysterics at his "christening" of the central heating.

'Daft sod eh?' he replied, then putting his thumb over the top of the bottle, he proceeded to squirt champagne at her like a grand prix driver on the rostrum.

'Bugger you!' she screamed at the top of her voice. 'I'll get you for that!' Disappearing upstairs she changed into some dry clothes while Tony grinned at the way he'd caught her full in the face. A voice beckoned him from the landing.

'What is it?' asked Tony detecting a note of concern in her voice.

'I think you'd better come and have a look at this!'

'On my way!' he announced, then taking the stairs two at a time he prayed it wouldn't be - a leaking radiator! On reaching the landing he turned just in time to see a large amount of water arrive, and - he didn't duck in time! For a few seconds he stood there

in full shock wondering what had happened, but the look of triumph on Lauren's face told him everything; he burst out laughing. It was now Tony's turn to change his clothes, so pulling a clean top over his head he suddenly felt Lauren's hands close around his waist from behind, and turning to face her she had that certain look in her eye.

'Well... I guess I'd better get on with the garden... no one else is going to do it!' said Tony smirking, Lauren hit him playfully.

'Ouch!' That hurt!' he said grinning broadly as Lauren clasped her hands behind his neck.

'I... would like to start a family!' she announced playfully. 'Do you fancy children?'

'Yeah but you'll have to help me out,' replied Tony clowning again, 'I couldn't eat a whole one!' Lauren lashed out again, but pre-empting it she missed as he dodged sideways. Without warning he pulled her close, then kissing her long and hard she responded immediately, and having undone her blouse buttons her ample breasts fell out of the top which floated lightly to the floor. Her chest felt good against his, so... at this stage there was no turning back. Falling backwards onto the bed she landed on top of him, then turning over she opened her legs, and very slowly Tony started making love to her. Sensing her increased arousal he increased his passion to match hers, then as she neared her climax her mouth opened as if to utter a scream, then as a low guttural sound came from the back of her throat she suddenly let go. As her nails dug deep into his sides a few seconds his damn burst! To see his fabulous wife come like that was the most beautiful thing in world

to him! For a few minutes they lay in silence, not wanting to spoil the moment. It was Tony who eventually opened a dialogue.

'I don't see any real problems, the bank balance is in good shape now so... let's go for it!'

'We just did!' announced Lauren.

'You mean... you haven't been taking your pill?' asked Tony, she laughed mockingly.

'You crafty bugger.' he said grinning again. 'Well if you want to take maternity leave I've got no objections.'

'I'll make a cup of tea then.' announced Lauren.

'That's one way of celebrating I suppose.' answered Tony thinking of something a bit stronger, 'but yes, tea will do.'

'We can have that with dinner tonight.' she called back up the stairs.

'What again?' asked Tony, mimicking total shock, 'I can see I'm gonna have to watch you!'

'One track mind!' shouted Lauren from the hall. Dressing again Tony went down to the lounge, and picking up the local freebee Lauren brought his tea, then sitting down he read the latest on what was happening in their neck of the woods.

'Your tea m'lud!' she announced regally, and ribbed him for sitting in that chair like the lord of the manor.

'Thankyou Marchant.' replied Tony straight-faced pretending not to notice her jibe, then tipping the cup slightly Lauren made as if to pour it in his lap.

'Do that and I'll have to do something nice to you!'

'Ooh, does that mean I'm on a promise then?' said Lauren laughing over her shoulder.

'One track mind,' replied Tony returning her earlier retort. 'You know considering what this chair is worth it's bloody uncomfortable!'

'Yes,' replied Lauren, 'that's why I never use it.' Thanking her for his tea Tony took a sip, and placing the cup back in the saucer continued reading. Placing the paper on the coffee table he decided he'd take a shower, but for some strange reason found he was stuck fast in the chair. Pushing himself forward again he was still unable to move, and wondering what was happening he felt a strange tingling, accompanied by a low almost indiscernible hum. Without warning a feeling of levitation overtook him, then suddenly disappeared as if nothing had happened. Although he was now able to get up Tony felt slightly unsettled about the whole affair, and for a while was puzzled as to what had taken place, but unable to comprehend the anomaly he finally put it down to one of life's strange experiences.

That evening he and Lauren enjoyed a couple of cans of lager, the strong stuff that gives you the necessary wha-hey when you "know" something good is going to happen! Making sure she was in bed before Tony she waited until he'd finished messing about in the bathroom. Brushing his teeth and gargling, then gargling again, and after what seemed like a week he finally walked into the bedroom! Dressed only in red bra, stockings and suspender Lauren sat on the edge of the bed, just one look and Tony knew it was going to be a very naughty night; he was *not* wrong!

For a few months life went on as usual, and

nothing much happened other than the mundane routine of every day life, but she was happy and had everything she'd ever wanted. Then came the day when Lauren arrived home late from work, as Tony looked up from the TV her face was alight, and it was obvious she had some world shattering news!

'You look very pleased with yourself, had a raise in salary?' asked Tony, deliberately playing down her obvious happiness.

'No you idiot, can't you guess?' she replied, laughing at his attempt to dilute her happiness.

'Oh is that why you're late, you've been for those tests at the doctors.'

'No the tests were done several days ago, I've just got the results!' she announced triumphantly.

'So - am I to gather by the grin on your face that stretches from ear to ear, that you're saying you're preggers!'

'Ten brownie points for Tony, it didn't take you long to work that one out!'

'Well it's a long time since we decided to start a family.' said Tony sheepishly. 'Anyhow, I can tell you this much - YAHOOOOO! As elated as Lauren he grabbed his coat and car keys and headed for the front door.

'Where are you going now?' said Lauren, wondering what had become so urgent.

'Never you mind,' he replied with an air of secrecy, 'I'll be back in ten minutes!' Before she could say another word he was gone. After Tony had left she felt as if time had slowed, and for five minutes a feeling of loneliness and desolation came over her, and it was so strong she wondered what was

happening to her. Suddenly the tyres of Tony's car crunched the gravel on the drive, and the feeling disappeared.

Walking through the front door a few seconds later he brandished a bottle of very expensive looking champagne.

'We are going to C-E-L-E-B-R-A-T-E!' announced Tony with a wicked look in his eye. 'Starting now!'

'I can't drink alcohol while I'm pregnant.' said Lauren in dismay hoping he wouldn't be upset'

'One bloody glass won't hurt surely?' replied Tony looking hurt, but his question was more of a protest.

'Please don't be angry,' she pleaded with him, 'the doctor advised me not to drink, he said it could affect the pregnancy.'

'Yeah but surely one little glass of bubbly won't do any harm?'

'Well I'd rather not if you don't mind.' said Lauren adamantly. Knowing her refusal had hurt him Lauren felt she had to stick to her guns. Storming into the lounge Tony slammed the bottle down hard on the coffee table without bothering to open it, then picking up the remote he switched on the TV, and pretended to watch the first programme that came on.

'Oh come on love, let's save the bubbly for when it's born... we can celebrate then without any problem.'

'Forget it!' snapped Tony, his reply was curt and clipped, then switching off the TV he left the room and ran up the stairs to the bedroom. Feeling bad about letting him down, especially as he'd taken the trouble to go out for it, Lauren was even more upset that he didn't understand her concern for their baby;

especially as it was their first born.

CHAPTER FOUR

Waking in a sullen mood the following day Tony didn't say much, but on occasions when he had to speak to her his answers were monosyllabic. Lauren couldn't remember the last time she'd had such a bad day, and being a Saturday made it even worse, that and Sunday were two days they could spend together, and he was behaving like this! So Lauren decided on one more attempt at reconciliation before resorting to more drastic measures.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked as nicely as she could, without sounding ingratiating.

'Yeah... ok.' His reply this time was a shade less terse than before, and as it appeared he was now relenting she felt happier. Walking into the kitchen she filled the kettle and plugged it in, then popped her head back through the door.

'It won't be long, oh, you're sitting in the old chair.'
'So what, you got a problem with that?' asked Tony curtly, 'if I want to sit in a chair that belongs to me, I don't see why it should concern you!' Biting her lip Lauren wondered how she could have been so dumb, just as he was beginning to mellow, she blew it by criticising him when it wasn't really necessary, so quickly returning to the kitchen she poured the tea in silence.

A few minutes after she'd left the room Tony was still smarting from his row with Lauren. It was then he noticed that same feeling of levitation he'd felt earlier, and was accompanied by a cold or 'flu like sensation, but this time it was different, and was something he hadn't experienced last time. His upper

legs were held firmly to the seat, and his forearms to the arms of the chair, as if they were being sucked down by a vacuum cleaner! His struggle to free himself was futile, and try as he might he couldn't move, and as his concern turned to panic Tony wondered what was happening to him. Shouting for Lauren his heart pounded like a kettledrum, then realising his voice was mute his plea was sucked down his throat, and Tony felt some unseen power had stopped him from contacting her. Suddenly he noticed the decor of the room had changed, and had reverted to the way it was when they'd first viewed the place over two years ago! His eyes wide with fright, he watched as it change again to a decor he hadn't seen before, and no sooner had his eyes focused on that when it changed again! It now changed with increasing rapidity and became mesmeric or kaleidoscope-like in its effect. Feeling violently sick he wanted to vomit, but all he could do was retch, although the room now appeared static Tony now felt totally disoriented, as if he was being dragged backwards at great speed. Suddenly everything went black, and even though he was still conscious he began to wonder if he'd gone blind!

Picking up both mugs in one hand and the biscuit barrel with the other Lauren walked into the lounge to see if Tony had calmed down.

'Here's your tea darl!'- stopping in mid-sentence she realised the room was empty, and thinking he'd gone to the loo or something placed the mugs on the table, then opening the biscuit barrel took out her favourite oatmeal biscuit. Having finished the biscuit and taken three sips of tea it dawned on her

that Tony still hadn't come down. Getting up she walked quickly to the bottom of the stairs.

'Tony, your tea is getting cold!' There was no answer, and being afraid she might provoke another situation thought better of calling him again. Leaving him to come down in his own good time she returned to the lounge and finished her tea. The magazine article was interesting, and Lauren was totally absorbed by it for more half an hour, then glancing at the clock she suddenly realised he still hadn't come down!

'Tony, what are you doing, your tea is stone cold love, shall I pour you another?' Still there was no reply, so climbing the stairs she walked briskly into the bedroom to find it devoid of all life. Thinking for a moment that he was in the loo it occurred to her that on her way across the landing the bathroom door was ajar, and the bathroom empty! Besides, what would he be doing in the loo for more than half an hour? Where in Hell's name could he be? Maybe he'd gone off in a huff, but she hadn't heard the front door close or his car pull away, so running quickly down stairs she checked to see if his coat was still in the hall, and like a sentinel it hung on the hook as if it was trying to tell her something. Considering that may have walked out on her she knew him well enough to know he wouldn't do that! Running to the shed she opened the door but it was vacant. The garage! Yes of course, that's where he'd be, but as she turned the corner of the house his car was parked in the driveway, now in a state of panic Lauren wondered what could have happened to him. Surely he wouldn't, couldn't, leave her over a silly

little argument like that? In the vain hope that by some quirk of fate he would be there when she returned she ran back to the lounge, but as she peered around the door the room was still empty.

'Oh, hello, I would like to report my husband missing!' said Lauren in a broken voice.

'Now look, the first thing is not to upset yourself,' replied the desk sergeant, 'I know that might sound like a foolish thing to say, but there's nearly always a rational explanation for these things, have you had a row?'

'Yes... he got upset when I explained I couldn't drink while I'm pregnant.'

'Well there you are then my love,' philosophised the sergeant, 'he'll be home tonight you wait and see.' Dropping the phone onto the cradle Lauren looked at the ceiling for divine inspiration, but now at a loss as to what she should do next she walked back to the lounge, and it was then she noticed the old chair was missing! If he'd left her why had he taken that with him? It made no sense, and there being no rhyme or reason to the situation her little heart hammered like a pile driver.

'Oh God please tell me he hasn't left me!' she sobbed, then breaking down she cried 'til her eyes were red and sore. Walking into the kitchen she pulled a paper towel from the role and wiped her eyes, but was unable to accept he would leave her while she was carrying their first born, and Tony was as just as "in love" with the idea of starting a family as she was!

Returning to the lounge she sat down to consider her next move. Ring her mother and tell her what

had happened, yes of course, Mum's always know what to do in situations like this. After ten minutes on the phone, and knowing both her parents were on their way she felt more stable. Waiting for them to arrive she sat on the settee, then it suddenly occurred to her his paper was also missing, and it was then she tried piecing the jigsaw together. He was missing, the chair was missing, and so was his paper, but why just those three things? Phoning Tony's parents next she told them what had happened, but his mother assured her that their son would never ever leave her, and was certain something had happened to him! They asked if they could come over and help with anything in her hour of need, but Lauren informed them that her own parents were already on their way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sitting in his chair as usual Master Anthony said very little, his life was a miserable one, as all he would, or could do was ask specific questions. To put it mildly he was merely an amusement to his father and five brothers, only his mother showed any love for him.

'Why does the time go so fast?' asked Anthony for the thousandth time in his limited life.

'Ah, there you go again Master Anthony, always asking about the time... you and your useless legs!' Laughing loudly his brothers found this highly amusing, and taunted him whenever the opportunity arose, and poor Anthony just sat wondering why they found it so funny that he couldn't walk. This ritual happened most days, and usually ended up with Anthony reduced to tears as a direct result of a comment made by his father.

'Where is Lauren?' asked Anthony, making his brothers roar with laughter.

'Who is Lauren?' asked his father testily.

'My wife.' replied Anthony innocently, and hearing this his brothers fell about laughing insanely.

'But you're not married Master Anthony, who'd 'ave you and your useless legs!' said his father laughing again, and the mirth now showed by his brothers was unmatched by anything that had gone before.

'Now, now, leave 'im in peace my sons, or you'll make your mother melancholy!' shouted his father over the top of their laughter. His father had always come to his rescue, but Anthony felt it was out of a sense of duty to his mother rather than love for him.

'Why does the time go so fast?'

'Never you mind about the time now young Master Anthony!' replied his father impatiently and laughed again, but his brothers couldn't believe they'd heard him ask the same question for the second time in ten minutes!

'Thankyou for your support husband.' said his mother smiling at him kindly, 'it is wrong that his brothers taunt him so!'

'They're in a jocular mood my dear.' said his father defending their son's lack of compassion. The voice whispered to Anthony again.

'Why does the time go so fast?' it asked, 'you must get an answer!'

'Why does the time go so fast?' asked Anthony again. This time his father fixed a stern look on Anthony, and stared at him for a full minute. Taking up the mantle his brothers also stared at him, and assumed that if their father was staring at him, then it was alright for them to follow suit.

When his father was like this Anthony both hated and feared him, although his father had never laid a finger on him he could see great cruelty in his eyes, and one look instilled an overwhelming dread in him.

'You and your useless legs,' said his father finally, 'you're a shame to me boy, sitting there with your questions!'

'The boy means no harm.' said his mother in his defence.

'No harm?' retorted his father. 'His brother's do work the mill alongside me, and keep him in food and clothing!'

'Does the chair speak to you father?' asked Anthony in a voice quaking with fear, and his father and brothers laughed 'til they rocked.

'A new question now then Master Anthony?' asked his father but it was loaded with sarcasm to excess, and the voice whispered to Anthony again.

'You must ask the question, you must get an answer!' insisted the voice.

'Why does the time go so fast?' asked Anthony again, but his face wore the expression of someone expecting an adverse reaction. His brothers were now hysterical, and knocking over two goblets the wine spilled over the table and onto the floor.

'Take the boy to his bed chamber wife!' announced his father suddenly. 'Too much laughter in one evening is not healthy.' It was as much as his mother could do to lift him from the chair, let alone carry him upstairs, but doing as she was bade no help was offered by his father or his brothers.

His sleep was fitful that night, affording Anthony no rest time and again the voice asked him the same question.

'Why does the time go so fast?' asked the voice incessantly. Time was going fast for Anthony, and knew his would be a short life devoid of pleasure, but didn't know why!

Hearing his mother shuffle along the boarded floor to his room, he knew she would take him down those rickety stairs one more time, uncomplaining as always, a mother's love knows no bounds, and she would do it forever if necessary. Sitting him in his chair his father glanced at him sideways, and emulating him two of his brother's darted glances at

him, would they have some more entertainment this morning? As they hadn't heard one question from Anthony they returned to guzzling their oats before starting their daily task in the mill. Being the only one aware that time was going fast Master Anthony looked at the clock again, but none of his family were aware of his plight, not even his saintly mother.

'It's a special day today Master Anthony.' declared his father, but Anthony simply grinned at him inanely.

'The boy is not aware that he is twenty one years of age today.' replied his mother, then sensed another session of ridicule.

'Why not?' shouted his father. 'He should show more respect, after the trouble we've gone to for his celebration!'

'Surely it is of no matter my husband.' replied his mother, being his birthday she'd hoped to spare him further misery.

'But I am forty nine today!' announced Anthony without warning.

'The boy has something to say?' asked his father challengingly. To his mother's dismay his brothers found this statement beyond hilarity, and falling backward from the bench in hysterics, one of them took his bowl of oats with him!

'Now that was indeed very clumsy!' shouted his father at his eldest son, and rising from the floor he received a cuff around the ear. Knowing better than to incur his father's wrath the boy sat down without uttering another word.

CHAPTER SIX

His mother had baked a cake for his birthday; a special cake for her crippled son that she loved so much. Returning from the mill her husband and sons washed away their daily toil in the tub, then trickling in one by one sat to the table for the meal their mother had lovingly prepared for them. Seldom was it appreciated, and it was only her husband who paid her compliments on her cooking, but his laxity allowed his sons to do largely as they pleased, and never bothered to thank her for her toil.

'Now! Where is this so-called cake woman?' asked Anthony's father in a rare and jovial mood.

'I shall bring it now my husband.' replied his mother meekly, then taking her cloth she went to the oven, and lifting the iron handle on the oven door she pulled it open. Leaning back from the searing heat she removed the cake from it's griddle, and placed it on another at the end of the table.

'Well now, that looks like a cake to fill the belly of a working man!' said Anthony's father as he eyed the well-risen cake in its final resting place.

'Thankyou my husband, it pleases me that you are happy with the results of my labours.'

'Why does the time go so fast?' asked Anthony once more.

'Now!' said his father sternly. 'We'll have none of that today, you will stop it now!' Bringing his fist down heavily he caused the table to shake violently. The room went silent, and for over a minute no one uttered a word, then blowing thinly through his lips he looked up at his wife and nodded at her silently

to cut the cake. Not having comprehended his meaning she stood mute with fear, and had never seen her husband's temper before.

'Well!' he shouted at the top of his voice 'do I have to do it myself?'

'Do what my husband?' she inquired in shaky voice.

'Cut that damned cake!' he bellowed at her.

'But the cake is too hot to eat at present.' she replied calmly, not wishing to inflame the situation further.

'Then why in Hell's name didn't you bake it earlier?' he roared at her, and again brought his fist down heavily on the table.

'But I had all my cleaning chores to do during the day my husband.'

'You have ruined the day woman!' he shouted at her as his eyes bulged with rage. By this time Anthony was crying, and his brothers had long since fallen silent, no one dared utter one word or make the slightest sound. Not knowing what she had done wrong their mother broke down, and paralysed with fear didn't know what to expect.

'I've had enough of this, I'm going to the inn for some ale, and when I get back that cake had better be ready to eat!' Leaving the table in a surly fashion he stormed from the house without a backward glance. Although more relaxed after he'd gone the atmosphere was far from happy, but the stress that Anthony suffered was such that he sat rigid in the chair as if he was glued to it, and dared not even ask why the time was going so fast!

'This tea's cold love!' shouted Tony sitting in the chair with the paper on his lap. Hearing his voice Lauren ran in to see a grey-haired old man with a

very accusing look on his face!

THE END

Galactic Summons

SUMMONING THE LEADERS

Monday 4th January 2016, 9:00am, a fax was received at the White House addressed to the President of the United States of America. It read as follows.

The President of the United Sates of America, Glenn Johnstone, is summoned to appear before an Intergalactic Tribunal on the planet Mars to answer the following charges:

1 That he knowingly freely allowed people to administer their business or businesses in a manner that has caused pollutive damage to the Earth's environment, damage now deemed irreversible. That this action also caused the extinction of many indigenous species of plant, bird, animal and insect throughout the world.

2 That he and his predecessors have engaged in warfare with other nations, to effect a peace advantageous to business people indigenous to The United Sates of America and its allies.

3 That his predecessors have knowingly developed and built nuclear weapons for use against other nations, and that they were used as a threat against other nations to enforce a peace.

4 That he and his predecessors have knowingly

allowed indigenous businesses to exploit less well off nations to effect greater profit margins than they would have received in their country of origin.

5 That he and his predecessors have knowingly, and willingly, made funds available to poorer nations, for the express purpose of improving their economy, and have charged that said nation an extortionate rate of interest, whereby that country had no chance of repaying said debt. Further, that they did so without proper care for the offered funds and policing of same.

6 This charge (the most serious) has been prepared against all leaders of all wealthy nations, and that is that, they neglected to look after the welfare of children in their own, as well as foreign countries, and observed poverty and suffering in both, also, that they allowed child cruelty and abuse, along with these obscenities they also allowed Paedophiles to minister their evil crimes against children, where the perpetrators received relatively light punishment.

It has been decreed that the above mentioned person will make himself available to answer the said charges on Monday 18th January 2016 at twelve o'clock midday Earth time (known as Greenwich Mean Time), ALL persons (hereinafter known as presidents, prime ministers, dictators, or any title they carry as a national leader, whether they be public servants, military, commoners or royalty) receiving this summons will also make themselves available by 12 o'clock Greenwich meantime on that

day. A craft will be sent to collect you at the above-mentioned time.

MAKE SURE THAT YOU ARE READY! Failure to attend will seriously affect your case.

PLAINTIFF: The Intergalactic League of Justice.

DEFENDENTS: The Leaders of all nations of the planet Earth.

Running across the hall at full tilt, the Vice President's pace was such that he nearly knocked down a secretary innocently walking in the opposite direction! as the door flew open the President looked up in complete disbelief at the sudden intrusion into his morning brief.

'I don't believe this Mr. President,' screamed the understudy, 'another cranky high school kid trying to have some fun at our expense!'

'What the Hell are you on about Jim?' replied Glenn Johnstone.

'This fax, that's what I'm on about!' retorted Jim Wallasey, 'how many more of these are we gonna have to put up with?'

'You'll have to trace the originator Jim... like you did with the other four, now if you don't mind...'

'Already tried that! This one's a Smart-ass, a bit cleverer than the others - no trace!'

'Ok, give it to security, let them sort it out, we'd best treat it as serious 'til we know better.' replied the President. Wasting no time Jim Wallasey slapped the fax in the "in" tray of the Chief of Security. Back in the Presidents office one of the "hot" lines rang, and picking up the handset the presidential aide

handed it immediately to the President.

'It's the British Prime Minister sir.'

'Good morning Sir Gordon, and how're things in Grande Bretagne today?'

'Ok, except that it's afternoon here - nine minutes past one to be precise! Anyhow I digress, had an odd communiqué through our fax... about half an hour ago-'

'Let me tell you what was in it,' interrupted the president, 'it was some weird summons to an intergalactic trial - am I right?'

'Yes - spot on old chap, how did you know? I know your CIA chaps are quick on the uptake, but that beats all records!'

'Can't take the credit for that I'm afraid, I'll let you in on a little secret - we had one identical to it, except the defendants name is different... namely myself.'

'What does it all mean Glenn?'

'We couldn't trace the sender so we threw it at security, but I suspect it's a prank, we've had a spate of them over in the last year, crazy high-school kids that think they'll have a laugh at our expense!'

'Well the funny thing is we couldn't trace the source of ours either, maybe we should give it some priority... it could be some terrorist movement, I'll tell MI5 to tackle it.'

'Ok Gordon, let me know if you come up with anything, and I'll reciprocate.' said the president.

'Appreciated old chap.' replied the prime minister and hung up.

Sir Gordon Kingsland 'rose from his chair, and walking around the leather bound ministerial desk he pondered the oddities of these two fax's that he

and the president had received; the phone rang again. Picking it up he found himself speaking to the French president, Sir Gordon's face went pale as he listened to the French premiere's account of an untraceable fax he'd received a few moments ago, Sir Gordon then related his own, and the American president's accounts to the French premiere.

'There is something odd about this,' said Sir Gordon, 'I'm going to call Brussels, I think we need to find out if anyone else has received one of these, I'll let you know.'

'Merci Sir Gordon, replied the French premiere, then rang off with a heavy frown across his brow. A personal assistant entered Sir Gordon's office looking flustered.

'While you were on the phone to our French cousins, the Germans, Italians, Greeks, and the Spanish have been trying to get through - they say it's very urgent that you contact them immediately!' said the assistant with urgency as the prime minister looked through the window of number ten. Then turning suddenly he told his aide to fax the relevant nations to the effect that he was dealing with the matter, but would have to speak to President Johnstone first before going direct to Brussels.

'Also, ask them to make their way to Brussels post-haste!' he added hastily. The assistant left to carry out the PM's instructions; Sir Gordon snatched up the phone and dialled the "hot" line direct to the president.

'Glenn, Gordon here again, look I've just had a chat with Anton LeClerc. It seems not only have the French received a summons, but so have the

Germans, the Greeks, Italians and the Spanish! And I suspect that when we've finished talking, there will be others.'

'Ok Gordon, I think we have to take this seriously, this is obviously the work of some extreme terrorist movement, I'm alerting the FBI on this one as well, I-'

'Look Glenn, sorry to interrupt, but I'll have to cut you short, I can see one of my assistants waving frantically at me from the other side of the room, it looks like things are getting worse!'

'Alright Gordon, keep me posted will you.'

'You can bank on it.' As Sir Gordon hung up the assistant immediately made his way over.

'Sorry sir, we've had countless calls from just about every member state in Europe, and a few from former eastern block countries, all saying the same thing!'

'Get Alan Critchley on the phone - soon as you can!' said Sir Gordon, and the aide then dutifully dialled the Australian premier's number.

'Alan, Gordon Kingsland, I take it you've received your "Galactic Summons" have you?'

'You're in a hurry, what's happened - world war three? If so I'll get a few beers in!'

'Look Alan, I'm sorry to press you on this matter but it does need some attention!'

'Ok, what's all this about a "Galactic Summons" - is that what you called it?'

'Yes, the USA, Canada and most European countries have received one, we haven't heard from the Russians yet, but that's nothing unusual, we think it's an international terrorist organisation - and I think

they're serious!

'Hang on Gordon, someone's panicking outside my office... I think we're about to find out what this is all about!' replied Alan Critchley, Sir Gordon heard him rustle a piece of paper at the other end.

'Yeah,' he said, finally returning to the phone, 'that's it alright... it appears I am summoned to appear before an Intergalactic Tribunal, I think-'

'Sorry for the interruption Alan, but we have to move fast on this one, Glenn's waiting for me to get back to him with any and all developments, we'll speak in a few hours when we've made a decision on what we're going to do about this. The popular theory at the moment - and I support it - is that this is something to do with an international terrorist group - I'll phone you back Alan!' Replacing the receiver Sir Gordon got up from his desk and went to the window, as he always did when something unusual invaded his life. At that moment he fervently wished he was on a hot sunny beach, then returning to the phone he dialled the hot line to Glenn Johnstone. Apart from this latest panic, Sir Gordon was also getting flack from various different sources, as well as his deputy regarding the pending cabinet re-shuffle!

'Glenn,' said Sir Gordon, hearing the presidents voice, 'Gordon here again, look my chaps at MI5 have pointed out they think this bit about Mars may be significant, I'm wondering if-'

'Pardon me Sir Gordon,' interrupted Glenn Johnstone, 'but I don't see Mars as being significant at all, what exactly do they mean?'

'Well... why would a terrorist faction refer to Mars?'

It doesn't add up Glenn, perhaps you could ask your boys at the FBI to look into it.'

'I will do that Sir Gordon, although I don't see what light it's gonna shed on the situation at all!' added the American premier.

Getting home early that evening Sir Gordon felt more than weary as he walked through his front door a little after ten o'clock.

'Is that you love?' called his wife Elizabeth from the kitchen, 'you must be worn out you poor thing, sit down and I'll get you something to eat.'

'No really, don't bother yourself dear,' replied Sir Gordon wearily, 'a cup of tea will do splendidly... I'm not the slightest bit hungry.' The armchair felt welcoming, and sitting heavily it eased the stresses and strains of his long day. The phone rang!

'Elizabeth Kingsland!' said Gordon's wife, 'Hang on one minute and I'll get him for you.' Hearing that Sir Gordon's heart sank momentarily, but being used to interruptions from the office spilling into his private life he got wearily out of the chair.

'It's Glenn for you dear.' she told him cheerfully.

'Hello Glenn,' answered Sir Gordon, 'What can I do for you?'

'Gordon, sorry to ring you now, I know it's late there, but I thought you should know immediately,' answered Glenn Johnstone slightly out of breath, 'tell your boys at MI5 well done, they were not wrong! The signal source for that message was indeed Mars! Have you got any keen astronomers there that are willing to take a peek at Mars through their scopes?'

'I uh... I suppose we might be able to rustle someone

up yes, why, what are you getting at Glenn?

'Tell your boys to take a look at Phison, 320 degrees east of longitude, and 20 degrees south of the equator, they won't fail to see it! I'm under pressure at the moment Gordon, so I'll leave you with it if that's ok?'

'Sure Glenn, thanks, I'll get someone onto that immediately.' For some reason Patrick Moore sprang to mind, and without hesitation Sir Gordon dialled his number.

MOORE OR LESS

Who likes being disturbed after ten o'clock at night? Be honest, no one really! Like everyone else Sir Patrick Moore was thinking about retiring for the night when his phone rang, so picking up the receiver he announced himself, and waited for the caller to identify themselves.

'Gordon Kingsland here Sir Patrick,' he said hesitantly, 'I... hope it's not too late, I mean this is business rather than pleasure, but it does require your expertise... do you have a few minutes to spare?'

'What can I do for you,' asked Sir Patrick, and intrigued as to why the PM would ring him at that hour, 'you say it needs my expertise?'

'Yes... uh, are you in a position to look at Mars - right now! Sorry, I sound a bit vague,' apologised the PM, but this only served to fuel Sir Patrick's curiosity, 'if I gave you a name and two map references for the planet would you take a look at the area and phone me back with your report?'

'I'd be pleased to,' said Sir Patrick champing at the bit, all he wanted now was to set his sight to the eyepiece, and see what had intrigued Sir Gordon Kingsland, 'I'll ring you as soon as I've taken a peek.' Settling down again Sir Gordon hoped to drink his tea without further interruption. Picking up the daily paper he sat in his favourite armchair to relax for a while, then sipping gratefully at his cup he opened the paper to the sports page as he always did. This was purely for the reason that he rarely had time to listen to sports reports, so he always read this

section first! The phone rang! Knowing Elizabeth would answer it Sir Gordon was very aware of what she meant to him, she was a gem!

‘Oh yes, I’ll just get him for you Sir Patrick.’ Hearing that Sir Gordon leapt from his chair and almost ran to the phone.

‘Hello Sir Patrick - thankyou for calling back so soon, I -’

‘Not at all old chap,’ cut in Sir Patrick eagerly, ‘please forgive my rudeness, but did I see correctly, or should I get a new telescope?’

‘You certainly don’t need a new telescope Sir Patrick,’ replied Sir Gordon, ‘Tell me exactly what you saw... in your own words.’

‘Well - what I saw appears to be a massive - and I mean massive - mother ship that appears to have parked itself on Phison, on several occasions I saw a number of satellite craft flying around, then return to the mother ship... if this is for real, it’s... well - incredible!’

Sir Patrick,’ replied Gordon Kingsland guardedly, ‘I can’t tell you anything at this moment, this is now a matter of national security, but I would appreciate you keeping an eye on things up there - and as soon as I’ve got you some clearance I’ll let you know what this is all about!’

‘Appreciated old chap,’ replied Sir Patrick, ‘I shall look forward to hearing from you.’

‘Hello Glenn,’ said the PM breathlessly, ‘Sir Patrick has confirmed the existence of spacecraft on Mars, now look, tomorrow’s the second right? Now according to the alleged summons we are to appear on January 18th, and that only gives us fourteen

days to find out how to deal with this!

'I get what you're saying Gordon,' replied the president, 'it's a tall order, but I think we can do it.'

'Do what Glenn?' asked the PM urgently, 'just supposing they find us guilty of these trumped up charges, how are they going to sentence us... and to what?'

'Ok Gordon,' said the president, 'I'll get congress to initiate a think-tank, I'm sure we'll come up with something!'

'Appreciated Glenn,' replied Sir Gordon, 'we'll do likewise, maybe we can compare notes and see what transpires.' The PM hung up, then walking slowly to his armchair contemplated the consequences of all this. There were no doubts as to the certainty of Sir Patrick's testimony, these spaceships existed! So why were they being persecuted in this way by an alien race, and apart from that all world leaders appeared to be implicated!

MAN'S BEST

With a week to go before their “court” appearance, the world’s leaders spent every working hour and more trying to figure out a way to expose and combat this supposed alien threat. Try as they might no one was able to come up with a feasible idea, and time as they all knew was fast running out! Before finishing his brief that morning the president excused himself and ran from the room at breakneck speed.

‘Get Sir Gordon on the phone quick!’ he said urgently, his aide complied immediately.

‘Sir Gordon,’ said the president breathlessly, ‘I’m sorry to bother you, have I interrupted your lunch?’

‘Good God no Glenn, in fact it’s nearly tea time! What can I do for you?’ asked the PM.

‘I just wondered what you think of this, why don’t we have a video conference, involving all major parties!’

‘That’s a brilliant idea Glenn, I think the sooner we set it up the better! Look, if I take Europe and Asia, you take the rest of the world, but as you say, we’ll have to exclude minor countries, logistically it would take too long getting them set up.’

‘Ok Sir Gordon, and let’s hope we can come up with something,’ added the president, ‘otherwise I don’t know what we can expect from these aliens.’ It was the quickest hook-up since the Internet was born! All the major world’s countries sat in their various boardrooms ready to discuss their pending trial, and its subsequent outcome. The US president opened the discussion with his format for dealing with the

alien threat.

‘My friends world-wide, we now know we can’t afford to ignore this threat to our planet, so we have to come up with a realistic plan to combat it. My proposal is simple, global passive resistance! At present we have to assume that they are serious, but if we don’t respond to their threat they will have to show their hand, then we will know for certain! I welcome any other suggestions, but if there are no others can I ask for a show of hands on this proposal?’ As the assembled world considered the president’s request there was a brief silence, and was eventually broken by Sir Gordon Kingsland.

‘I second the president’s proposal!’ After that a landslide of votes poured in, all Europe voted in favour, then Australia, New Zealand and Asia. The only exception was North Korea who came up with an idea of their own; Nuke them! Exclamations of horror screamed across the ether, no one had contemplated this as a credible alternative!

‘My friends,’ said the president guardedly, ‘I think we should consider first what kind of weapons they have.’

‘There is no way we can tell what weapons they have!’ replied the North Korean president.

‘Then do you think caution should be our watchword?’ countered the US president. At that point the North Korean president turned to his aide, and after a lengthy discussion returned to the mike, and having modified his suggestion now suggested they should use the threat of nuclear weapons.

‘Again I have to say,’ replied the US president, ‘even the threat could be dangerous, I believe the

only way forward is to use passive resistance.’ Once more the North Korean president talked with his aide, but this time it was fifteen minutes before he returned to the microphone.

‘Yes, we are in full agreement!’ said the North Korean president finally. After their previous statement a sigh of relief traversed the globe by those waiting with bated breath.

‘Ok,’ said the president, ‘it appears we have an agreement. So... when the aliens send their craft to take us to stand trial, no one moves! Including today, we have four days to wait until that event, so I suggest we keep our thinking caps on... just in case someone thinks of something better, but for now, as this is all we’ve got, we’ll just have to hope it works!’

Life went on as usual, and the widely accepted theory that we humans turn to work when adversity strikes, was again prevalent in this case. There seemed no point in stopping, or bringing the world to a standstill, as it might never happen! It’s what keeps us going, like coal on a fire, gas in an automobile, and keeps the inevitable from our conscious mind. All available telescopes were unerringly trained on the Phison area of Mars, watching, waiting, hoping, and praying they might just go away, but everyone knew... it just wasn’t going to happen. The spectre of the alien craft stood like a sentinel of doom poised to drastically change or modify our way of life, and replace it with... what? Sometimes it’s best not to think about things for too long. Friday 15th passed uneventfully, and many had predicted that the aliens would make their

move on that day, to gain an element of surprise, but they were proved wrong by the other faction that argued, as they “knew” they were superior they wouldn’t consider a need for surprise! Saturday also turned out to be just another day, albeit the weekend was spent by most in their usual fashion, and not least by the worlds leaders tension was felt by most around the world. One journalist put it rather succinctly by headlining “Will The Reds Have Their Heads”! Sunday in turn was pretty well the same; just routine, but that evening the world’s apprehension increased, as everyone knew that tomorrow was the *big* day. All wondered inwardly what would happen, not only to the human race, but also the planet. Was it possible that the world’s total population could suffer insomnia on the same night?

Monday morning 18th January, at seven o’clock the radio on Sir Gordon Kingsland’s alarm blasted into his cranial cavity. Sitting on the side of the bed Sir Gordon rubbed his hands over his face, and like most, having had scant sleep that night felt decidedly groggy. Looking at his wife Sir Gordon wondered what would become of her should anything should happen to him. That thought only increased his apprehension, which if anything at that time wasn’t light! Walking slowly to the bathroom he stopped his razor, shaved and showered, then returned to the bedroom to dress. A suit and tie would suffice, as far as he was concerned this was just another day at the office.

‘You’re up early darling,’ said Elizabeth sleepily, ‘I’ll make some breakfast.’

‘Thankyou Elizabeth,’ replied Sir Gordon, ‘I’ll be

down in a moment.’ Although his appetite was dull he supposed he had better eat something, and remembered times past when he’d regretted going without. Seeing his car arrive through the lounge window Sir Gordon hurriedly finished his tea.

‘I’m off now Elizabeth, I’ll see you this evening darling.’

‘Yes... I suppose so.’ replied Elizabeth hesitantly.

‘Oh come on love,’ said Sir Gordon reassuringly, ‘it’ll be alright, you’ll see, there’s nothing to worry about!’ Smiling thinly Elizabeth kissed her husband goodbye, and wondered if or when she would see him again, but a brave face was what she needed now.

‘Ring me just before twelve!’ called Elizabeth as the car drove Sir Gordon away. Waving to let know he’d heard her; he would phone. At half past eight Downing Street was a hive of activity, as secretary’s ran back and forth like there was no tomorrow, but indeed, would there even be a tomorrow!

‘Gordon Kingsland!’ said Sir Gordon picking up the receiver.

‘Patrick here Gordon,’ said Patrick Moore urgently, ‘I hate to inform you Gordon, but those craft have returned to the mothers ship, which has now taken off from Mars... and is now heading for Earth!’

‘Ok Patrick,’ replied Sir Gordon pensively, ‘any idea how long it will take them to get here?’

‘I don’t know the drive capability of their ship Gordon,’ replied Sir Patrick apologetically, ‘if it’s capable of speeds in excess of light, then I would say they’ll be here in less than fifteen minutes, but that is a pure guess on my part.’

‘Thankyou Patrick,’ replied Sir Gordon, ‘you’ve been a great help, and it really is much appreciated.’

‘Not at all Gordon,’ replied Sir Patrick, ‘is there’s anything else?’

‘No... that’s all I need to know Patrick, and thanks again.’ said Sir Gordon finally, and replaced the phone. Sitting at his desk he stared at the wall for a moment, and apart from the rest of the world thought about what this would mean to the British public! If anything happened to him would they find someone else to lead them? Making a decision to deputise a replacement immediately he was about to leave the office when the phone rang.

‘Gordon Kingsland!’

‘Hi Gordon,’ said the president, ‘I take it you know they’re on their way.’

‘Good morning Glenn,’ replied Sir Gordon, ‘yes, Sir Patrick just informed me.’

‘Do you also know that they are now stationary over the mid-Atlantic?’

‘Bloody Hell – no I didn’t!’ Look Glenn, sorry to cut you short, but I have a rather urgent bit of business to do, can I phone you back?’

‘Sure, I’ll speak with you later Gordon.’ The president rang off. Knowing they had arrived it was clear the alien threat wasn’t hollow, and the next few hours would be telling. The phone rang again, and Sir Gordon wondered if he would ever get to find someone to replace him!

‘Gordon Kingsland!’

‘I am Placeo, from The Intergalactic League of Justice, you know of us, and why we are here, I trust you will board the craft we are sending for you, and

that you will attend the trial?’

‘I don’t suppose I have a choice in the matter do I?’

‘No!’

‘Then I suppose I’ll be there.’

‘Good, the time is now nine o’clock GMT, the craft will be at Heathrow airport at 11:45am. Please make sure you don’t miss it!’

‘You can’t land at Heathr-‘ the line went dead. Picking up the phone he dialled Heathrow to inform control of the immanent danger, all flights would have to be cancelled now in the interests of safety!

A REPLACEMENT IS FOUND

Picking up his phone the Prime minister dialled a number, then drumming his fingers on his desk waited for nearly a minute before getting an answer. ‘Gordon here Christian,’ said the PM, slightly agitated at being kept waiting, ‘listen, I need you to listen carefully, in case something should happen to me up there today I want to nominate you as my replacement, being the party whip you’re someone I trust, and I think, the ideal candidate.’

‘I don’t know what to say Gordon,’ replied Christian Turner, ‘I hope to God nothing does happen to you, but, yes of course, you can count on me. Listen uh... if anything does go wrong, would you like me to... uh, ring Elizabeth for you?’

‘That would be very much appreciated Christian,’ replied Sir Gordon, ‘thankyou, and good luck for the future if uh... well, you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, I know... and good luck yourself, I hope everything goes well.’ Thanking his would-be replacement Sir Gordon hung up. Half past ten and he had just over an hour to be at Heathrow, then suddenly remembered he hadn’t called Glenn again after his earlier call.

‘Hello Glenn, so sorry, it’s been mayhem here this morning, now, what can I do for you.’

‘We’ve had a re-think here Gordon, we feel this is only a trial to get us to mend our ways, no one has been directly threatened so we feel it is in our best interests to comply with their request and attend this “hearing” as it appears to be.’

‘Well, there’s a thought, I must admit what you say

has a ring of truth about it, perhaps we should alert the others before it's too late!

'Sorry Gordon, I'm afraid I pre-empted your answer and we've already taken care of it!' replied Glenn Johnstone.

'Good old American efficiency eh, well done Glenn, well... I guess I'll see you up there in an hour.'

'Is it right for me to say, "Look forward to it?"' Laughing with bravado Sir Gordon rang off.

'Bring the car 'round to the front straight away, it's time we went to Heathrow – in a hurry!' The Jaguar sped off, and once through the gates turned right down Parliament Row, then turning right again they headed west to the A404; Big Ben struck the hour as they turned.

'I hope to God the traffic isn't thick sir!' said his driver half turning to the premier.

'Pessimist!' replied Sir Gordon laughing. 'Although you might have a point Arthur, if it is heavy, and I am late... I wonder... will I be whisked off to another planet to serve my sentence?'

'Don't even joke about it sir!' replied Arthur in his usual dour manner. Thankfully the traffic at that time was fairly light, and they made good progress through the city, and once on the A404 Arthur let the big Jaguar fly. Looking at his watch Sir Gordon knew he had time in hand, at eleven twenty two they were more than half way, and having no papers to peruse he sat back, relaxed, and enjoyed the ride.

At eleven thirty five the Jaguar drove into Heathrow, and immediately Sir Gordon could see the craft that would take him aloft to his trial. As they drove across the airfield he could see four

armed guards either side of the walkway he would climb to board the ship, and opposite them was a regiment of the SAS; poised and ready for action if needed. There was no getting away from it, the atmosphere was tight, and Sir Gordon sensed that one tiny spark could set off an affray that no one had seen before on this planet! Pulling out in front of them a heavily armoured Landrover escorted them to the craft, and as they stopped six armed military police got out and surrounded the Jaguar. Opening the door the sergeant allowed the premier to alight; the premier thanked him, and the sergeant wished him good luck. Walking at a steady pace he wasn't going to show them fear, the four humans as they plainly were, turned in towards the walkway as he approached, then stopping briefly Sir Gordon looked at each of them in turn and climbed the walkway. Inside it was as futuristic as he'd imagined, and *really* was like something out of a sci-fi film, all flashing lights and panels. Another "human" stepped forward to greet him, and showed him a seat, which he duly took.

'You are the first of your world leaders to board one of our craft.' said the being.

'Well now, is that what we would call a world first?'

'I don't understand.' replied the being.

'Oh it doesn't matter.' said the premier tiredly. Studying the ship closely he guessed it to be roughly the size of a mansion house, and if this ship was just a shuttle then how big was the mother ship? Watching the military police retreat the door with its integral walkway slowly swung up and closed.

Slamming shut the airlock hissed and sealed them in, and looking at his watch Sir Gordon heard a low whirring noise, the time was eleven fifty and they were airborne. Disc-shaped the craft was glazed around its full circumference, and allowed him full radial vision. The speed at which they were climbing alarmed him, and noticed they were approaching the mother ship at an incredible rate, then suddenly slowing it hovered for a few seconds, and Sir Gordon assumed they were waiting docking instructions. Throughout the whole journey he hadn't experienced any G force, then as the shuttle moved inside the mother ship it docked on a circular base identical to the ships circumference, another hiss and he was ushered from the craft into the most gigantic hall he had ever seen, Sir Patrick had said it was probably massive, but this! The mother ship was at least the size of New York, and here it was floating above the Earth like it weighed nothing! Having thought that he smirked, the ship was outside the Earth's gravitational pull, so of course it weighed nothing! The being who was acting as his usher turned out to be Placeo, the one he'd spoken to on the phone, and who now ushered him to a doorway a hundred feet away. That doorway led to another room, and being much smaller appeared to be a sort of holding room, but surely he wasn't being held captive? He was! As he stepped in Placeo quickly turned and shut the door with a small remote, and hearing two clicks in quick succession Sir Gordon knew it had been locked. The room appeared to have no entertainment, TV, magazines, newspapers, or periodicals of any nature. There was

however a table in the corner with drinks on it, and feeling dry in the mouth Sir Gordon helped himself. Taking a tall frosted glass he filled with a dark amber liquid he had never seen before and looked fairly thick, then swirling it around the glass confirmed his suspicion, it was indeed quite viscous. Sniffing at it tentatively told him it was akin to something citric, but couldn't discern whether it was orange or lemon, or was it more like lime? Before he had a chance to determine which the door opened again, and in walked his old friend Glenn.

'Boy, am I glad to see you!' said Sir Gordon genuinely.

'Hi Gordon, well... this is a turn up for the book!' replied Glenn smiling, 'It's good to see you Gordon, even though it's in dubious circumstances. What's that?'

'I haven't tried it yet,' replied Sir Gordon, 'it's very thick, a sort of citrus flavour.' Taking a sip Sir Gordon swilled it around his pallet then swallowed.

'Yes, amazingly it's very refreshing, can I pour you one Glenn?' The president declined. Again the door opened, and in walked the French president Anton LeClerc with Alan Critchley the Australian prime minister. Shaking hands they talked for a while about their situation, and tried guessing the outcome of their trial, it was at that point other world leaders started arriving thick and fast, however, most of them agreed that they would most probably be tried separately, as to try them en masse would be impossible through sheer weight of numbers! It was then they felt an almost imperceptible jolt; they were on their way! Incredibly fifteen minutes later

they landed in the Phison area of Mars. As Glenn Johnstone looked at his watch the door to their room opened and in walked in Placeo. Calling for silence he asked them all to follow him to the chamber. Looks of surprise countenanced every face as it appeared they would be tried en masse after all! Following Placeo they walked for about three minutes, then entered the chamber through a huge door that slid silently open as they approached, that Sir Gordon estimated to be at least fifteen feet high. Like the rest of the ship the chamber was massive, at the head of the room sat twelve men at a long bench, but were unsure whether they were jurors or judges. As Placeo ushered them into a large pen Sir Gordon and Glenn Johnstone commented that it was more than big enough to hold the assembled world's leaders. Standing upright they remained silent in an atmosphere of stark eerie solemnity. Ten minutes and several coughs and splutterings later, they began to wonder what sort of trial this would be. It was then that one of the "judges" as they apparently were, stood and read from a sheet of paper.

'To the leaders of all nations of the planet known as Earth, hereinafter known as The Defendants, I read the following charges brought against you by the Intergalactic League of Justice, hereinafter known as The Plaintiff. Reading out the charges the world leaders listened carefully, but quickly realised they were listening to a repeat of the summons they had received by fax.

After his oration a silence befell the auditorium, when Sir Gordon noted that this was profoundly different from British courts, in-as-much-as the

charges were usually read out by the Clerk of the Court. It was then that another of the officials stood, and cleared his throat.

‘You have heard the charges brought against you by the Intergalactic League of Justice, and you have also heard that they have been identified as the Plaintiff. You, as the leaders of Earth’s nations have been identified as the Defendants. I ask you all now to answer the charge against you – do you plead guilty or not guilty? You may answer now.’

‘Not guilty!’ shouted 194 voices, then after a few straggling voices died away silence reigned again .

‘Take them to the death chamber!’ ordered the judge.

‘Now just hang on a minute,’ shouted Sir Gordon, ‘on our planet we give the defendant a chance to explain why they committed their crime, primarily for the reason that they may be innocent, are we to assume that we are not allowed that courtesy? And as for the death chamber – I hardly think it relevant to the crimes we’re *alleged* to have committed!’

‘For one thing,’ replied the judge angrily, ‘you are not on your planet now! And for another, you are *all* guilty of genocide! You dare to stand there and dictate to me what is right or wrong – take him first!’

‘Well I happen to agree with Sir Gordon,’ cut in Glenn Johnstone suddenly, ‘this court stinks! I believe we should have the right of redress, after all it’s only what’s right!’

‘He’s next!’ shouted the judge. About to voice his something Anton LeClerc thought better of it, then changing his mind again thought, what the Hell, I’m

gonna die anyhow!

‘I think monsieur that we should have the right to appeal, it is the decent way to do things!’

‘Take him with the other two!’ said the judge, then pressing a buzzer on his bench a door at the far end of the hall opened, and in marched a hundred armed troopers in light grey one piece uniforms. As the troopers took up their positions either side of their holding pen it rolled back on itself, no one moved, but the troopers remained motionless and waited, as if expecting the world’s leaders to know they should automatically follow the troopers meekly to their death.

‘You will go now with the troopers, it is pointless to resist!’ said Placeo indifferently.

‘Tell us why don’t you!’ said Alan Critchley sarcastically making the other laugh.

Taking the initiative Glenn Johnstone walked forward, and without flinching Sir Gordon walked beside him, then staring at the judge with as much malice as they could muster they walked from the pen; taking their lead the other statesmen followed. Turning left they walked in the opposite direction to which they had entered the chamber, and were flanked by the troopers on either side.

‘How wrong can one man be?’ asked Glenn as they walked along the gangway.

‘It’s not your fault,’ replied Sir Gordon, ‘we all thought you were right so...’ On entering the death chamber they continued to stare defiantly at the judge, the death chamber was pitch black, and curiously no light filtered through from the trial chamber, then as if controlled by a dimmer switch

the lights gradually became brighter. Having marched a few feet into the room the troopers split into two groups, one rank marching left and the other to the right, then proceeding around a raised Diaz they came to a halt as Placeo stood to one side and ushered the world's leaders onto it. There was no escape, with the troopers surrounding the Diaz they stared out at the bleak room that would be their last vision of life.

Suddenly the troopers raised their gun, inward and upwards towards the condemned, and Sir Gordon assumed that in the case of a rebellious outbreak they would avoid shooting each another; clever he thought! Turning to Glenn they shook hands, and every last man shook the hand of the other, any differences of opinion, national, or international were swept aside as they said their last goodbyes. No warning was given as a thin veil descended around the circumference of the Diaz, which appeared more like water than something solid, but whatever it was it was certainly soundproof, as they could no longer hear Placeo instructing the troopers. Suddenly a terrible cold descended upon them, and as Sir Gordon started shivering he noticed that Glenn's teeth were also chattering. The cold was incredible, and to a man felt they were at the North Pole with no clothes on. Turning to Sir Gordon, Glenn complained of indigestion, and having nodded silently in the negative he changed his mind, then suddenly becoming unbearable told Glenn it felt like his whole body was heating up from the inside! Their fear now became intolerable, knowing that fear

Glenn and Gordon looked at one another one last time, and watched as the others panicked. Looking at Sir Gordon Glenn mouthed the words “good luck”; and doing likewise Sir Gordon nodded his understanding with a poker face. The heat in their insides increased again, and now well beyond the tolerance level of the human body their skin temperature dropped even further! As a black cylinder descend around them they were already semi-conscious and felt their arteries and veins were about to explode, then – nothing!

INHABITANTS OF EARTH

The following morning another fax was received in the offices of the late world leaders, which were read by their understudies. The shock of what had happened to their leaders reverberated around the world. With a cold raging anger Christian Turner had taken his rightful post, and immediately called his US counterpart.

‘Is this true? They’ve actually executed them?’ he asked with incredulity.

‘Well... I don’t have to guess, you’ve had the same fax as us!’ replied a fuming Howard Dexter. ‘*Callous bastards!* They say they will address the world later this morning, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what they have to say.’

‘You’re right Howard,’ said Christian, ‘we’ll talk again after.’ Replacing the receiver Christian Turner turned to the Secretary of War and asked his opinion of an attack on the aliens using all NATO forces.

‘My opinion is it would be extremely stupid!’ replied Tom Helman. ‘They obviously have weapons that are far superior to ours.’

‘I know that Tom, but if we used atomic weapons surely it would be have some impact on them.’

‘Are you crazy Christian?’ asked Tom, ‘think what that would do to the Earth’s atmosphere!’

‘They’re not in the Earth’s atmosphere Tom!’ said Christian pointing out the obvious.

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Tom relenting momentarily, ‘but having said that, if for any reason the attack had no effect on their craft, just think what the consequences might be for us!’

‘Well, let’s put it this way then,’ said the first minister not to be outdone, ‘would you rather be ruled by them, or would you prefer our present system of government?’

‘Oh bollocks!’ replied Tom Helman, ‘Ok, but we’ll have to talk it over with the Americans first!’

‘Well that is blatantly obvious Tom, it’ll have to be a global decision, and a global exercise!’ said Christian Turner, now satisfied he was getting somewhere.

At twelve noon precisely the world heard a voice that primitive man would have mistaken as a visit from the Gods! Booming around the world it instilled dread into the hearts of many jungle races who failed to comprehend the voice from the sky.

‘Inhabitants of Earth, we are the Caucus, and come from a planet similar to yours - Caucasia! Now that we have rid your planet of its oppressive rulers you may go about your business as usual. A hundred and ninety four of our staff will stay behind, to monitor the progress of each and every nation, until it thrives with a new vitality. At that stage you will be free of all subjugation, and will be able to live full and contented lives, then, and only then will our people be recalled. Of course, should we receive reports of a... non-compliant nature, I think everyone listening today will know what that will mean!’

‘F---n’ Hell!’ said a listener in the street, ‘they’re gonna take us over!’

‘F---n’ Hell! They’re not!’ replied the man stood next to him. Although the overall feeling was of fear towards the aliens, there *was* a distinct and rebellious undercurrent.

‘Shut the f—k up!’ said another vehemently, who was trying to listen to the oration.

‘So with that,’ said Placeo in closing, ‘the officers remaining with you will have powers of office bestowed on them to imprison, try, and execute anyone who rebels against the new order. I trust that is clear to you all.’ There was no answer, as yet the good people of Earth hadn’t been able to develop a communication system as advanced as theirs, so Placeo smugly accepted their silence as one of global compliance.

‘Well they don’t mince their words do they?’ asked Christian ironically. After listening to the rantings of Placeo he returned to Downing Street, and picking up the phone at twelve twenty dialled the Pentagon Hotline.

‘Howard?’

‘Christian, I thought it might be you,’ said Howard with relief, ‘well it appears they do wish to occupy our world!’

‘They can go fry their asses!’ said Christian Turner angrily. Coming from a northern working class background he didn’t mince his words, ‘I say we fight back – *like f---n’ now!*’

‘You’re a man after my own heart Christian... Nukes?’

‘I think we have an agreement!’

‘Set up your end, we’ll set up ours, contact as many European countries as possible, get them to do likewise, I’ll take on the Pacific Basin and Antipodean countries.’ Slamming down the phone Christian Turner was at war! He was accepting no alien as his superior! Picking up the phone again he

dialled a number.

‘Hello?’ he said brusquely. ‘Who’s that? No... I want to talk to Tom Helman, are you daft or something... then get him – *now!* Don’t be a condom all your life, take a day off!’ Slamming the phone down he sat and waited for Tom to call him back.

‘Hello, Turner!’ said Christian acidly.

‘Christian, it’s Tom, what can I do for you?’

‘I’ve talked briefly with Howard Dexter, and he wants to have a go at these bastards as well! What we have to do now is contact the leaders of all our European friends, and get them to synchronise with us to *attack that big black dinner plate with everything we’ve f---n’ got!*’

‘I’ve still got reservations about this Christian,’ replied Tom hesitantly, ‘if it fails to work the repercussions could be enormous.’

‘Tom – *bollocks!*’ replied Christian brusquely, ‘just get hold of everyone in Europe, I’ll leave that to you!’ Slamming down the phone Christian was fuming at Tom’s reluctance to co-operate, and help free their planet from this obvious incursion. Hopping mad he now considered a replacement for Tom!

Having seen what was happening, at two minutes past three Sir Patrick Moore picked up the telephone and rang Downing Street.

‘Good afternoon Christian,’ he said gravely, ‘they’re on their way!’

‘What, the shuttles?’ replied Christian raising his eyebrows, ‘I didn’t think they’d be here that quick!’

‘If you look out of your window now, you’ll see

them fanning out around the world.’ Running to the window Christian saw several of the black shuttles swoop from above, then disperse in several different directions.

‘Right Sir Patrick,’ said Christian, with gravity, ‘it looks like we’re in for the long haul! Thankyou for that.’ Slamming the phone down he was incensed, and assumed he would soon have the pleasure of meeting his so-called alien overlord! Sure enough, having run like an athlete to the rear of the house he saw a shuttle descend close by, and made a bet with himself it had landed in St. James Park! An immediate decision was made; he would *not* send the car ‘round to pick up that bastard!

‘I wonder how long it will take him to get here?’ asked Tom Helman standing behind Christian.

‘Oh Tom, I didn’t hear you arrive,’ said Christian in his usual churlish manner, ‘let the bastard walk!’

OUR GLORIOUS LEADER

Grabbing one of the two chairs at the head of the table Christian Turner pushed the other aside, then sat deliberately facing the door, while Tom Helman sat by the side table next to the clock. They would let this so-called ruler come to them!

‘Excuse me sir,’ said the constable politely, ‘I can’t allow you in there unless you have an official pass!’

‘Is this official enough!’ replied the alien, then shot him. Feeling his insides suddenly overheat the constable collapsed heavily to the pavement, and died seconds later. Opening the door to number ten the alien walked calmly in, then looking around for a moment it seemed he knew instinctively where he was going, and headed straight for the Cabinet room. The large white double doors opened, and walking in he saw Christian sitting at the head of the table, then looking briefly at Tom Helman returned his gaze to Christian Turner.

‘It is you I will speak to.’ said the Alien flatly. ‘I am-‘

‘A bastard!’ interrupted Christian angrily.

‘I am Trella, I am your new leader,’ he continued, ‘your worries are over now, and you no longer need to administer to your duties alone. You know of course all countries in your world will enjoy the same benefit as you, and I will personally guide you through our benefit program to show how you can all become wealthy. You will have heard Placeo mention what will happen in the case of rebellious action, so I don’t think we need to dwell on that any

longer. Do I have your co-operation?’

‘What do you think Tom?’ asked Christian slyly, ‘do you think it’s a good package?’ Knowing he’d deliberately put Tom on the spot, Christian sat back and waited for his answer.

‘Well...’ replied Tom, hesitantly, being unsure of his answer.

‘Come on man, the gentleman’s waiting!’ interrupted Christian.

‘Well yes, I think we should give him all the help he needs!’

‘Exactly!’ replied Christian before the alien could utter a word. ‘My sentiments entirely. So, apart from bastard, what else do we call you?’ Shutting his mouth he deliberately slouched in the chair, then folding his arms he studied Tom’s face, and had to admit, being a mask of confusion it was a funny sight. Looking straight at Christian, Tom asked his silent question – why me?

‘Well, my name is Trella, and I’m glad to hear you are compliant,’ said the alien finally managing to get a word in, ‘not only will this make my job easier, but we will also have a harmonious working relationship.’

‘Well dippy doo!’ said Christian defiantly.

‘What does that mean?’ asked Trella looking confused. ‘Dippy doo, I mean.’ Laughing loudly Christian knew he shouldn’t have, but his sense of humour simply got the better of him.

‘It’s uh... an expression of delight, it means you’re happy about something.’

‘I see.’ replied Trella still looking confused. ‘So you are happy?’

'*Ecstatic!*' replied Christian with great emphasis.

'I am glad to hear this,' said Trella completely missing the point, 'I feel we will get along well.'

'*F---n' famously!*' replied Christian sarcastically, and grinned maliciously. 'It appears that you are now our glorious leader!'

'Well in that case I suggest we start by going through the ministries, and assessing their accounts.' suggested Trella, 'oh uh, what is *f---n*'?'

'Maybe you have a different word for it on Caucus, but you definitely do it – *believe me!* Anyhow you know where the accounts are,' said Christian, hoping he would swallow the bait, 'off you go!'

'No! You bring them to me!' replied Trella in no uncertain terms.

'Oh I'm sorry,' said Christian with a genuinely malicious grin, 'you'll have to excuse me, I'm not used to this occupation lark.'

'Lark? asked Trella, looking confused again.

'Oh it doesn't matter,' said Christian testily, and cursed his luck that Trella hadn't taken the bait, 'it's just a term we use here.' It occurred to Christian he would have a hard time getting Trella out of the office, and he needed to call Howard Dexter. Looking at Tom Helman he could see this situation was getting the better of him, his face was strained, and Christian realised that he wasn't cut out for political chicanery.

'Tom, why don't you get us all a nice cup of coffee?' suggested Christian, and winked at him in the hope he would get the message.

'Where are you going?' asked Trella looking concerned.

‘He’s going to get us all a cup of coffee.’ said Christian before Tom said anything.

‘Coffee?’ asked Trella, frowning deeply.

‘You’ll like it,’ answered Christian smiling widely, ‘it’s a bean that grows here, we grind it to a powder and pour boiling water on it.’

‘I see!’ replied Trella. Two syllables again thought Christian, still, better than one, but will he improve? Deliberately staying away as long as possible Tom hoped Christian would be able to do something to alleviate their situation.

‘Where is your Tom Helman?’ asked Trella. At last thought Christian, now perhaps he would be able to phone Howard!

‘He’s not my Tom Helman, and as to where he is I haven’t got the foggiest!’ replied Christian cryptically.

‘Foggiest?’ asked Trella, confused again!

‘Foggiest, uh... fog, is a weather condition here, where you can’t see where you’re going.’

‘I see!’ said Trella in unison with Christian, but was still confused. The look that Trella shot Christian after told him that irony was certainly not lost on him, and smiling broadly Christian looked directly at him.

‘You are very sarcastic Christian Turner.’

‘Yes... I *do* have my moments!’ said Christian, again sarcastically.

‘Where is your Tom Helman?’ asked Trella again.

‘I told you, he’s not mine – *I don’t own him!*’

‘Yes of course, but he has been gone a long time,’ said Trella concernedly, ‘Is he likely to try and escape?’

‘Anything’s possible!’ said Christian, still sitting with his arms folded.

‘I’d better go and look for him, I hope he doesn’t try to escape, I’d hate to have to kill him!’ At last! Daft bastard thought Christian, Escape? Tom wouldn’t have a clue where to begin! While Trella was out of the room Christian feverishly dialled the Pentagon.

‘Howard? Listen I haven’t got long, this Trella bloke is driving me nuts, he’s on our case all time. I just want you to know that everything here is going fine.’ Hearing Trella approach Christian slammed the phone down Before Howard had a chance to reply.

‘You were communicating with someone?’ asked Trella walking into the room.

‘No... no one.’

‘I detected an open line on your communicator,’ stated Trella flatly, ‘you were talking to someone else – *I know!*’

‘Alright, so what? It’s none of your business who I was talking to!’ replied Christian angrily. ‘Anyhow... if you must know it was a lady friend of mine, you know... *the opposite sex?*’ For the first time since his arrival Trella smiled, and Christian was glad he could only detect an open line, as his deliberate lie had made it blatantly obvious that Trella could not detect a conversation.’

‘So where is my Tom Helman?’ asked Christian sarcastically as Trella returned.

‘He is coming now, he couldn’t find the coffee.’ replied Trella matter-of-fact. Then realised Christian had been sarcastic again, and shot him another glance; Christian smiled again.

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’ asked Christian, then realised he’d opened another can of worms!

‘Surprise you?’

‘He’s a cack-handed son-of-a-bitch,’ said Christian, and seeing Tom enter the room, ‘aren’t you Tom?’

‘What’s that Christian?’ asked Tom. Raising his arm Christian waved his comment aside, and couldn’t be bothered to explain to both of them.

Finally at six o’clock Trella announced that the days labours were done, and it was time to go home! Picking up his attaché case Tom walked to the door, then sensing a silence he turned and looked at Christian, who in turn was looking at Trella.

‘You may go now!’ said Trella quizzically.

‘No... I live here!’ said Tom emphatically.

‘No... I live here!’ replied Trella with emphasis, and emulating Christian!

‘You can stay with me if you like.’ said Tom graciously. Considering the implications of that for a moment he picked up his brief case and closed it.

‘No – thankyou Tom, I’ll check into a hotel for the night, I’ll sort something out tomorrow.’ Closing the door behind him he left Trella to usurp his home, and hailing a taxi Christian made up his mind he would pay for this.

‘The Aarden, St. Georges Drive Please!’

‘Ok Guv., we’ll be there in a jiffy, ‘ere! You ‘ad any trouble with this alien geyser then?’

‘Trouble? He’s more trouble than six puppies with f----n’ diarrhoea!’

‘Christ! Sounds like a bad bastard!’ replied the cabbie.

‘You don’t know the half of it!’ said Christian, who

was always on the same wavelength as the man in the street, and had never forgotten he was one of them!

MORSE CODE

To save time Christian ate in the hotel, then returning to his room to ring Howard he poured a large whisky and sat on the bed. Knowing that Trella had the mental capacity to detect open phone lines, what he didn't know was the outer limit of his detection powers. His first thought was to use the hotel phone, but then it occurred to him it might be safer to use his cell phone.

'Howard,' said Christian as soon as he'd answered, 'it's Christian, listen, these bastards have telepathic powers, he knew I'd phoned you this afternoon!'

'Yeah, I had a similar experience today, we've got a guy called Portha, he's out of the office now, but I'll bet he'll know I've been on the phone when he gets back!'

'The only thing they can't tell,' replied Christian, 'is who you've been talking to! We'll have to think of a way of communicating they can't detect.'

'That'll be difficult,' replied Howard, 'it appears their telepathy encompasses all high frequency for some distance, listen, he's on his way back I'll have to go!' The line went dead, so turning on the TV for a little entertainment Christian watched a BBC 2 programme about WW2, including the airforce and the army, the navy used Morse code to communicate from ship to shore. If nothing else Christian was a thinking man, and it suddenly occurred to him they might not be able to detect Morse! Running down to the lobby he asked the receptionist for the nearest library.

'I'm sorry sir they'll be closed now!' replied the

receptionist as Christian absentmindedly looked at his watch.

‘Yes, of course, I forgot the time.’ said Christian wearing the vacant expression of preoccupation. Seeing his disappointment the concierge asked if there was anything he could do.

‘I desperately need to get hold of the Morse code.’ said Christian with urgency.

‘You hang on right there sir, and I’ll be back in a few minutes.’ said the concierge, then disappeared into the inner sanctum of the hotel, and one minute later returned brandishing a little red book.

‘There you are sir,’ said the old man, ‘you can borrow this, it’s the one I used in the navy.’

‘Don’t worry, I will look after it, and I promise you’ll have it back tonight.’ Returning to the reception desk Christian asked the young lady if she would mind photocopying all the code pages. The copier clicked and whirred as he waited, then a few minutes later she returned with his copies, so thanking her he returned to his room. Opening his laptop he went to Outlook Express and brought up Howard’s private email. Clicking on Create Mail he typed in the body: <.... _ -.- - - - .- .-. .-.-...
... . -.. - > then clicking send, he watched it disappear from his outbox. Checking the time it was half past nine, and quickly calculating it would be half past four over in the US Christian sat wondering how long it would be before Howard would be able to reply; he knew it wouldn’t be soon. How wrong can one man be? New Mail sounded, and opening up Outlook Express he watched the message download. Reaching for his Morse code he

deciphered the message: <-.--> yes! Now all he had to do was see if it passed the Trella test in the morning! Sending a reply he entered: <.--- .- .. - ..--- -.-. ..-. .-. --- -- -- .> then clicked send.

At nine precisely the next morning Christian arrived at Downing Street, and shot Trella for taking his home without so much as a thank you, and mentally watched the bullet pierce his skull! As he approached the railings he heard Tom call out from behind.

‘Good morning Christian,’ he said flatly, ‘how did you get on last night?’

‘Ok thanks Tom,’ replied Christian, ‘I stayed at The Aarden, and I’ll tell you something else later when that creep isn’t around.’ Opening the front door the replacement constable allowed them in.

‘You haven’t asked for ID, aren’t you afraid we’ll shoot you?’ quipped Christian walking passed. The constable laughed at Christian’ ironic humour. Walking straight to the Cabinet room with Tom in tow, he opened the doors to find a full cabinet assembled around the table!

‘Christ! You all shit the bed?’ asked Christian in his usual manner.

‘Good morning Christian.’ said Trella, ‘I trust you slept well last night.’

‘Very well actually,’ replied Christian tersely, ‘I dreamt I was stabbing you to death!’

‘Stabbing?’ asked Trella.

‘Oh Christ here we go again!’ replied Christian, ‘it’s just a little joke we have here on Earth.’

‘Oh I see.’ Holy cow thought Christian, three syllables!

‘If you will take your seat please Christian, and you Tom. We must make progress today. I noticed your line was open again last night Christian... twice, but there were no messages.’

‘Nothing escapes you does it,’ replied Christian ironically, ‘but to put you straight, the first call was to my good lady again, and the second was when I went online to buy something, then changed my mind. Does that answer your question?’ Smiling thinly Trella muttered something then proceeded with his agenda. Knowing he was no longer in charge Christian lost interest in the proceedings very quickly and deliberately, especially as everything was now designed to subjugate the nations of Earth, and grinning inwardly Christian realised thankfully – that Trella hadn’t detected the Morse code!

‘Christian – *you are not paying attention!*’ said Trella suddenly.

‘Oh, what a naughty boy, what are you going to do, take my toys away?’ The room fell silent as Trella paled significantly. Without warning a gun appeared in his hand.

‘You will pay attention, how will you learn to be free if you don’t?’

‘We were free before you got here you bastard,’ replied Christian, placing himself in danger, ‘we didn’t ask you come and free us!’ Walking ‘round the table he placed the gun at Christian’s temple and glared at him for a long and unnerving time.

‘You *will* learn!’ said Trella menacingly, and for the first time Christian remained silent. Not because he was afraid of Trella, but in this instant he thought discretion was the better part of valour, and didn’t

want to arouse Trella's suspicion more than necessary.

'I understand,' replied Christian flatly. Walking back to the head of the table Trella continued. It was a long day, and throughout Christian remained the model pupil, but the look of mild annoyance on Trella's face as six o'clock struck, even he hadn't failed to hear the sighs of relief!

MORE MORSE

Back in his room Christian quickly put together a message to all his European counterparts, and did a multiple mailing in Morse code as a test to see if Trella picked up on it. The message read that they shouldn't give up, and that everyone should communicate using Morse from here on in. By doing this they would be able to effect a way of ridding themselves of these insurgents for good. During the remainder of the evening he received many replies, and nearly all European countries were in favour of retaliation. Slumber came quickly that night, for the single reason that he had at least got something tangible going, and his last thought before dropping off was; these aliens will not rule our world! Thursday morning he felt a surge of rebellion come on - again, so switching his alarm off he turned over and went back to sleep. It was after ten thirty when he finally walked into number ten to face a fuming Trella!

'I know what you're going to say,' said Christian quickly before he could open his mouth, 'I overslept, it happens sometimes!'

'For a moment there I thought you had planned and executed an escape.' replied Trella placidly. This took Christian completely by surprise, and thought he would get another dose of Trella's gun, or worse! 'Take your seat Christian, I'll quickly update you on what we've achieved.' Looking quizzically at him for a second Christian decided it was prudent to keep his mouth shut, for now, and promptly sat down. It suddenly occurred to him he hadn't

switched off his mobile, so reaching into his pocket he grabbed his handkerchief, and wrapping it 'round his phone, he pulled it from his pocket and pretended to blow his nose. Returning the cloth to his pocket he pressed the off button, then almost panicked as he thought the shutting down jingle might sound, then thankfully remembered he'd switched it to run silent. Another long day, and once more Big Ben struck what had now become their favourite hour. As they left the building Tom tackled Christian as to what was happening, and explaining briefly Christian told him of the network he'd set up across the globe. At the gate Christian said goodbye to Tom and hailed a taxi. Then, as an afterthought waved it away, and decided he'd walk the five minutes to Bridge Street and pay a long overdue visit to Café Nero. Remembering the food there was more than excellent his palette watered as he thought of the Italian wrap he'd had on his last visit. Having eaten he felt better for it, and many people came and wished him well for the future. The human race were a good bunch as far as he was concerned, and he felt good that support was coming from all quarters. Back in his room he thought about how they would finally defeat the aliens, then it hit him like a brick – *in order to launch a missile at it they would somehow have to make sure that mother ship returned!* There was no way he could see of doing that without using insurgency, and that could only mean one thing - people getting killed! His dilemma was massive, and as far as he could see there was no way 'round the problem! However, in every fight for freedom there were casualties, and no

matter which direction his thinking took him, he always came back to the same conclusion – freedom meant death! Although he abhorred the idea he was drawn inexorably towards the inevitability of war!

At three ten in the morning he was still going over the situation in his mind, and realised because of these insurgents many people would lose their lives; and could mean he'd even lose his own! Well... so be it! The radio alarm went off at six fifteen, and for five minutes he listened to the inane babbling of an early morning DJ, then rapidly tiring of it he showered and dressed. Breakfast in the dining room was a quiet affair, and there was only a handful of people in the dining room, so Christian decided on a full English with toast and tea to follow. The condemned man ate a hearty meal thought Christian, then promptly told himself to shut the f—k up! Returning to his room he sent a Morse message to Howard Dexter, and watched as it disappeared from his outbox. Five minutes later he received a reply that simply read; “We’re ready”! Time to go to work. Another day in the in the alien house thought Christian, and he wasn’t wrong! At lunch time one thing Christian realised was that Trella, and presumably his race, were inherently trusting, since Christian had decided to become a model pupil he’d accepted it without question. Outside of escape it appeared they had no concept of subversion, cunning, or deceit, and this thought Christian would be advantageous to the human race! ‘I have to leave,’ said Trella suddenly on his return from lunch, ‘there has been a disturbance in Japan, I trust you will all carry on with the good work?’ As

everyone nodded their agreement he left to assist his “brothers”. As soon as he was gone Christian opened his laptop and sent a message to Howard Dexter. < Get ready – there is a disturbance in Japan >. After which he addressed the cabinet regarding their willingness to participate in an uprising. To a man they readily agreed, except for one – Tom Helman!

‘Tom... *engage your brain!*’ shouted Christian angrily, the last thing he needed now was dissention, ‘why Tom? Why would you want to live under their thumb? *It just doesn’t make sense!*’

‘Look Christian,’ replied Tom, attempting to sound confident, ‘we have to ask ourselves, is life really that bad with these people? They haven’t done me any harm!’

‘Tom – *bollocks!*’ replied Christian vehemently, ‘this is just the beginning Tom, they will control us more and more as time goes by, and I need to know *everyone* understands the meaning of the word solidarity!’

‘I ask you again – are we as one?’ This time Christian breathed a sigh of relief as Tom raised a half-hearted hand with the others.

‘He’s back!’ came a whisper from the door. A rustle of papers went around the table as they worked industriously at creating the brave new world, all for Trella’s benefit - not theirs!

‘I see you are working well.’ said Trella entering the room, ‘that is good. I have to report that the disturbance in Japan has been quashed, an insurgent thought he would upset the new order.’

‘Well we can’t have that can we?’ came Christian’s

terse comment, after which Trella shot him another glance.

‘Christian – are you trying to undermine my office?’ asked Trella, having walked to the head of the table. ‘Who me?’ said Christian innocently. ‘As if I would! I’m just having a bit of fun.’

‘Fun?’

‘Oh shit!’

WE SHALL NOT

By lunchtime their day was much the same as the day before thought Christian, and the day before that, and it was becoming *boring!* With Trella in charge he felt things were out of his control, and he didn't like it one little bit. It will be great when things come to a head thought Christian, and they finally rid themselves of these insidious placid invaders that pervaded their world. The laborious process that Trella used to meticulously comb and analyse the departmental accounts was now beginning to tell on them, and six o'clock couldn't come soon enough! Back at the Aarden that evening Christian emailed Howard, and his message this time was one he'd been itching to send for a long time. The text as usual in Morse code read:

<Hi Howard,

According to our various time zones we will have to attack on a synchronized basis, I have discovered that the Caucasians telepathic power is stronger when communicating with each other, especially over long distances. Please forward this message on, I will wait one week to ensure that everyone globally has received the message. Then we will synchronize our attack.>

Christian.

Not having seen them for six weeks, that Friday Christian decided he'd pay a visit to his wife and children, and thought a few days break before the uprising would be nice. One thing he had considered was that if things got out of hand, and he lost his life, he would never see them again, nor they him!

At first thinking he would just get in the car and go he considered the implications of that action, then changing his mind decided it more prudent to let Trella know he was going.

‘And how long will you be?’ asked Trella in his usual monotone.

‘Four days, I’ll be back on Wednesday,’ answered Christian truthfully.

‘As long as you don’t try to escape I don’t see any harm. If you attempt an escape *I will* find you.’ said Trella, and emphasised that Christian would be foolish to even think about it!

‘I thought you’d have known me better than that by now!’ said Christian feeling vexed at Trella’s mistrust, then looking at him briefly Trella walked away. Making sure they said goodnight to Trella on their way out, Christian packed his case and left the building with Tom as Big Ben struck six. It wasn’t that they wished him a salutation, but thought it might allay any suspicions he might have, particularly as Trella hadn’t tackled Christian on the frequency of calls from his laptop recently. Back at the hotel Christian packed some clothes in his case, then grabbing his laptop left for the west country.

By half past seven he saw the sign he’d been longing for since leaving Downing Street, Bristol 28 miles. Watching that incessant ribbon of tarmac for an hour and half he ready to get out from behind the wheel. Finally seeing the sign for Cribb’s Causeway, he flicked the indicator left and got into the lane for the lights at the underpass. Down the dual carriageway he went to ‘round the mini-roundabout; he was almost there. Then stopping

suddenly in Crow Lane he went into the shops for a bunch of flowers for his lovely Marie, not having seen her for ages he thought it might cheer her up. Rounding the bend at Avon Way he was in Halden Road at last! Killing the engine he grabbed his case and the flowers, and ran to the house. The first thing he heard was the familiar sound of the lawn mower, Marie was cutting the grass! Walking down the side of the house he opened the gate and saw her for the first time in six weeks, and he had to admit, she was a lovely sight to see!

'Christian!' she cried, as the motor died away.

'Hello Marie,' said Christian grinning like Cheshire cat, '*you* are a sight for sore eyes! These are for you.'

'Oh thankyou darlin', they're lovely... let me put them in a vase. How was your trip back?'

'Oh, you know, ribbon of tarmac, that sort of thing. How about we go down the Billy tonight and have few drinks?'

'Yes, ok, that'll be nice, you can meet up with some old friends, yes?' said Marie, her face had come alive now Christian was home.

'Where's Josie?' asked Christian, wondering where his daughter was.

'She's in town with some friends at the moment,' replied Marie, she'll probably go out clubbing tonight.'

'Oh to be young again!' said Christian grinning as he remembered his youth. 'How about Shane, have you heard from him?'

'He was here yesterday,' replied Marie, 'but he might be over again on Monday.'

‘I hope so, I’d like to see him before I go back.’ said Christian hopefully.

Being a Friday it was crowded as usual as they walked through the door of the King Billy, so ordering drinks for himself and Marie they sat down to enjoy the friendly atmosphere of their local. Many of their friends came over to say hello, but most asked only two questions, how are things going in the capitol, and when will be rid of the f----’ aliens? Answering as best he could he told them from this point on they wouldn’t have to wait long for salvation. One of their friends who’d been drinking most of the day started singing “We shall not, we shall not be moved,” and before they knew it everyone was singing at the tops of their voices. During the oration Christian thought quietly there was no fear of him having got it wrong, there was insurrection in the air! There had never been a night like this before, everyone was smiling and cheerful, a people united in the face of adversity with the true British air of defiance towards *any* invaders. As Christian and Marie left the pub everyone slapped him on the back, and wished him luck in his quest for freedom. Walking back up the hill they talked about the pending fracas, and what it would mean when they had won their freedom, and also what it would mean if they lost! Opening the door Marie walked in and opened a bottle of wine, then pouring two glasses handed one to Christian, then sat on the settee.

‘What if you get killed Christian?’ asked Marie; scared she might never see him again.

‘I’d be lying if I told you it wasn’t an option, but

there is also a good chance I won't,' replied Christian honestly, 'I can't' say much now, but the way we've planned it... if everything goes smoothly there shouldn't be any blood spilt at all, not ours anyway.'

'But what if you do get killed, what do I do Christian,' said Marie tearfully, 'I don't want you to die!'

'Oh look love,' replied Christian putting his arm around her shoulder, 'I don't plan on getting killed, I've got too much to live for! Anyhow, think of the insurance money, five hundred thousand pounds! You could cruise the Caribbean, fly to Mauritius, or take a trip on an alien craft...' That did it, Marie was laughing again, and hearing her laughter was music to his ears. Saturday night saw them dancing at their local club, as they both loved getting on the floor to lose a few pounds, well Christian did! Getting home at one o'clock they had a couple of glasses of wine as they watched a late-night movie.

'It's a long time since we've done this.' said Christian thoughtfully.

'Yes, it was great,' replied Marie, 'I really enjoyed myself tonight.'

'Me too,' replied Christian, 'I wonder when we'll do it again?' No sooner had he uttered the words than he wished he'd bitten his tongue. Breaking down Marie cried for nearly five minutes before he'd managed to console her.

On Tuesday morning Christian packed his bag and put it in the boot of the car, then checking his watch the time was eleven o'clock, and knowing he had to return realised the last few days had spoiled

him, and now it was time for him to leave again he wanted more.

‘Marie!’ he called up the stairs, ‘I’ve got to go now sweetheart, I want to be in the hotel before two o’clock, I’ve got to do some emails.’

‘Be careful Christian... I love you,’ said Marie tearfully running down stairs, ‘when will you be home again?’

‘I’m not really sure right now love,’ replied Christian flatly, ‘and... I love you too, anyhow, if things go well I should be home again in a couple of weeks, oh, tell Shane I’m sorry I missed him, pity he had to work.’ The engine fired up, and the big Scaglietti rumbled on tick over as only a Ferrari can, as the driver’s window slid down Christian stuck his head through the window and kissed Marie hard on the lips.

‘I love you!’ said Christian then reversed out of the driveway.

‘I love you too!’ shouted Marie as the big Ferrari roared off. Heading east on the M4 Christian suddenly wished he was heading west, and had serious doubts about going back, and at junction 17 almost turned around! How could he? Everyone was relying on him to free them from the absurdity of the Caucasians, and apart from that, if he caved in what would happen to the global effort? Although he knew it wouldn’t collapse, he knew his severance from the movement would seriously delay it, but the emotional wrench of leaving Marie was almost more than he could bear!

Driving across the Chiswick flyover the Ferrari had easily soaked up the miles, and suddenly it felt

like he'd never been away.

D DAY

Satisfied that everything was as ready as it could be Christian went to the bar, and thinking about the coming twenty four hours a few double whiskies would help quell his nerves for tonight. Striking up a conversation with others in the bar confirmed Christian's belief, that the Caucasians belief in their own superiority and invincibility had indeed made them very lax. People were talking freely about their dislike of the occupation, but no one had been punished for talking against the regime! This gave him tremendous heart for the coming coup, and everyone he met wished him well. Although his confidence was at an all-time high he still had concerns that there was only one Caucasian "Overlord" for each country, and began to think he had missed something? Did they know something he didn't? Returning to his room he knew at this stage it was too late for speculation, besides, what happened place tomorrow would either succeed or fail according to how well they had planned it. Making one last phone call he showered and got in to bed. At five thirty he washed and dressed and left the hotel, and driving to Tower Bridge he crossed the river then took a right onto Jamaica Road. Seeing Lower Road he turned right and headed down to find an address he'd been given, to see a man about a dog! Scawen Road, this was it, turning right he looked for number twenty six. It was a house that had been done up in recent times, and had full double glazing and replacement doors, so parking opposite Christian killed the engine, but

knowing he had to be there at six fifteen he was ten minutes early. Killing ten minutes he watched the house, other than the curtains rustling a couple of times nothing untoward happened and considered it safe. Locking the car he crossed over and walked up the road, and thirty seconds later knocked on the door.

‘Christian?’ asked a voice from behind the door.

‘Yes.’

‘Come in mate,’ said the voice as the door opened. Walking in he found a well kept house with pristine décor.

‘Tea, or would you prefer something stronger?’ said the voice.

‘Tea will be fine, something stronger is too early for me.’ replied Christian grinning.

‘I’m Mike by the way,’ he said, finally introducing himself, ‘I’ll be right back.’ Returning a few minutes later with two steaming mugs of tea he placed one on the occasional table and handed one to Christian.

‘So, you’re looking for a Beretta 84 Cheetah - yeah?’

‘Have you got it?’ asked Christian, knowing he’d been told it would be ready to collect.

‘Yeah, I’ve got it.’ said Mike, much to Christian’s relief.

‘I want a shoulder holster as well,’ added Christian.

‘They come together when you buy from me.’ replied Mike grinning broadly.

‘How much?’ asked Christian, ‘you’re not gonna rob me are you?’

‘Three hundred, no questions asked.’ Pulling out his

wallet Christian counted three hundred in twenty pound notes. Picking up the wedge Mike counted it again, and noting the look on Christian's face he finished counting and placed it back on the table.

'You can't be too careful can you?' said Mike grinning again, 'not that I'm saying you would do me, but it's easy to make a mistake.'

'That's fine,' replied Christian, 'I'd have done the same.' Picking up the gun and holster from the table he put them in his case; they shook hands.

'Good luck!' said Mike, as Christian left to return to Westminster. Back at Downing Street Christian went straight to the Cabinet room, and knowing he was early opened a file and pretended to read up on it. A few minutes later Trella walked in, and seeing Christian with the open file put a happy look on his face.

'I'm pleased with your progress Christian,' he said ingratiatingly, and Christian thought he saw the trace of another smile, 'you have created a precedent for the others... keep it up!'

'Thankyou Trella,' replied Christian lying through his teeth, 'that is nice to know.' Walking in with a few others Tom quietly took his seat, and all cabinet members present noticed Trella's not-so-covert move as he surreptitiously looked at his watch. Placing his papers on the table Christian winked at Tom, then told Trella they were going to make coffee for everyone. Following him from the room Christian whispered to Tom of the pending coup at noon.

'Make sure the others know Tom,' whispered Christian as they returned to the Cabinet room.

Feigning normality as best he could Christian relayed his weekend experience to Tom as he carried tray to the cabinet room, and realising Tom was nervous as Hell, Christian was mildly amused by the sound of eleven rattling cups. The morning dragged slowly by, and Christian swore the clock was ticking slower than usual just to annoy him, after what seemed like half an hour he looked at the clock to find only five minutes had passed! Eleven o'clock saw another coffee break, and Christian realised it would be less than an hour 'til he finally despatched Trella. The cabinet members went about their daily business as usual, but as twelve o'clock approached infrequent and furtive glances were exchanged, as all those present wondered what was going to happen, and how exactly Christian would despatch Trella! At five to Twelve Christian asked Trella if he would mind fetching some accounts for the Education Committee, and thankfully he agreed. As he left the room Christian pulled a three foot length of cord from his jacket pocket, and running silently across the room threw it over Trella's head, then yanking it swiftly back he twisted it tightly, and watched as Trella gagged for breath. It wasn't as hard a job as Christian had first thought, and not being a strong person his breath rasped as he fought for his precious life! His hands and feet flailed wildly as his hands fought to tear the rope from his neck, but Christian held his grip, and within thirty seconds Trella was losing his fight to survive. His eyes bulged, and being severely swollen his tongue now filled his mouth, as every cabinet member watched in horror at the spectacle of Trella's death

throes; his body finally went limp.

'That's enough Christian,' said Tom suddenly, 'he's dead, let him go!'

'I'll decide when he's dead!' replied Christian calmly. 'I saw someone lose their life once because they let go too soon, his so-called victim had feigned unconsciousness, then suddenly turning he thrust a knife deep into his heart!' Finally relinquishing his hold on the cord Christian was satisfied that Trella was dead, and letting his body slump to the floor he quickly pulled the Beretta from his pocket.

'Shit Christian,' said Tom suddenly, 'what in Hell's name are you doing?'

'This isn't a tea party Tom,' replied Christian brusquely, 'if you don't like it go to another room!' It was then they heard the scream, it wasn't in the room, or even in the building, it appeared to come from outside. It was then Christian realised their telepathy had joined them in Trella's death, and the scream had been heard around the world. It was then Christian *knew* the coup had been successful.

'Christ Christian, where did you learn to do that?' asked Tom with bulging eyes.

'There's something you don't know about me,' said Christian flatly, 'I'm not who you think I am.'

'Well go on.' said Tom after short a silence.

'I spent some time in the SAS,' replied Christian hesitantly, 'some people have called me a killing machine!'

'Well, you live and f----n' learn!' replied Tom looking flabbergasted.

Opening his laptop he coolly sent a message to Howard as if he'd just opened a tin of sardines.

<Howard - success here - are things ok your end?>
Regards, Christian. A few minutes later his answer arrived, and it was affirmative! They had won! Picking up the phone Christian dialled the Pentagon hotline.

‘Howard?’ shouted Christian eagerly.

‘Yeah, how are you Christian? It looks like we’ve done it!’ replied Howard happily.

‘Well almost,’ said Christian with caution, ‘our next task is to get every single missile aimed skyward in readiness for the return of the mother ship!’

‘Yeah,’ replied Howard, ‘we’ve already done that, we’re using Homers to be on the safe side, so let the bastards come - *we’re ready for them!*’

‘Aliens al fresco?’ joked Christian, and forced a laughed from Howard, and knowing Christian was the sort of guy who got things done with a minimum of fuss he’d readily taken to him.

They didn’t have to wait long, only forty eight hours had passed before Sir Patrick rang and notified Christian of their presence. All countries were on red alert, watching and waiting for the first sign of hostility, but their wait went on relentlessly, and after four days the Caucasians still hadn’t shown their hand. Having spoken with Howard, Christian and he agreed they were applying psychological pressure, and the Caucasians were waiting for them to crack! Suspecting a night attack the military in all countries took ‘round the clock shifts; there was no attack.

‘What d’you think Howard, should we nuke ‘em now?’ asked Christian, thinking they should take the offensive.

‘Well... sitting up there doing nothing they’re sitting ducks, I agree Christian - *let’s nuke ‘em!*’

‘Ok,’ said Christian finally, ‘if you set it up on the Internet, we can co-ordinate our attack.’

‘It’s almost ready as far as I know Christian, hang on,’ Howard’s phone went quiet for a few minutes, ‘yeah... ok, that’s it Christian, we’re up and running. We’ll email the web address to everyone concerned, and when the time is right - *BOOM! No more aliens!*’

‘Sounds good to me!’ replied Christian happily. Slamming down the receiver he turned to his laptop, and clicking “Receive” waited for his emails to download. Thinking the first highlighted email was his he opened it up to see someone had been quick off the mark. <Get your alien suits here! Complete with gun and space helmet! *ONLY \$29.95! ORDER NOW TO AVOID DISAPPONTMENT!*> Laughing loudly Christian deleted it, then searched for his email. Seeing Howard’s name with a sigh of relief he opened it saw the address, then doing a cut and paste he entered it in his browser and clicked Go; then waited.

To all Leaders and Chiefs of Staff:

The attack will begin at 12 noon GMT today.

Our prime target - the Mother ship - set your coordinates accordingly.

The countdown will be monitored from Huston Texas, make sure you have the page open!

With God on our side we can rid ourselves of this insidious occupation. Good luck to everyone, everywhere.

Howard Dexter.

Checking his watch Christian knew they only had two hours and fifty minutes to wait, and this would be the longest wait of his entire life. Having checked and double checked everything he knew nothing would go wrong his end, his planning as usual had been meticulous. The smell of brewing coffee pervaded his nostrils, and off he went to pour a cup, being his favourite non-alcoholic beverage it was something he just couldn't resist! One more check to see if everything all right, and an hour and forty minutes later he was back at the head of the table, to address the Cabinet as to what would happen at twelve o'clock.

'We have just one hour and ten minutes left before we will know if we have been successful in expelling the aliens from our planet, in the meantime I suggest we carry on working for the next forty minutes. By that time it'll be closer to twelve, then... we'll get ready to witness our salvation.' Having finished speaking Christian sat to answer questions from the Cabinet.

'Christian - have you thought what will happen to us if this operation goes awry?'

'Yes... but we can't let that stop us now,' replied Christian assertively, 'I'll be honest with you, if things do wrong we'll be in very deep shite!'

'Are you prepared to answer for that if it happens?' asked John Turley, Minister for Education.

'I don't see as I'll have much choice.' answered Christian matter-of-fact.

'You appear to have an almost cavalier approach to all this Christian, is it just something that is you... or don't you really care at all!' asked the Minister

for Home Affairs smoothly.

'I take exception to that,' replied Christian quickly, 'I *do* care, and what's more, I'm the one whose done it all...and liaised with the other nations to set it all up - *and you ask me I f---n' care!*' The minister shut his mouth. Questions came and went, and most were answered to the best of Christian's ability, but a glance at his watch told him it was eleven twenty five.

'We'll close this meeting now,' suggested Christian, 'I think we should take our places for the fireworks, it's going to be quite a spectacle!'

Offices, factories, shops and supermarkets alike shut down, as workers left to watch the downfall of the aliens. Lighters and matches were applied to cigarettes, others bought takeaways or just coffee-to-go, and within minutes the streets looked as if a protest march was underway. For the first time ever there would be a coordinated attack by the combined world's military against a common foe. It was as if the whole world was holding its breath, but apart from the continuous low level chatter, there was a grave silence among the people of the world. Intercontinental ballistic missiles around the globe had been pointed skyward, and awaited their instruction to destroy an enemy that hovered two hundred miles above the Earth. The atmosphere was tense, and as the minutes ticked by everyone the knot tightening their solar plexus. As soon as the aliens attacked it would be the task of the military to retaliate, but when would that be? As time went by the tension grew, and after an hour people began talking more volubly as they do in anticlimactic

situations. Even Christian took to talking, and taking a periodic glance at the laptop checked for any sign of hostility.

‘Alien launch!’ Suddenly Christian was alert, and hearing the announcement those in the near vicinity passed the word around, proving the grapevine was still a useful tool! As everyone looked skyward they watched almost two hundred shuttle craft disperse from the mother ship, then fanning out they traversed the world as they headed for their strategic targets. Launching their nuclear retaliation the sky was suddenly full of missiles. It was cataclysmic, as the alien shuttles approached the upper atmosphere the missiles made contact, the sky lit up, and the Sun appeared to dim with the blinding flashes of one missile after another as it made contact with its alien target! The situation was surreal, and was highlighted by the fact that it was taking place outside the atmosphere, and watching repetitive nuclear explosions in silence made it seem somewhat eerie. After the last of the shuttles had been destroyed the residual silence somehow deepened. Enveloping the Earth a light so bright it made the Sun appear insignificant was preceded by a silence that preceded doom. For one full minute the planet glowed like a giant light bulb, then finished as suddenly as it had started. Black and charred the Earth resembled a lump of Coalite.

‘Well that appears to be the end of Earth,’ said Placeo, ‘where next?’

‘Preferably a planet where there are no Christian Turners!’ replied Trella.

‘Aaah!’ returned Placeo in retrospect, ‘perhaps you

will learn a lesson from this, and remember, you now only have eight lives left, wouldn't you agree Tom Helman?'

THE END

Mods

FLIGHT TO ORESEA

'*Earwigs!*' declared Tom Torrance laughing as he walked into Klein's office. Looking up briefly Klein waved him into a seat, and for several more minutes carried on writing his report, then finally looking up stared unerringly at Tom.

'*Yes - earwigs!* You think it's funny eh... well you won't laugh when you see them!'

'Oh come on Franz it can't be that bad - you know I've been sent up to oversee this whole operation, and the bosses are saying if you can't cut it they're gonna replace you!'

'Let them,' replied Klein seriously, 'I wish my successor all the *very best of luck!*'

'Franz... how long have we known each other, it's gotta be ten years at least - and in that time have I ever lied to you?'

'More to the point Tom,' replied Franz carefully, '*have I ever lied to you?*'

'This is getting political,' countered Tom, '*and* it doesn't answer my question.'

'You're right... it doesn't,' replied Franz immediately, 'but what are you going to do about this problem, tell me?'

'What sort of a question is that?' asked Tom, playing for time.

'A straight one - so?' replied Franz. Silence ensued for a moment while Tom considered his answer.

'Well Franz,' began Tom cautiously, 'why can't we swat them like we do on Earth?'

‘You haven’t seen them yet?’ asked Franz angrily.

‘You know I haven’t!’ protested Tom.

‘Well,’ countered Franz instantly, ‘these bastards are over twelve inches long, and they’re identical in every way to their Earth-bound counterparts except for one thing...’

‘*And?*’ said Tom growing impatient.

‘Their pincers are at the front - *not the rear!*’

Remaining silent for several minutes Tom’s expression paled, ‘That’s not all,’ added Franz dramatically, ‘unlike their distant cousins back on Earth, these little fuckers can also fly - in swarms!’

‘Shit!’ replied Tom gravely.

‘Now perhaps you can see what we’re up against here.’ said Franz conclusively. Remaining silent for a few minutes Tom looked at Franz as if trying to exploit a weakness.

‘So obviously the lasers don’t work on them,’ he said suddenly, ‘and we’re tied to contract already... it doesn’t look rosy!’

‘Look Tom... right now I’m not concerned about contracts, I’ve got men here, married with families - *and I’m not sending one man out there until I get something done about these - things!*’

‘*Ok* - I hear what you’re saying Franz... Ok, there is a new weapon being tested - in it’s latter stages I think, a sound gun that will destroy anything. I’ll fly back to Earth and tell them we need as many of them as possible - *preferably yesterday!*’

‘Now you’re talking Tom!’

‘If they argue the toss with you, tell them... these little bastards can sever a man’s limb with one closure of their pincers!’

‘Shit! Yes ok, but now that we can grow new limbs is that so much of problem?’

‘F--k you Tom,’ replied Franz angrily, ‘you sound just like them! These little f----s can take a man’s head off!’

‘Yeah right - sorry Franz... wrong choice of words,’ said Tom apologetically, ‘look I’ll get going straight away, the sooner I get back the sooner we can get it sorted out.’

‘Before you go Tom,’ said Franz looking through his office window, ‘our geologist Kyle Grainger has just walked in.’ Turning to look Tom couldn’t see him straight away.

‘Over there by the door, with the crutches!’ said Franz pointing him out.

‘What about him?’ asked Tom naively.

‘He’s the result of the last Earwig attack - as you can see he lost his leg just below the knee!’

‘Why hasn’t he grown another limb?’

‘That’s the other thing about these gits - they are capable of modifying our genes so that new limb growth is inhibited! My guess is that it’s their way of slowing us down... to increase our vulnerability - now d’you see what I mean!’

‘Clever little bastards!’

‘You said it!’ replied Franz in conclusion rising from his chair. Risking an attack Franz morphed the blinds to show Tom the seriousness of the problem. Within seconds several earwigs had landed on the plexidome. Seeing Tom and Franz in the blister beneath them their feet clattered as they hacked away in an effort to gain entry. Then suddenly the sky darkened as hoards of them flew straight at the

dome with one purpose - to gain entry!

‘Why haven’t the others gone with them?’ he asked noticing a group of them fly away.

‘They’re staying to continue the attack, while the others fly away to research a better way of breaking the dome, but they’ll be back - you can bet on that!’ replied Franz with certainty, as they watched the sickening hoard relentlessly attack the dome, in less than ten minutes later the other group return to the grizzly scene! Landing on the concrete apron at the base of the dome Tom looked on in disbelief.

‘Shit! I don’t believe it, they’re...’

‘Yeah, that’s the other thing - they can metamorphosise any part of their body!’ cut in Franz with a sneer. Looking through the plexiglass again Tom could see that in the ten minutes since they’d left they had metamorphosised their pincers into conical drill-like entity. On their return several of the group had landed on the dome, while the remainder went for the concrete apron, and Tom could see plainly that the group as a whole were attempting to gain entry through both! The first group on the plexidome were having little or no success, but the others on the apron were making what Franz termed a worrying amount of progress! Dust and chippings from the apron flew in all directions, and visibly shaken Tom looked at Franz in horror, then hurriedly shut the blind.

‘At that rate they’ll be through that apron in less than ten weeks!’ said Franz with emphasis.

‘Christ! I uh... I don’t know what to say Franz, I’m sorry I doubted you - *that* is fuckin’ hideous!’ replied Tom.

‘They’re totally persistent, they just don’t stop, so get those sound guns here as soon as - ok Tom?’ said Franz heatedly. ‘We gotta have them - *at any cost! Good luck!*’ Running to the Hyperport Tom already knew he would have a tough time. How would he convince the bosses of the dangers faced by their workers on this God-forsaken planet, and knew he’d have to get them on his side well within two weeks - or there would be no point!

Once in the cabin he relaxed in the plush velvet aircushion, then taking a magazine and a report file from his briefcase he placed the magazine on the seat beside him, and opened the file to write his report. His thoughts poured through the pen and onto the Velumpage, as his subconscious returned to the ore mine, and Franz’ predicament. How could he make his report convincing enough to persuade the bosses to do something - *and do it now!*

The journey back was fraught, and their craft was continually buffeted by stellar matter being drawn across their flight path by nearby black holes. By the time they’d reached Earth he was ready to crash, but unfortunately having landed right in the middle of the working day, he knew he’d have to go straight to HQ to request an emergency meeting with his superiors. No rest for the wicked he thought taking an aircab to his place of work. Reception had been particularly difficult in giving him an appointment for that day, and having complained bitterly about his lack of forward communication, they asked why he hadn’t sent a gram on the black-matter frequency. His reply came in the form of a counter question; if they’d been in his shoes what would they have done,

and apart from that his report had already been sent via that route! Enough said, predictably they had suddenly lost their collective voice, and went about the business of getting him his appointment. Entering the hallowed halls of the bosses at two thirty he got a frosty reception; word of his persistence had obviously preceded him! Standing somewhat ceremoniously the Mandir asked what Tom had found so urgent that it couldn't wait until the end of the week.

'I think once you've heard what I have to say, you will understand fully why I had to see you today,' said Tom with deliberate emphasis, 'also, what it means to your mining operation on Oresea - and *how* it could probably bring the whole operation to a halt!' There was a stunned silence for a few moments, then rising to his full height the Mandir looked sternly at Tom.

'Well in that case you'd better let us in on it now - and it better be good!'

'Oh believe me - it is - *good!*' replied Tom testily, and wasn't going to be out-done by his boss's attempt at intimidation. 'As such I have no progress report to give you... but what I have got is something I think you should waste no time in tackling. On Oresea there is a species of Earwig that is capable of flying incredible distances, not only -' Their derisive laughter sickened him as they cajoled and pointed at him in their moment of mirth, then after their initial merriment had died away Tom continued, 'as I was saying, they are capable of flying, but that is not all... there is more - and worse - to come. These creatures are also capable of metamorphosis, and

can easily alter genetic material in a very short space of time, not only that but they can also alter human genes!' Now listening intently Tom didn't see one smirk let alone a broad grin. Unhindered Tom continued his narration, and told of the events he'd witnessed the previous day on Oresea, but by the time he'd finished there were some very sombre expressions in that board room!

'I don't believe a word of this,' declared Mellor Stanck the marketing director, 'for some reason I think you're stalling for time... I don't know why as yet - but I'll find out!'

'What possible reason would I have for stalling this project Mellor,' challenged Tom, 'you seem to forget, that I, like most of you have a vested interest in this project!'

'True,' came Mellor's retort, 'but one thing we haven't forgotten is that Franz Klein is a very good friend of yours - am I right?'

'So?' replied Tom stretching his arms to full length, 'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Oh come on Tom, surely you can work that one out for yourself?' said Mellor sarcastically, 'if Franz is behind schedule, this is a bloody good way of buying him some time - wouldn't you agree?'

'You sad bastard,' said Tom, and slowly beginning to lose his cool, 'you think I'd chance losing my own money to cover up for someone else's mistakes... God, I really don't believe what I'm hearing!'

'I must admit, as an argument it does have a certain amount of street cred,' cut in Phil Hacking the Mandir, 'but we would need proof of that Mellor - I

don't hang people without cast iron proof!

'I don't know why we're arguing the toss when precious time is being wasted,' cut in Tom suddenly, 'and may I mention the *very high* possibility of loss of life?'

'Oh. it's alright for you,' retorted Mellor, 'anything to cover your tracks eh?'

'Ok... I've had enough of this,' replied Tom angrily, 'I've always had the success of this project at the very centre of my thoughts, and if you think - ah, just one momento - which one of you received Franz' report?' No one answered, and hoping someone would get twitchy Tom stayed deliberately silent, but tapping the boardroom table several times with his pencil hadn't produce one single twitch.

'Well someone must have received it!' he challenged them. Still there was no reply, so opening his briefcase Tom produced his phone, and dialling a number he pressed the dark matter transfer button and waited.

'Did you press the DM button then?' asked Mellor derisively.

'Yes I did!' returned Tom testily. 'I'm ringing Franz direct, to find out who received his report on Kyle Grainger.'

'Is all this necessary?'

asked Mellor, suddenly getting jumpy. 'You know what these calls cost the company!' No one however challenged Tom after that, even Phil Hacking seemed happy to let things take their natural course, and every one remained silent while Tom listened intently to Franz on the other end of the line. A few minutes later closing the call Tom looked up with a distinctly worried

expression.

‘It seems gentlemen that the Earwigs have made a lot of progress in gaining entry to the dome, an area approximately three metres by five, and one metre deep, has been taken out of the concrete apron... and Mellor - apparently you received Franz’ report two weeks ago, why did you not distribute a copy among the other board members, it could have been on the agenda for last weeks meeting!’

‘Why indeed Mellor?’ asked Phil Hacking, ‘I would like an answer - *NOW!*’ A feint but distinct dribble ran from the corner of Mellor’s mouth, and it was clear to all that he was guilty of covering up a misdemeanour, one of his very own.

‘I uh... don’t recall g-getting any such report,’ he stuttered, it was clearly a weak attempt at bluffing his way out, ‘it’s all very well T-Tom making accusations, b-but he really should get his f-facts right f-first!’

‘I’m not wasting any more time arguing, it appears we’ve lost a week already’ declared Phil Hacking, ‘Tom - you have my full authority to do what ever is necessary, just get things back on track again! Mellor - I will call the board to vote you off on the grounds of no confidence!’

‘H -hey come on,’ protested Mellor, ‘I think that’s g-goin-’

‘Too far?’ asked Phil with a broad grin, ‘I don’t think so, if I was to exercise the companies full rights I’d have done for fraud!’

‘You’re bluffing Phil,’ challenged Mellor, ‘there’s no way you could get away with that!’

‘No?’ came back Phil, ‘have you read the companies

act section two paragraph 1b, as amended 15th July 2215?’ Mellor fell silent, and knowing he’d been found out there was nothing more he could do or say in his defence. Festering with hate for the man who’d tumbled his little deception he sat face down in shame. A moment of chaos ensued while Tom waited for Phil Hacking, who was frantically trying to obtain the name of the contact person in charge of weapons research at Fusilaser Ltd, then looking up from his screen he reeled it off as Tom recorded it on his audiopad.

‘Ok Mr. Hacking,’ said Tom seriously, ‘I appreciate this, I’ll get going straight away.’

‘Thanks Tom,’ replied the Mandir, ‘oh uh - it’s Phil by the way!’ Nodding his thanks again Tom ran from the boardroom and made straight for the elevator.

Out in the street he hailed an aircab, as it pulled up he jump in and shouted the address at the driver, and told him to get there post-haste. Explaining his reluctance to do so Tom offered to pay his speeding fine should he be unlucky enough to get caught, and sure enough two minutes later a traffic cop sped up behind them and chased them down the road at break-neck speed.

‘I’m gonna have to stop!’ declared the driver with a furrowed brow suddenly seeing his occupation funnel down the drain.

‘No! Keep going - *whatever you do don’t stop!*’ insisted Tom looking out the back window.

‘It’s alright for you,’ replied the driver glancing quickly in his rear view mirror, ‘it’s a hundred dollar fine for every mile an hour you do over the

limit!’

‘Just keep going,’ said Tom, ‘my company will pay the fine - that’s not a problem!’

‘And just who is your company?’ asked the driver looking increasingly worried with every yard he travelled.

‘Kwartex Mining!’

‘Enough said!’ replied the driver with renewed confidence. ‘Let’s go!’ To say his foot went to the floor would be an understatement, as a few seconds later their speed indicated that it had gone through the floor and come up the other side - several times! The frowning cop stayed with them, and behind his visor glowered at the silliest cab driver he’d ever known, boy - would he throw the book at this one! Fifteen minutes later the tyres howled as they pulled up to the security gate at Fusilaser.

‘Tom Finch Kwartex Mining, I need to speak to Barry Coad.’

‘You want to talk with our Bar Coad do you?’ asked the security guard grinning, but Tom wasn’t in the mood for sarcastic remarks about someone’s name, then directing him to the research building the security guard looked distinctly peeved his joke had fallen on deaf ears. Now Tom had the information he needed his concentration returned to the cab driver, who was bleating at the cop to spare his licence.

‘It’s ok officer,’ interrupted Tom, ‘Kwartex Mining will pay the fine, just forward it to company HQ.’

‘I suppose that’ll have to do then.’ said the officer looking disappointed, and like most cops in the city he knew that no one went against Kwartex - that is if

you valued your job! ‘Well... off you go then.’

A RAY OF HOPE

Running along the corridor Tom thought he'd never reach the end, but thankfully office 3143 was only just over half way along, or at least he assumed it was, but one look along the corridor he wasn't sure he could even see the end! A buzzer sounded loudly inside, it was one of those that had an insistent almost klaxon-like sound, and Tom admitted having to listen to that day in day out would have driven him insane.

'Barry Coad?' asked Tom, as a long ginger-haired man in his forties answered the door abruptly.

'No!' replied the man without offering further assistance.

'Can you tell me where he is then?' asked Tom acidly.

'Over there.' he replied pointing at a tall skinny man two benches away. Brushing passed the ignoramus Tom introduced himself and held out his hand, and Barry Coad shook it with a wet clammy hand that had Tom wiping his own discreetly down his coat as they sat at his desk.

'So, what can I do for you,' inquired Barry interlocking his fingers and placing his elbows square on his bench, 'I must admit you've created quite a stir!'

'I'll come straight to the point,' started Tom purposefully, 'the new sound gun you're working on - how near to completion is it?' Looking pensively at the desk Barry blew through his lips, as if giving Tom an advance warning of many insurmountable problems.

'I can tell you this, we've had a considerable amount of success with it... but as far as completion goes, well... are you asking me if it's ready for general use now?'

'Yes - that's exactly what I'm asking!' replied Tom testily, and detecting a certain reticence.

'W-would you like to see it on test?' asked Barry nervously, but having sensed Tom's purposeful attitude he quickly changed his tune for fear of upsetting a future client. Getting up from his desk Barry crooked his little finger cockily at Tom to follow him, so looking at Barry he purposely raised an eyebrow and made sure Barry saw it. Entering a door on the other side of the laboratory/office as Tom had now christened it, thankfully this time he didn't have much of a walk, and the next room they entered was the company testing range.

'This place is completely soundproof - for obvious reasons,' declared Barry sniggering, 'we don't want our staff melting all over the place do we?' Smiling politely Tom asked if he would be willing to try a specific test for him.

'*An earwig!*' answered Barry disbelievingly.

'Yes, after a certain exposure time has elapsed I want to see what is left of it.'

'Yes... I suppose that'll be alright, Forficula Auricularia.' he said absent-mindedly, 'but I'm not sure where to find any!' Suggesting he ask a junior lab assistant to procure them Barry's face lit up like the northern lights, then sniggering again ran off to perform the duty. Five minutes later Barry returned to tell Tom he'd been successful in getting someone to procure said earwigs, so while waiting for their

crustaceans to arrive Barry went through various procedures in preparation for their tests. The door opened, and in walked a fresh-faced youth with a Petri dish full of the little pests, then placing it on the bench waited faithfully for Barry's instructions as to what he should do next.

'That's all Cole,' said Barry disinterestedly, 'you can go now.' Wearing a distinct look of disappointment he left, and it was obvious Cole was hoping to see what was going on, but it was also obvious that he, or any other junior lived in fear of Barry, and dared not go against his wishes.

'Surely he could be of use to us,' cut in Tom suddenly, 'we'll need somebody to place fresh earwigs as and when we need them!'

'Yes... I suppose we will,' replied Barry blankly, 'ok, well Cole... stand their until you're called for.' As Barry made final adjustments to the gun Cole grinned thankfully at Tom and stood where Barry had told him.

'Well that's it then,' said Barry in a monotone, 'shall we begin?' Nodding his agreement Barry waved at Cole to place an earwig on the test platform, and having done so Barry fired a single pulse at it with no effect whatsoever, adjusting it again he fired another pulse, but this time it distinctly slowed the insect down. Another fine tune saw it arch its back in agony as the sound gun's increased energy hit home, but not satisfied with that Barry put the gun on maximum frequency, and two seconds later all that remained were a few dots of carbon on the platform!

'Oh dear - I think that was a little over the top!'

declared Barry. 'Another earwig please Cole!' Running forward he dutifully placed another of the little red beasts on the platform. Another blast, and although this time it died instantly it remained intact.

'Ah... I think that shows what this gun is capable of!' announced Barry proudly.

'Yes - but what if the earwig was over twelve inches long?' Looking blankly at Tom for several seconds Barry gazed at the ground to consider what he'd just heard.

'Over twelve inches long?'

'That is what I said.'

'But earwigs that large don't exist!' protested Barry indignantly.

'You obviously haven't been to Oresea!' Looking baffled for a few moments Barry walked around the lab trying to ingest the information Tom had just given him.

'Over twelve inches long?' asked Barry again.

'Yes!'

'Well I can't advise on that... I mean I don't know if it would have any significant effect on an earwig of that size!'

'Ok,' said Tom growing impatient, 'how about we try it on a scorpion?'

'Oh yeah!' Barry came alive again, and at this stage Tom was beginning think he was the only one capable of thinking outside the box. Fortunately Cole had already reached the door when Barry called to him to collect some scorpions, which caused Tom to grin at Barry's miserable face-saving exercise. Another wait while Cole did the business

for their timely experiment, but twenty minutes later back he came with no less than seven of the insidious beasts. This time Cole was more careful and used tweezers to place one on the platform, and turning a full circle the scorpion froze on the spot, then picking up the sound gun Barry fired a pulse into it, but the result wasn't what Tom had hoped to see.

'Well... it looks like we're goin' back to the drawing board.' said Barry grinning.

'How long will it take you to get it up to scratch to kill off those little bastards?'

'How long is a piece of string?' asked Barry grinning.

'How long can those miners on Oresea last without this gun?' asked Tom, without smiling.

'How do you mean?' asked Barry feeling guilty.

'This gun will save many lives if it can be finished and got up there in time!' said Tom meaningfully. Barry got the message, but with the clock reading five to five Barry's thoughts had drifted to going home, and glanced at the clock in the hope that Tom would take the hint. In the next second his face paled at the thought of having to work overtime, and without uttering word Tom looked at Barry until he spluttered another sentence.

'Well... we'll work on then... until it's ready!' said Barry reluctantly.

'That's what I like to hear - *commitment!*' said Tom with much venom. 'I'll be at my hotel, here's the number... if there's anything you think I should know - call me!' With that he left Barry wondering what life was all about.

‘Alright for him,’ muttered Barry under his breath, but unfortunately not low enough, ‘goin’ back to his hotel while we do all the fuckin’ donkey work!’

‘The firm I work for is Kwartex! And that piece of string... had better be only one inch long!’ Barry’s face resembled a solar flare, and without further ado he got down to the job in hand.

Having slept uninterrupted all night Tom wondered if Barry had actually done anything about improving the gun, but as he was about to get into the shower the phone rang. Cursing he lifted the receiver.

‘Oh yeah - I was just thinking about you.’ said Tom hearing Barry’s voice.

‘Well I can tell you we worked ‘til nearly ten o’clock last night... but - we did it!’ said Barry proudly.

‘You mean it *actually* works?’ asked Tom incredulously.

‘You’ve hurt my feelings!’ said Barry taking his opportunity for revenge.

‘Sorry,’ replied Tom, ‘I didn’t mean it that way... I was surprised you’d had such early success after what you said last night.’

‘Well... I must admit we had a stroke of luck,’ admitted Barry, ‘a guy from the time labs came by and suggested we try inverse refraction to focus the beam more effectively - and it worked!’

‘Ok, you’re gonna hate the next question - when can I have it - *or them!*’

‘Yeah right,’ replied Barry laughing, ‘I’ve got our guy Ivan in production to give it A1 priority, I’ll connect you to him now, and he’ll tell you how long

it'll take.'

'Ok, hey Barry... thanks - I mean that, we got off to a rocky start, but you're ok.' said Tom sincerely.

'Thanks,' replied Barry, 'you're not so bad yourself!' Ivan was a very serious guy, not just about work but his outlook on life, and even on the phone Tom could tell he was talking with a serious expression. Asking Tom how many weapons he required Tom jokingly replied he wanted at least five million, but his quip met with a stony silence as Ivan merely raised an eyebrow and waited for the appropriate answer.

'I think five hundred would be about right,' said Tom finally, 'if that's ok?' Without blinking Ivan rang off and returned to the production area. Arriving at the factory Tom made a bee line for the production area, via a quick visit to Barry's office on the way.

'Don't worry,' said Barry, 'he'll be back with your guns before sun up.'

'That quick?' asked Tom expecting to wait a few days.

'Yeah... he'll test every twentieth unit as he goes,' continued Barry, 'very meticulous is our Ivan.'

At eight thirty the phone jerked Tom from his slumber, and cursing volubly he ran across the room to answer his hand set; fumbling to find the button he switched on.

'Tom Torrance!'

'This is Ivan Redland from Fusilaser production,' he told Tom sounding more monotonous than ever, 'your weapons are ready, seeing they're going to another planet, as well as their normal seal I've also

blister packed them.'

'Good man,' replied Tom, 'I'm on my way over -
and thanks!'

RETURN TO ORESEA

Snatching the label from the printer Tom peeled it from its backing and stuck it on the crate, then opening a line on his phone he rang the customs desk at the Cosmoport. Having cleared the crates at the Arrival Centre he made a hasty return to the hotel to pack his bag, and hoping he wouldn't be too late he followed the courier van to the port for take-off! Making a quick call to Phil Hacking Tom informed him of the status quo.

'Well done Tom, said Phil gratefully, 'I wish you luck, I know you'll do everything you can.'

'You can bet on it Phil,' replied Tom hastily, 'I'll let you know what the state of play is as soon as I get up there - bye!' At the port the vast ship had already powered up, and watching the last of the passengers make their way up the walkway Tom ran across the apron shouting at them to wait!

'You're lucky,' said the conductor grinning, 'I don't usually hang on.'

'I'm sure glad you did!' replied Tom grinning.

'You got friends in high places?' asked the conductor.

'Why do you ask?' questioned Tom.

'My boss phoned five minutes ago and said "Under no circumstances was I to take off without you", so what's that all about?' As Tom took his seat he explained what had transpired on Oresea, and the implications of what could happen if the threat wasn't contained.

Lifting from the apron the giant transporter 'rose

rapidly through the atmosphere with no G force whatsoever! For that sole reason Tom thought these new ships were far superior than their older counterparts.

‘Well I’m sure glad I don’t have to go down there!’ said the conductor, ‘anyhow... why are you talking to me, people don’t usually pass the time of day with me.’

‘Why not, you’re the same as anyone else, I don’t see the problem.’ replied Tom.

‘Well it’s the new law of not conversing with people in service?’ challenged the conductor.

‘Oh give me fuckin’ strength,’ replied Tom feeling exasperated, ‘that is the most ludicrous law they’ve brought out yet!’

‘I don’t think that guy over there would agree with you!’ replied the conductor pointing out a man opposite who was openly glaring at Tom.

‘Well he can go fuck himself,’ said Tom emphatically, ‘I don’t give a toss!’

‘You talking to me?’ asked the swarthy passenger suddenly turning aggressive.

‘And what if I am?’ asked Tom leaning forward.

‘I think you should watch who you’re talking to,’ replied the man menacingly, ‘I don’t like your attitude!’

‘Well hard fuckin’ luck pal,’ said Tom, also menacingly, ‘exactly what are you going to do about it?’ With that the man got up, and walking over to Tom caught hold of his coat and yanked him forward. That was a very bad mistake, as the man suddenly found himself on the floor with his right arm firmly forced up his back, and squealing for

mercy!

‘Now... let me tell you something,’ said Tom informatively, ‘I talk to whoever I like, and no one tells me otherwise - *do you understand?*’

‘*Yes, yes, Aaahhhg, ok, ok, I understand, just let go mate,*’ bleated the man, ‘*you’re breaking my arm!*’ With that Tom let him go, and with a very red face the man returned to his seat rubbing his very sore right arm.

‘Christ man,’ said the conductor, ‘where did you learn to do that?’

‘I was in Special Forces for five years... I saw a lot of action and learned a lot of things!’ replied Tom factually. Deciding that glaring at Tom was definitely suicidal the nasty person sat mute in his seat for the remainder of the journey! Docking on time Tom was the first to rise from his seat, and said goodbye to the conductor in the loudest voice he could muster, who, in return grinned widely at Tom’s flouting of the new law. Having overseen the transfer of the crate from the transporter to the shuttle he took his seat to Oressea, while passengers on the transporter remained seated for their journey to recommence. As the shuttle settled on its pad the airlock hissed, and loading the crate onto a dilly Tom watched as Franz ran towards him. Pressing the button the dilly dutifully hovered alongside as Franz updated Tom on what had happened since his departure.

‘*Am I glad to see you,*’ said Franz emphatically, ‘you won’t believe this, but the little bastards have hacked away most of the apron on the north side, it’s only a matter of time ‘til they get through now,

and I'll be honest, another week will do it - *and I'm sure glad you got those guns Tom!*'

'Well the good news is I've got five hundred,' said Tom grinning, 'all we need to do now is hope they work! The tests we carried out on Earth were pretty conclusive, but it doesn't mean they're guaranteed to work up here!'

'Well there's only one way to find out,' replied Franz with a deep frown, and nodding agreeably he and Franz opened the crate. Studying the weapon for half an hour Tom explained how they worked, and showed Franz how to spread the beam to give maximum protection to the user - and kill more earwigs!

'Well... suits on,' said Franz apprehensively, 'let's see if we're gonna be lucky!'

'Hang on Franz,' said Tom suddenly, 'are we going out alone, or are we taking more crew for back up?'

'You're right, perhaps we should take three crew with us,' replied Franz, 'I'll get Bert, Kyle and Timothy, they're good men, and will give it a good go!' Satisfied they were ready the five of them stood in the airlock with their weapons drawn, and were ready to face the most terrifying ordeal in they had ever known.

'Ok,' said Tom as the airlock slid back, 'we form a circle, it's got to be back to back until we get every last one of them... or they get us!' Forming a circle they walked slowly and purposefully through the airlock, but it was quiet deathly, and even the earwigs that had attacked the apron had gone!

A breeze blew up from the east, and knowing how incredibly fast those little bastards could fly

they looked nervously around for any sign of the insidious insects, but apart from another breeze nothing stirred. It was as if the earwigs knew something was up, and had taken refuge until the threat to their existence had passed.

‘How long do we stay out here Tom?’ asked Franz looking distinctly worried.

‘We’ll give it an hour, and if nothing happens we’ll go back in!’ replied Tom, then scoured the horizon for the slightest sign of the flying sentinels of death. An hour later and nothing had happened, so to let them know they were on their way they radioed ahead and returned to the airlock in formation. As the airlock opened the sky was suddenly full of them, and like a red cloud of mortal danger they came out of nowhere!

‘*Close the fuckin’ airlock!*’ screamed Tom as the first wave attacked without mercy, but as the sound guns went into action they flew off with bloody noses, or pincers, that was enough, and they didn’t like the sound guns one little bit! The battle lasted for ten minutes, but this time they were more than glad to get back through the airlock. It was bad enough watching them damage the plexidome, but being out here face to face them was more than unnerving.

WE WON THE BATTLE

A week had passed since they had first used the sound guns against the earwigs, and Tom was beginning to think they'd had enough, but his time in the services had taught him one thing, and that was never think you've won, always *know!* It was eleven o'clock when Kyle Grainger ran in and breathlessly informed them he'd seen earwigs flying near the horizon to the south of the dome!

'How many would you estimate,' asked Franz, 'does it look like an attack?'

'How the fuck should I know,' replied Kyle panting heavily, 'all I know is the sky was black with the little bastards, but they flew away after a minute or so!'

'Ok Kyle,' said Franz finally, 'thanks for letting us know, we'll put out a red alert and uh... think of what we've got to do next.'

'Don't forget it was those little fuckers that gave me this!' said Kyle pointing at his leg as he walked out. Studying Franz' face his permanently creased brow was a dead giveaway, as Tom noticed signs of stress.

'Franz,' said Tom suddenly, 'I know it's worrying you, but we're all in the same boat! Get a grip mate, we'll find a way to beat them... there's always a way!' That statement seemed to appease him, at least for the moment, but Tom could see in his eyes that his was mind was still troubled.

'Ok. I've got a plan,' said Tom suddenly, 'give me a suit and gun, I'll go out alone and see how these

little shits stand up to the gun on maximum spread... I know what you're thinking Franz, maybe I am mad, but what other alternative do we have?'

'Why not me?' asked Franz with a faltering voice.

'Come on Franz,' replied Tom seriously, 'I've got combat training and experience, what chance would you have against them eh? What chance do any of us have?'

'Yeah ok,' said Franz finally relenting, 'you're right of course, but be bloody careful Ok? If you think you can't get the better of them you head straight back in!'

'It's a done deal!' said Tom finally, and with that went to get a suit and gun.

Fully kitted out Tom went to the airlock, as he waited for the inner doors to close he adjusted the gun to maximum spread, then turning he watched the outer doors open. Walking through the airlock the swarm was clearly visible a mile away; they were back! The outer airlock closed, so standing with his back to it he waited for them to attack, but after fifteen minutes they still hovered near the horizon. Wondering what the Hell they were up to he asked himself why hadn't they attacked. What were they thinking, what strategy were they thinking up to rid their planet of the human invaders?

'Franz,' said Tom into the mike, 'I think I'll come in, they seem reluctant to attack, I think they're actually afraid of the guns... or, they're planning something!' The airlock opened, and Tom admitted he was glad to be inside again, but if things had gone wrong what death would he have suffered? During the rest of the day they watched the swarm

hover on the horizon without moving an inch, and for many it was unnerving not knowing what they would do next.

‘What I would like to know Franz,’ said Tom frowning, ‘is how come they didn’t attack you while the dome was being built?’

‘To be honest Tom,’ replied Franz, ‘I don’t really know, but my guess is that they didn’t know we were here until the dome was finished.’

‘Mmmm,’ replied Tom preoccupied, ‘just as well... they could have made a serious dent in this operation, and might just have closed it down!’

‘Well, I’m off to bed now Tom,’ declared Franz yawning widely, ‘another day tomorrow etc. etc..’

‘Yeah, might as well get some shuteye while we can.’ agreed Tom.

At three thirty Tom woke with a start, the familiar staccato chatter of earwig feet had started, and were attacking the concrete apron! Pulling on his pants he ran into the corridor to find Kyle and Franz already on their way down.

‘You know what I’m thinking,’ said Tom as they ran down the stairs.

‘Yeah,’ replied Franz, ‘they’ve resorted to night attacks, thinking we won’t be able to do anything about it!’

‘Spot fuckin’ on!’ replied Tom as the lights went up. Kyle pressed the button to morph the blinds, and as he did so several hundred earwigs stared at them with their evil black eyes.

‘Fuck!’ said Franz vehemently.

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Tom suddenly running from the room. Returning a few minutes later he had

a gun in his right palm.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Kyle looking puzzled.

‘We haven’t tried the guns from inside yet have we?’ said Tom grinning. Adjusting the horn spread down to twenty percent he pointed it directly at the dome, and pulling the trigger he hoped fervently to see them drop like flies, but it had no effect!

‘Shit!’ hissed Tom through his teeth.

‘The plexidome must be shielding them from the effects of the gun!’ said Franz

‘So... we have to take the fight to them!’ said Tom emphatically. It was something no one wanted to consider, but the fact was, they would have to fight those crustacean bastards on their own ground!

‘I’ve never known them to attack at night before!’ said Franz now shaking visibly.

‘They’re fuckin’ clever little shits, I’ll give them that!’ said Kyle, with hatred etched on his face.

‘I’m going out!’ said Tom, ‘it’s the only way we’ll find out if these guns are any good at all.’

‘At night, are you crazy Tom?’ replied Franz screwing up his already heavily etched face. ‘You’ll be ripped to shreds!’ Donning the suit again Tom adjusted the gun to maximum spread while waiting for Franz to open the airlock. Checking his radio was on he heard the door slide open, and slowly making his way out the darkness was impenetrable, but Franz had re-morphed the blinds, and light now emanated from the dome, and rounding the concrete apron he expected to see the enemy right in front of him, but there was nothing. An attempt at scanning his surroundings proved futile, then as he was about to return he saw Franz signalling frantically through

the plexiglass, and understanding the urgency of his signal Tom decided he would go back in. Reaching the half way mark they suddenly swooped, and the noise from their wings made a fearful hum that he likened to several turbines running simultaneously. The only difference being the rise and fall in pitch as they swooped then flew away, but the next time they flew straight at him in a thick swarm. Quickly bringing up the gun he opened fire, and watched as they dropped like flies! Although Tom had it on maximum spread it wasn't enough to kill them all, and getting passed the cone of sound a few of them flew at his face, but Tom ducked instinctively and missing they flew over his head. Knowing they would manoeuvre for another attack Tom turned quickly. Thankfully the sound gun did it's deadly work as the little beasties dropped at his feet! As he returned to the airlock Tom stamped on one out of pure hate, and hearing it crunch he lifted his boot to find a moist sticky substance stuck to his sole.

At four thirty Tom, Franz and Kyle were glad to be back in their beds, not so much a late night, more an early morning! However the rest of the night passed without incident, so getting up at nine thirty Tom went to the restaurant for breakfast, but fatigue from the previous nights excursion had dulled his appetite, so finally settling for a bowl of cereal and two rounds of toast he sat to watch out for his favourite pets. Seeing Franz already there they chatted while they ate, but everyone's eyes were fixed firmly on the dome for a sign of those Mods returning for another attack.

'Well Tom, it looks like we've won the battle but

not the war!' said Franz succinctly.

'War!' replied Tom. 'It's gonna be a bloody long one!'

'What you said about them being afraid of the guns Tom,' said Franz looking worried again, 'I don't think it's that, I think they're figuring a way to genetically modify themselves.'

'How d'you mean Franz?' asked Tom quizzically.

'To make themselves immune!' replied Franz prophetically. 'It's what they're good at.'

'Shit! Oh well - we'll soon find out the next time they attack!' added Tom with a grimace.

TAKE THE FIGHT TO THEM

Having engaged his brain for more than two hours Tom was convinced himself the only way to beat these Mods was to take the fight to them! Quickly making his way to Franz' cabin they talked it over, but before Franz would agree to the concept he insisted on Kyle being consulted before making a final decision. At first Kyle was sceptical, and their deliberation was extensive to say the least, then having discussed the matter for four hours, Tom had tired of their going over the same ground again and again.

'Look,' said Tom decisively, 'I think we need to make a hard and fast decision - right now! Let's vote. Who is in favour of going out and taking the fight to them?' Only Tom and Kyle raised their hands.

'Come on Franz,' said Tom testily, '*we have to do something!*' Although Franz had heard Tom he just sat mute and staring in to space.

'Franz!' Shouted Tom, but still got no response.

'Yeah ok... I suppose you're right, it just seems like a suicide mission that's all!'

'Maybe it is,' replied Tom convincingly, 'but we can't just sit here and do nothing, while those bastards are out there doing something!'

'It's better one or two of us get killed than the whole bloody lot of us!' said Kyle, backing up Tom.

'Two of us?' queried Tom.

'Well I'm going with you,' replied Kyle, 'you'll need someone to drive the Seeker, and I - am *fuckin'*

good!’

‘Not being funny Kyle, but what about your leg?’ replied Tom, and was concerned in case he hampered the operation.

‘Don’t even worry about that,’ said Kyle with certainty, ‘and remember... I’ve got a vested interest!’ Thinking about that for moment Tom realised Kyle had a point, and he would need someone to drive for the simple reason that they would have to get in and out as fast as possible! Seeing no point in delay they went straight to the kitting room, then donning a suit each they took four guns, and Tom loaded twenty capsules of Plasitex and detonators - to finish off the Mods once and for all!

‘Incidentally Kyle, why are they called Mods?’ asked Tom, realising he still didn’t know how they came by their name.

‘It’s modifiers really,’ answered Kyle, ‘because they can modify their genes, and like everything else it just got shortened.’

‘Is that another of your useful pieces of information?’ asked Tom grinning. Kyle laughed, and knew that Tom was one of the few who liked a joke on this God-forsaken planet!

The outer airlock door opened, and once again they faced the mortal danger of those insidious little twelve inch monsters, but how in Hell’s name they’d been classified as insects he didn’t know, they were too damn big for a start! Walking ’round to the transport section they started the Searcher and checked it over before taking it on the mission.

‘She seems to run ok,’ said Tom as the Atomotor

crackled faintly on tick over.

'Yeah, they don't give much trouble.' replied Kyle confidently. Heading south to where they'd last seen the swarm the Searcher went at a good pace, and having a lusty performance it dealt easily with the rocky terrain. The day was hot, and even though their suits were insulated they could feel the searing heat. There was no sign of the beasties as Kyle lovingly called them, and after thirty miles they began to think they were on a fools errand. Then, as they drove through a deep gulley Tom suddenly asked Kyle to stop.

'Look,' he said pointing at a hole in the gulley, 'I'll bet my dinner money that's it!' Pulling on the handbrake Kyle killed the motor as Tom ran to the rear of the vehicle, and removed their little surprise. Strapping six capsules of Plasitex together, he attached a detonator and checked to see if all was well.

'Wish me luck!' said Tom as Kyle returned to the driver's seat.

'Luck!' said Kyle sincerely, then walking slowly and purposefully into the gulley he was almost ten feet from the hole when a half a dozen Mods flew out, and made straight for him! Dropping the Plasitex he pulled the gun and gave them a taste of ultra-low frequency, for a second or two they reacted negatively and flew away, then thinking he was safe he picked up the Plasitex and set the timer for ten seconds. Throwing it as hard as he could it stopped slightly short of the hole, and for a few seconds Tom thought he would have to go down and give it a kick, but knew instinctively that would

mean certain death! Then by a sheer miracle it wobbled slightly and fell in, and three seconds later the air filled with a million body parts of dead Mods! By this time, and having seen their home destroyed, the remaining Mods attacked Tom as he went to retrieve his gun! Four of them went immediately, but missing the other two Tom cursed as they flew off, but it wasn't long before they returned for another attack. One flew directly towards Tom as the other flew around and behind him, as it flew at his face Tom annihilated it with a narrow beam spread, unfortunately the other managed to get his pincers into Tom's right leg just below the knee! Turning quickly he shot it in the abdomen, and releasing his leg instantly Tom screamed in agony where the pincers had dug into his upper shin.

'Come on - let's get the fuck outta here!' he screamed at Kyle. His leg was almost verbose in its attempt to let him know its agony. Thinking they were out of immediate danger Kyle drove like the very devil was after him, but as they crested a rise Kyle nearly lost control as a swarm of Mods came straight at them! Grabbing the pack from the rear of the Searcher Tom strapped three capsules together and planted a detonator, then setting the timer for three seconds, he hurled it at the swarm as they attacked from the right side of the vehicle. The explosion was immense, and as Mod fragments flew in all directions Kyle got the message and put his foot flat to floor! After an uneventful journey they were only ten miles from the dome when they saw a swarm so vast they almost stopped and gave up on

the spot!

‘How many capsules have we got left?’ screamed Kyle as he sped across the sandy terrain.

‘Only eleven!’ shouted Tom. ‘it’s not enough, I don’t think we’re gonna make it! I’m gonna use them one at a time, that way we’ll have a better chance!’ Putting the gun on maximum spread he let loose at the first wave of Mods, and as they scattered in all directions the second wave was already closing rapidly, so setting a four second delay he hurled the Plasitex at the next wave.

Five miles from home the Searcher was flat out, and considering the terrain they were driving Kyle was doing a sterling job. Another blast with the sound gun gave them a bit more leeway, but now they could clearly see the dome, and still three and a half miles away the Mods came relentlessly on. The sky had blackened by their sheer number, and Tom could now see it ending in disaster! For the last two miles the terrain was reasonably flat, and Kyle was able to increase their speed again, but the swarm had split in two and had formed a pincer movement, and suddenly realising their strategy Tom grinned.

‘What are you fuckin’ laughing at?’ asked Kyle.

‘They’ve formed a pincer movement,’ replied Tom, ‘get it?’

‘Oh very funny,’ replied Kyle, ‘I don’t like the word Pincer!’ Standing in the foot well with a capsule in one hand and the gun in the other, Tom hurled the capsule to his right, and let loose with gun to his left. Again they flew off, and thought Tom, it was like watching a squadron of fighter planes circling, and Tom silently admitted his admiration at their

tenacity.

‘When we’re fifty feet from the outer airlock open the doors Franz!’ screamed Tom on the radio letting loose at another wave of Mods. ‘But under no circumstances open the inner doors - got that?’

‘A-ok Tom!’ replied Franz watching their progress through the plexidome. The Mods however had other ideas, and to stop them regaining the safety of the dome, had now reformed in front of the airlock, but Tom was too close to home to give up now, so blasting them with the gun he immediately hurled another Plasitex at them with devastating effect! Suddenly they had a corridor, and if they were quick they might just make it to safety! As they entered the airlock Kyle still had his foot hard on the loud pedal, and only when the rear wheels had passed the entrance did he stamp on the brake pedal. The tyres squealed as smoke and flames spat from the rear.

‘*Close the outer doors!*’ screamed Tom as the Searcher smashed into the inner door. Although Franz had got the door down fast a dozen of them still managed to get in, and with his leg causing him extreme pain Tom kept blasting them with the sound gun. One of them had caught Kyle, and was about to sink its ugly pincers into Kyle’s shoulder when Tom’s gun sent it crashing to the floor, and thanked God it wasn’t set to maximum spread!

‘Ok Franz,’ said Tom, having regained his equilibrium, ‘they’re all dead!’ The inner door slid open, and Tom and Kyle were only too glad to be back inside the dome! By the time they’d run to the observation room the plexidome was black with their remaining number; they continued their attack!

However, most had settled on the apron, and were intent on breaking the concrete base to gain entry, and it was then Franz had a brain wave!

‘Gimme you’re gun quick!’ said Franz. Slightly bemused Tom handed over his gun, then stood and watched with fascination as Franz pulled the mike to the edge of the desk. Then putting the gun on minimum spread he taped it to the mike.

‘What the fuck are you doing Franz!’ said Tom incredulously.

‘We’ve got a Tannoy system that we can use to great effect - *I hope!*’ replied Franz, then switched on the mike. ‘This should give the little bastards something to think about!’ As Franz pulled the trigger the powerful amplifier sent them crashing to the floor like so much confetti, but as more Mods replaced them it seemed there was no respite, then with one more blast they also fell to join their comrades!

‘This is fun!’ declared Franz, having despatched a major number of them with his last blast.

‘Yeah,’ replied Kyle, ‘I thought you looked like you were having fun!’ Congratulating himself on a job well done, Franz and the crew watched the remainder fly away.

THE ROAD TO VICTORY

After five days without seeing a single Mod they celebrated a victory, and it was champagne all 'round! Now at last their mining operation could go ahead, and having sent a communiqué to Phil Hacking at HQ Tom joined the others celebrating. To say they were plastered would be an understatement, but Franz was the worst, his relief from torture was evident by the state of his inebriation, and the quantity of ale he'd put away was enormous! After several hours of drinking they slept soundly, and hoped they would be sober enough to commence work the following morning. It was however far from the truth as many sore heads reported for duty at ten in the morning, and that was the early ones! The outer airlock opened and the convoy moved out. Thirteen Searchers led off, and were followed by twenty seven Search Majors, carrying their bulky equipment. Bore heads, lines, sifters, conveyors, computers, you name it they had it! The site had been designated some six weeks earlier, but the earwigs had stopped the projects inauguration in its tracks. It would be different now, instead of a meagre retainer the miners would be earning real money at last, and were already dreaming of their big fat tonnage bonus! By three that afternoon the equipment was rigged up and ready to start their operation, so checking and double-checking everything was online Franz proudly pressed Go to start the sequence. The miners worked like Trojans, but their prime concern

being money they knew the longer they worked the more they would earn! Sweating profusely inside their air conditioned suits didn't seem to bother them, and their attitude was if the company wants Oridium, they will have Oridium!

At one o'clock precisely the klaxon sounded for lunch, and with the plant powering down the men gladly walked to the hut for a bite to eat. Talking about the future of mining Franz and Tom remained in the control room for lunch.

'I think we'll be here for a good seven years,' said Franz, airing his opinion, 'when you think about it the operation on Terrax 2 is still more than two years away.'

'Yes but don't forget Franz,' replied Tom warily, 'with Gold it's a much simpler planning process, and they already have the knowledge, so as flight and landing is all they need to set up basically it could be within the next six months!'

'Either way Tom,' said Franz confidently, 'we get first refusal for being here, so we're gonna be *in the money!*' Laughing loudly Tom looked out of the window, but his laughter died instantly. Although it appeared to have ragged edge a black sky was moving rapidly towards them.

'What the f...' said Tom staring transfixed. Seeing Tom's face Franz turned to see what it was he was looking at.

'Oh bollocks!' said Franz, as the nightmarish realisation dawned on him.

'Get the men!' shouted Tom running from the office, 'We'd better get the fuck out of here - *NOW!*' Hitting as many emergency buttons as he could

Franz shut down the remaining plant, then ran from the control room as fast as his legs would carry him. Looking over his shoulder the cloud had now grown considerably and was closing so fast he could now make out individual earwigs! Their number was so great they blotted out the sky, and the next thing he heard was that horrible buzz from their wings. Like the drone from ancient propeller driven aircraft he ran, and the men were already boarding the Searchers and Search majors, but the faster he ran it seemed the closer they got! Shouting at him to hurry the men could also see the closing swarm of death, and as Franz got within twenty feet of the Searchers some had already shut their doors and were driving away! The drone was now a roar, and as the earwigs closed vengefully on their first victim Tom shouted to Franz to move! It was too late, thinking of the safety of all on board someone slammed the door, and there was no way they could open it again! The Searcher drove off, and as they looked through the rear window they saw Franz being cut to pieces by those terrible pincers, although they could see his agony, the noise of the engine coupled with sound proofed windows had muffled his screams, the remaining hoard then set about attacking the Searcher. Switching on the wipers the driver hoped would give him a semblance of vision, but the swarm was so thick that as each sweep of the blades cleared the screen they were replaced by more. No longer able to see where he was going the driver stopped, and it was then they heard the staccato drilling of the earwigs at the doors and body panels! Sound guns were made ready, and they watched in

horror as the earwig's drill-like proboscis made an impression on the armoured doors, the men made ready to go down fighting! A tiny hole appeared as one earwig got through, but Tom quickly slammed his sound gun against it and pressed the trigger. A brief respite was won, but within thirty seconds they had started again, another dose of sound had the same effect, although this time their respite was much shorter, twenty seconds was all Tom reckoned before they started hammering again. Sweating profusely the men knew they had only moments to live, the noise was intolerable as the insidious sound of their wings became apparent inside the vehicle, and coupled with the noise of drilling it was a nightmarish cacophony they wished was just that - a nightmare - but it *was* real! The doors had now been rent asunder, and as the first earwig came through it was met by a blast of sound, but it's death meant a very brief victory for them, and before they knew it the swarm was in and all over them. As their pincers cut limbs cleanly and efficiently from the men's bodies they could hear each other screaming. Keeping his finger on the trigger Tom kept firing as several sets of pincers cut into his arms and legs, but his agony had now got the better of him, and screaming in pain he let go of the trigger; the gun fell to the floor. In his last moment of consciousness one attacked his face, but the pain was such he spiralled downward into a black pit.

'*Earwigs!*' declared Tom Torrance laughing as he walked into Klein's office. Looking up briefly Klein waved him into a seat, and carried on writing his report for several more minutes, then finally

looking up he stared at Tom.

‘Yes - *earwigs!* You think it’s funny eh... well you won’t laugh when you see them!’

‘Oh come on Franz it can’t be that bad - you know I’ve been sent up to oversee this whole operation, the bosses are saying if you can’t cut it they’re gonna replace you!’

‘Let them,’ replied Klein seriously, ‘I wish my successor all the *very best of luck!*’

‘Oh... fuckin’ Hell!’ thought Tom regaining consciousness. ‘De-ja vu! They’ve modified my genes for reincarnation, I’m gonna live this nightmare over and over!’

The End

The Giant's Causeway

Mohammed's Voice

The Causeway was littered with bodies from all nations, and there was no doubt it was a clear case of international genocide! , African, Afrikaner, American, South American, European, Chinese and Indians, including Native American. Ed Borley simply couldn't believe his eyes! Never in his whole life had he seen carnage on this scale, although weeping openly Ed was what you might call a hard-nosed TV reporter, and had seen almost everything in his thirty-eight years. But this! This was beyond reality, it was surreal. Ten years before he would never have believed a global government would take such dictatorial measures to stay in power. The evidence however was right under his nose, and he quietly thought, these people lying here are an epitaph to the most brutal regime this planet ever known. Herr Hitler was a Sunday school teacher!

Although Ed was well aware of the planet's political situation, the underlying reason as to why this had come about was something he would have to investigate, it was something on which he was short of knowledge, but he would find out! Care and craft would be his watchwords, and without doubt a regime like this was more than capable killing him, as they had done with these poor souls, who had quite innocently taken part in a peaceful protest. The military had been sent in with what were obvious orders to annihilate! A whimper reached his ears,

and Ed walked over to investigate. A man of twenty eight or thirty lifted his head slowly and painfully from the ground, and as he looked up Ed saw a face contorted with pain, and considering his injuries Ed couldn't believe he was still alive. These people had been mown down by machine gun fire, and then tanks had been sent to brutally run straight over them where they lay! This poor bastard had what looked like five or six bullet wounds in his chest, Ed stared in disbelief at the tank tracks across his legs which were buried in the ground where he lay. As a tear rolled down his left cheek his eyes pleaded with Ed, so taking out his gun he pointed the barrel at the poor guy's head as his own tears fell freely.

'What's your name?' asked Ed.

'Mohammed.' replied the man in a voice broken and laboured.

'I am... so sorry my friend,' replied Ed, his breath coming in short emotional gasps, 'I take it this is what you want?' Wracked with pain Mohammed was too weak to say anymore, so looking at Ed he simply nodded purposefully. Standing there for a few seconds Ed wondered if he could actually do it, surely he was as bad as the perpetrators of this crime if he pulled the trigger, however he couldn't just leave him to suffer. Looking once again at the pain on Mohammed's face he pulled the trigger, and Mohammed ascended with his wraith to be with his maker. Crying, angry, and confused Ed walked away, how could anybody do something like this? A rock in his peripheral vision drew his attention, and walking over he sat on it without really knowing why. Breaking down he cried bitterly for the human

race. Was there nothing left? Had humanity come so far that there was nothing left but death for those who dared to oppose a corrupt government? To what lengths would they stoop to protect their position of power? He had no answers right then, nor did he have the will to think about the situation. Unaware of how long he'd sat on the rock his mind was numb from the shock of what he'd seen. Unsure for a second if he'd actually heard it, he was aware of a voice in the background, one that patiently repeated its question.

Angela

'Do you mind if I sit down?'

'It's a free world,' replied Ed not looking up, 'please yourself.'

'Thank you,' replied the voice, 'It's very kind of you.' Wondering why this voice was being so polite over something as simple as sitting on a rock, Ed suddenly realised how cynical he'd become. Turning to look at the woman behind the voice, despite her more than evident wounds he could see what had been a very pretty woman. Some brutal bastard had given her a severe beating! Putting his arm around her shoulder her head dropped gratefully onto his shoulder as she silently sobbed, but it wasn't until her body shook with convulsion that Ed was really aware of it; she had been pushed beyond the limit. Reaching into his bag he pulled out a towel and a tube of ointment, then dabbing gently at her wounds he hoped it wouldn't cause her too much distress. The ointment made her look quite surreal, almost comical, he grinned at her.

'You'll do,' he said reassuringly, 'but you're not gonna turn any heads for a while!'

'Thank you,' said the woman gratefully, 'I didn't turn any heads most of the time anyway!' Ed didn't believe that for one moment, and once her wounds had healed she would once again be as she always had been - a looker!

'What happened?' asked Ed in monotone.

'We were demonstrating against the loss of free speech, it was peaceful at first, but then as usual the

government infiltrators started making trouble... they sent in the police first, then when it looked like getting out of hand, the government sanctioned military action, it was well orchestrated... they were waiting for it to happen, all they had to do was send in the army.'

'I've only just got here,' replied Ed slowly, 'I got separated from my camera crew and soundman... I don't know where they are... or if they're still alive!'

'I saw three men, two with cameras... one had bleached blond hair, would-'

'Sorry to interrupt,' asked Ed quickly, 'where exactly did you see them?'

'Back in the city, they were filming the army as they stormed the barricades.'

'How long ago?'

'A couple of hours I guess... I'm not really sure, I-'

'It's ok, don't worry about it now,' replied Ed not wanting to cause her distress. 'Can you walk?'

'I think I'm ok for that, yes, why?'

'Would it be too much to ask if you could show me where you saw them?'

'No, anything to get back at those bastards!' she replied, her voice vilipending with pure hate.

'Borley, Ed Borley.' he said suddenly holding out his hand.

'Angela Piper,' she replied taking the offered hand, then winced as he shook it. Apologising profusely Ed hadn't realised her hands had taken a beating as well!

'It's ok, I'd forgotten they were bruised.' she replied smiling wanly. The ointment made another urgent appearance as Ed applied a liberal amount to each

hand.

'Are you ready?' he asked, not wanting to rush her. 'Let's go.' replied Angela, and Ed noticed a fire in her eyes he hadn't noticed before. As they negotiated the rough terrain he held her arm as they returned slowly to the city, and as if that wasn't enough walking over bodies was totally unavoidable, and almost more than they could bear! Angela suddenly cried out in anguish.

'What's the matter?' asked Ed concerned at her sudden outburst, and turning he saw Angela pointing at the ground twelve feet away, the sight made him physically sick, although his reaction would have been vocal he was retching too much to scream. Half buried and face down in the mud was a little girl no older than three, her dolly lying two inches from her tiny right hand. Her head had been crushed by the tracks of a tank as it ran unemotionally over her tiny body. Sinking to his knees his head was bowed, and putting her arms around his head Angela held him as tight as she could, as her own tears ran like a torrential river. They would be haunted by the spectre of this horrific scene for the remainder of their lives.

The outskirts of the city looked foreboding in the half-light of dusk, and although some buildings were illuminated there were no streetlights in evidence, and Ed considered the prospect of a curfew being in place.

'We'll have to be careful, we could be subject to arrest if we just walk in.'

'Tell me something new,' replied Angela cynically, 'this lot are capable of anything!' Looking at her

sideways Ed realised she was not the complete innocent he'd thought. Pointing at a wall to their immediate right they crouched low as they made their way silently to it, on arrival Ed watched the outskirts of the city for some thirty minutes before he was happy it was safe to enter, or leastwise, as safe as it could be under the circumstances!

'I think now might be a good time to go in.' he whispered. Angela nodded her approval.

Moving low and fast Angela followed a few seconds behind, and they got within two hundred yards of the first building, which happened to be the administration headquarters of Global Government. They couldn't have picked a worse place to enter the city; being basically a civilian department they hadn't considered the possibility of the military being around at that time. Within fifty feet of the main building Ed looked again, if nothing else he was careful. Taking no unnecessary risks another twenty minutes and he signalled to Angela to move out. A tug at his sleeve startled him for a second before he realised it was Angela, and mentally gave himself a kick in the soft parts. Spinning around he saw Angela with her left index finger up to her lips, and her right finger pointing at two guards walking from the building. He thanked her (and his lucky stars) that she'd spotted them; he hadn't! Like a couple of statues they froze on the spot, and the worst part was they were out in the open, and Ed found himself having to consider whether there was enough light to give them away, and prayed fifty feet was far enough for the darkness to cover them, as long as they kept still and remained silent the

guards might not notice them.

The World Premier

The two guards lit cigarettes, and drew heavily like a pair of identical twins, or linked dummies! Both were verbose, and as their voices carried on the still night air Ed and Angela heard their every word.

'The tank boys had a good day today.' said the taller of the two.

'So I hear, a real massacre! I heard unofficially they got nine hundred thousand or more.' replied his opposite number.

'Wish I'd been there, especially in one of those bloody tanks - what a treat!'

'Yeah, I suppose so.' said the other, and Ed detected a note of reluctance in the voice of the shorter security guard. He was about to whisper to Angela to make a slow move to the corner of the building, when the tall one informed his mate it was time to go and collect their special guest.

'Fancy us being put in charge of the world premier... if you'd told me this morning on the way to work I wouldn't have believed you!' Hearing this both Ed and Angela froze on the spot, as those two words, "world premier", hit them like a ton of bricks! How could this be, to all intent and purpose he was on the other side of the globe! Indeed, the media had reported it thus, but if he was here, a few hundred feet from where they were standing, they were very close to the person responsible for the most heinous crime of modern times. The situation had changed

completely, and looking at Angela Ed could tell by her face the significance of it wasn't lost on her. That fire was in her eyes again, and there was something about this woman that made Ed feel rather uneasy. Something had really got to her, but Ed didn't want her going in gung-ho and upsetting the apple cart; then, by the same token he didn't want to upset her anymore than she already was. The security guards were back in the building and out of sight, so he decided to throw caution to the wind.

'Is there something you haven't told me?' he asked as softly as he could.

'No... nothing, why do you ask?' replied Angela furtively, and as she seemed reluctant to offer more information he let it go. Holding her hand he pulled her quickly into the shadows at the rear of the building, then stopping short of the entrance, they listened carefully while they caught their breath.

'You ok?' he asked her, and given her injuries were more than slight wondered if she might slow him down .

'Yes, I'm ready... don't worry,' she replied, pre-empting his unspoken question, 'I won't let you down.'

'I know... it wasn't that I was worried about.' replied Ed grinning at her. Thinking it was about time he checked behind them he turned to see if anyone was about, but the place was empty. What he did notice was an automatic lying on the ground, and in the gathering gloom he could see its magazine was still in place. Motioning to Angela he pointed at the gun, and warned her of his intent to recover the piece, but

it would be risky, as a shaft of light from the building fell on the ground where it lay. Backtracking he kept his eyes on the building, and occasionally glancing over his shoulder he bent down and picked up a Kalashnikov AK47.

'This'll do very well indeed!' announced Ed, and eyed the gun as if it had just been handed down from heaven. Pulling a Beretta pistol from his waistband he gave it to Angela.

'Here, this might come in useful.'

'I somehow think you're right.' She agreed, but being busy figuring out the whereabouts of his camera crew and soundman Ed missed the significance of her words. By the time he'd retrieved the Russian weapon the guards had long since disappeared into the building.

'Is that thing any good?' asked Angela, testing his knowledge of weapons.

'Any good?' It's accurate up to a thousand feet... 7.62 calibre as I remember, yeah, it's very good!' he replied emphatically, then for a few minutes stood stock still in thought. Having spoken to him twice Angela had to resort to poking him in the ribs to attract his attention.

'Sorry, what is it?' he said with mild surprise.

'It's ok, I thought you'd lost the plot for a moment... I was thinking... this a golden opportunity, and we shouldn't let it slip through our fingers.'

'What exactly are you talking about?' asked Ed, puzzled by her cryptic statement.

'Get that bastard... for what he's done, not just for today, but everything over the last ten years, we might not get an opportunity like this again!'

'You're mad! We wouldn't stand a chance... the place must be crawling with military... we wouldn't get within fifty feet of him!'

'I think you're wrong,' replied Angela confidently, 'after today they'll feel invincible and their guard will be down... I think we ought to go for it!'

'Do you realise we'd be done for murder... assuming we'd get to trial!'

'What about the murders they've committed here today? Think about it, we could be judge, jury, and executioner, come on, were entitled to it, it's our heritage!'

'Maybe you're right,' replied Ed, although his mind raced just thinking about the consequences of such an undertaking, 'I must find my crew first though.'

'No! I mean, they'll be alright until we've finished here... besides, you don't want to risk their lives as well - do you?' she added cleverly, and it worked like a dream.

'You've got a point there, I didn't think of that... ok... let's get it done!' he said finally, and remembering the little girl back on the causeway there was malice in his voice. Motioning to Angela she followed him to the corner of the building, but Ed had failed to notice how expertly she handled the pistol he'd given her earlier. It was more than half an hour before the two guards alighted from the building with their precious charge. Looking at Angela over his shoulder he nodded, then running up the six long shallow steps at lightning speed with Angela right on his heels they raised their weapons menacingly.

Ed's Command

'Drop your weapons!' screamed Ed, but their reluctance to follow his instructions brought an added, 'Now!' They did as they were bade.

'I thought you said we were as safe as houses here?' said the world premier, then turning to Ed added, 'what can I do for you, if it's money then-'

'Shut up!' barked Angela, 'you just do as you're told!' Seeing Angela the world premier visibly quaked, and shut up!

'Let's all go back into the building, ok?' suggested Ed, but the guards maintained a surly attitude, and Ed made a mental note to watch them, as they would undoubtedly try something given the opportunity. Walking to the elevator Ed indicated to Angela to summon it. Twenty seconds later as the doors hissed open they hustled their prisoners inside, then hit the button for the third floor. Looking at him quizzically for a few seconds Angela watched as the LED numerals indicated their upward progress.

The elevator doors slid back to reveal what Ed was hoping to see, this was it!

Christ! He'd heard the rumours, but hadn't given them any credence, but he would never doubt Jim's word again! This was definitely a weapons control room, and the control room personnel were now involved in the fracas; Ed was very nervous.

'Keep your distance and everyone stays healthy!' shouted Ed, 'Christ! I sound like one of those old gangster movies.' he added as he and Angela went back to back, and it suddenly dawned on him this

little lady was no innocent at all! He hadn't asked her to go back to back, she knew exactly what she was doing! Keeping his mind on their current situation however, the question of her innocence would keep until he had more time to quiz her about how she'd duped him. Approaching a console Ed told her to lift the clear plastic cover from the red button.

'Oh God... oh God, no, please... look I'll give you what ever you want, but you don't want to press that button... really - you don't!'

'I said shut up!' screamed Angela, as pointed her gun at his head. That was the only mistake they needed, in what seemed like a nanosecond a unit of SAS stormed the room with their guns trained at Ed and Angela, and Mexican stand-offs with the SAS don't usually last long.

'What is it with you?' asked Ed, his face contorted with fear. Angela then looked straight at the world premier.

'HE RAPED ME!' she screamed with all the fury she could muster. Ed didn't like this situation, but he now understood why Angela was keen to get in here, but as their lives were now in very grave danger it was time to make a decision. Lowering his hand he felt the button touch the palm of his hand.

'Anyone with itchy teeth, I would strongly suggest you let them itch, or my hand goes down on this button!' Feeling death creep through him Ed knew that he and the Kalashnikov were no match for a whole unit of trained SAS troops. His hands and brow were sweating profusely, but it wasn't the normal sweat of someone whose been in the sun too

long, it was the cold sweat of fear! As his legs shook uncontrollably he found it difficult to stop himself urinating, and his stomach felt like a pumpkin on Halloween night. With their guns at the shoulder The SAS unit stood stock still, aiming unerringly at Ed and Angela's heads, watching, waiting, for one tiny mistake.

'What in Hell's name do we do now?' asked Ed, hoping Angela had a magic word to get them out of this nightmare situation.

'He gets it!' screamed Angela holding her gun steady at the world premier's head, and suddenly the SAS unit moved forward a pace! As a reporter Ed was used to assessing a situation quickly, but being untrained in the military sense he was unable to keep his cool for that extra split second, and his thoughts immediately went to one of defence, plus, he didn't know the full meaning of the button under his right hand. All he knew was that those guns pointing at them were likely to go off at any time – and very soon! How long should he hesitate? If he and Angela were arrested their lives wouldn't be worth a bent penny. Shaking violently his nerve rapidly ebbed, and failed to notice the eyes of the SAS commanding officer look at his men one by one. He did however notice their hands tighten on their guns, and sweating profusely he felt his hand slide as it touched the button, if anyone made one move Ed had to consider the threat that would end it for all of them! Someone smiled on them in that minute, as the world premier made another plea for his life.

'Look, I'll get rid of the troops... let's - let's go to my

office, we can make an arrangement, we can work something out - can't we?' Being busy considering his options Ed didn't say anything, and had to admit at that very moment it was his only option!

'What d'you think Angela, should we negotiate, or should we put a bullet in him now, like he did with those poor bastards today!'

'I think we should negotiate,' she told Ed, 'is your office close by?' she asked the premier.

The Point Of No Return

The premier didn't answer straight away, and Ed's hand was quaking and sweating above that button as he prayed for their salvation.

'Yes, its right at the end of the corridor.' said the world premier nervously, and Ed let out a sigh of relief that could have been heard around the world! Holding her gun to his head Angela watched as the SAS unit retreated slowly from the control room. Reaching the end of the corridor Angela opened the door to his office, then satisfied it was clear she went in, then beckoned Ed to follow her. At that moment the world premier thought it might be an opportune moment to make a move, but feeling Ed's Kalashnikov prod him in the back swiftly changed his mind. Running to the window Angela watched the SAS file into a personnel carrier in the street below.

'It's ok, he's as good as his word.' she said without looking 'round, hearing that Ed laid his gun on the table, as he did so Angela suddenly spun around and shot him in the right knee. Landing at the feet of the world premier he screamed in pain as he applied pressure to the knee in an attempt to stop it bleeding. 'What was that for you bitch?' hissed Ed through his pain.

'That was for the beating your lot gave me this afternoon!' screamed Angela.

'What in Hell's name are you talking about?' hissed Ed.

I was taken captive by the terrorists after I got out of

this place, all I wanted was to get away from here - to be safe, but they dragged me to an old warehouse... and that's where I got this,' growled Angela pointing at her face, then raising her hands added, 'and these!'

'What's that got to do with me?' screamed Ed through his pain.

'You had to be in with them, while they were torturing me they didn't know I was conscious, then your name was mentioned!'

'Thank God you're on our side, you had me worried for a minute.' said the world premier suddenly brightening up.

'On your side.' said Angela in a monotone. Thinking he was in the clear the world premier grinned.

'As I hold the power now, I guess I'm the law... would that be a reasonable assumption?' said Angela in a conciliatory tone. The world premier reluctantly smiled his assent and accompanied it with a wave of his arm.

'In that case I find you guilty of rape, do you have anything to say before I pass sentence on you?' The world premier's inane smile waned rapidly, as his mouth dropped his brow furrowed, and he shook uncontrollably.

'Look. I uh... didn't want to do that to you... really, it was the others, you see they would have killed me if I hadn't done it, I - I couldn't let them think I was a soft touch, look, what do you want, money? I can let you have a lot... yes, you'll be rich, very rich, £500,000... what d'you say?' As he looked into Angela's eyes all at once he knew his days were numbered, and her malicious grin confirmed it.

Saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth, and spreading rapidly a damp patch appeared on the front of his trousers as he lost control. With tears ran freely down his cheeks he fell to his knees and begged Angela to forgive him. The pistol cracked once, and as Ed sat clutching his knee he watched Angela walk from the room without another word or backward glance.

THE END

The Liar

CHAPTER ONE

Laughing at her derisive abuse it appeared he hadn't heard a single word of the cutting and hurtful remarks she'd hurled at him. Staring at him angrily she turned and walked away, then as an after-thought she turned and hurled more abuse.

'You should be locked up... d'you know that? You're fuckin' mad!' Blasting the insult at him she pointed her index finger at her right temple to emphasise the fact. Laughing again William and locked his eyes to hers, and stared at her in a way that went longer and deeper than just hate or a warning, this was a stare of evil and malice, and penetrating her very soul it sent shivers down her spine. Walking away with as much bravado as she could muster she told herself she was not afraid of the Liar! Oh no, he didn't scare her at all! After a few seconds she turned again to see if he was still there, he was, standing motionless on the spot where she'd left him; still watching her. As his eyes searched her soul Shirley felt uneasy again, so deciding attack was the best form of defence she let loose another verbal tirade.

'What the fuck are you lookin' at,' she screamed at him, 'you're a Dingbat, a fuckin' Dingbat! Fuckin' spaceship my ass, you ought to be in Barrow Gurney!' Unmoved by the vicious verbal lashing she'd meted out William continued staring at her.

Now feeling more uneasy she decided it was better to leave than lose face, and that was

something Shirley would never do! She was hard at school, and was still known to her friends as Shirley "Streetwise" Holligan. Now nineteen she was well endowed and knew it! At school no one tangled with, and even some of the boys were afraid of her! In case things got a bit too hot to handle she always carried a knife, and on one occasion in a nearby town had actually used it, but had got away with it purely through lack of evidence. Although she hadn't been back there since on the off chance someone might just point an accusing finger. Walking out of the "chippie" her best mate Brenda pulled steaming chips from a large plastic container in her left hand, and suddenly Shirley felt like a free meal.

'Oi! Bren' gi' us a chip yeah?' she ordered.

' 'elp yourself Shirl'.' replied Brenda, thrusting the container under her nose; Shirley's hand gratefully lifted a liberal helping of chips from the offered container.

'Ta love, bloody starvin' me.' she told Brenda, 'I ain't eaten since this mornin.'

'Yeah, nor me,' returned Brenda, 'couldn't be fucked!' They laughed raucously at her self-confessed laziness.

' 'ey, I almost forgot, remember that Billy Locking who used to be in the year above us at school? He's fuckin' touched... I'm tellin' ya... he asked me out this mornin'... I thought 'e was alright - but 'e ended up tellin' me 'e 'ad a spaceship!' Their laughter bordered on hysteria as chips intended to fill their bellies ended up adorning the pavement, which was already liberally decorated with "pavement pizzas"

from the night before.

'So this Billy's a bit of a space cadet then is 'e?' asked Brenda.

'Yeah, 'e reminds me of that old film, what's it called? Oh yeah, Billy Liar!' said Shirley and laughed again. 'Yeah... I'll tell you what though, 'is eyes are fuckin' weird, 'e was starin' a' me all the time when I was givin' 'im a bollockin', I mean really staring!'

'e must be a fuck-brained wanker as well then!' declared Brenda sending them into hysterics again. Turning the corner they walked aimlessly down the road talking and cracking jokes as their high-heels clanked noisily on the pavement.

CHAPTER TWO

Leaving work a hero that night Shirley had stood single-handed against the foreman during a dispute, and had won the argument and a concession for her fellow workers! As Brenda had to see her bloke that evening she explained to Shirley she'd been after him for a month, didn't want to miss out on getting her hands on the other side of his zip! Admitting to herself the new guy was quite "bad" Shirley walked home alone, and didn't blame Brenda for wanting to get her mitts on the newest bloke in the factory.

'ello Shirl', you wanna go out again tonight?' said a familiar voice behind her.

'What d'you think, after last night I think you've blown your gaff, don't you... you're a bit of a wanker really aren't you?' she replied acidly.

'Why is it you don't like me... eh?' persisted Billy.

'What are you like? Don't you know? You tell me stupid things like you've got a space ship...' said Shirley, and letting her voice trail away hoped he might disappear.

'You don't believe me then?' he asked.

'What d'you think, just fuck off before I put my knee in your bollocks!'

'I'd like to see you try!' said Billy coldly, and became angry at her arrogance.

'Well if I can't, I've got two big brothers who certainly can!' replied Shirley throwing down a challenge.

'I'd like to see them try!' said Billy spitting the challenge back in her face.

'Oh yeah? When, where, and what time!' retaliated Shirley.

'You know where I'll be tonight, send them up... and I'll post you back the fuckin' bits! Taking fright Shirley suddenly felt as if someone had plunged her into the arctic circle, and turning she saw that same stare he'd given her the previous evening, although not totally sure, she knew there was something odd about his eyes.

'Ahhhh piss off!' screamed Shirley as she walked away, it was her last bit of defiance in the face of a better enemy, but she wouldn't admit that to Billy.

'Ten o'clock, you know I'll be there!' he shouted at her. Sending shudders down her spine this time she didn't turn 'round, the thought of seeing those eyes again was more than she could take.

Coming through the door five minutes later her eldest brother Martin heard about her altercation with Billy, and his immediate reaction was to declare war.

'I don't need Paul to help me take care of that bastard!' he told his little sister.

'All the same,' came Paul's voice from behind, 'if we both go we can make a picnic of it!'

'Oh yeah,' replied Martin, having thought about it for a second or two, 'we'll give 'im staring eyes, we'll put them out for 'im!' All three laughed at the thought of Billy Locking with a white stick.

'e reckons 'e'll be up the Crown tonight,' said Shirley, 'e also said 'e'd like to see you try, 'e said if you went up, 'e'd post me back your bits!'

'Fuckin' 'ell, the boy's got some cheek I'll give 'im that!' said Paul with an air of sarcastic bravado.

"e'll 'ave swollen cheeks when we've finished with 'im – four of 'em!" added Martin, as if sealing Billy's fate with that sweeping remark.

With dinner finished and their parents screaming at them to behave they left the family pyle to visit the Crown, and to seal the fate of Billy Locking. Pausing as they walked into the bar they looked around, and seeing Billy wasn't there Paul ordered a round of drinks, but remembering he'd bought the last round had a go at Martin for not paying his way. 'I bought the last round on Tuesday night!' he protested.

'You fuckin' never!' challenged Paul vehemently.

'Never mind that,' said Martin, wanting to get on to more important matters, 'where the soddin' 'ell is Locking?'

'I don't know,' replied Paul, then turning to someone they knew to be a friend of Billy's, 'where the fuck's that weirdo mate of yours tonight?'

'I told you,' cut in Shirley suddenly, 'e won't be here 'til ten o'clock!'

"e ain't weird!" replied Billy's friend Fred, known to everyone as "The Phase".

'I say 'e's weird - ok?' said Paul threateningly, but not wanting to mix it with the Holligans The Phase turned away. 'Don't turn your back on me!' said Paul and punched him viciously in the ribs, then as The Phase sank to his knees the landlord threatened them with a ban. Realising they were there to get Locking, they apologised and bought The Phase a drink to make up for their untimely behaviour.

CHAPTER THREE

At ten o'clock precisely Billy walked into the bar, and seeing the Holligans already there he sneered at them, then walking to the bar bought himself a pint. Opening his mouth he poured it straight down his throat without a pause.

'Two point nine seconds in case you're interested!' he boasted grinning maliciously at Paul and Martin.

'We're not!' they replied, and knowing they couldn't match him pint for pint hoped they hadn't lost face.

'So you reckon you're gonna post our bits back to our Shirley do you?' said Martin throwing down the challenge.

'Oi!' shouted the landlord sensing more trouble, 'I warned you just now-'

'It's alright,' replied Martin, 'it won't be in 'ere - will it Lockin' ?'

'Where ever,' replied Billy, 'I'm not fussy.'

'Cocky bastard aren't you!' said Paul, trying to maintain the famous Holligan reputation, without a word Billy walked to the door, then turning he glared at them and walked out. Looking first at Paul, then Martin Billy cocked his head at the door, but having followed him out he was nowhere to be seen.

'I told you,' declared Martin, 'e's shit 'is trousers.'

'Have I?' said a voice from behind. Spinning 'round they found Billy standing behind them. Throwing a left Martin found his fist suddenly clamped in a vice-like grip the strength of which he'd never felt in his life.

'Don't be fuckin' stupid,' Billy told him, 'if we start

anything here the law'll be on us before we know it!' 'So uh... what did you 'ave in mind prick?' replied Martin, not quite so self-assured.

'I say let's go up in the woods, we won't be disturbed there,' said Billy icily, 'I'd like to finish off you lot, you two and your sister think you're pretty fuckin' clever – but I'm goin' to put a stop to you lot forever!'

'Come on then,' said Paul turning away, 'let's do it!' Walking down the street no one spoke, and putting his hand in his pocket Martin felt the handle of his switchblade, but after the confrontation outside the Crown he wasn't so sure he was good enough to take Billy out. Still feeling the impression of Billy's hand on his knuckles both worried and annoyed him, how come this stupid looking bozo had so much strength? A hundred yards inside the tree line and Billy turned to glare at Martin and Paul as he'd done with Shirley.

'So, you're goin' to put a stop to us forever?' said Paul, asking more than informing Billy of his earlier threat.

'Well... yeah,' replied Billy, then glancing at his brother Martin saw he was disconcerted.

'Me and Paul, we're gonna put you away!'

'Ok, let's go,' replied Billy, but neither Martin or Paul made a move, and after a few seconds Billy grew impatient.

'Come on then,' he said, repeating his challenge, 'I thought you two were hard?'

'Look, we don't wanna fall out,' said Martin suddenly, 'it seems a bit daft really - don't you think?'

'I don't give a toss one way or the other!' replied Billy nonchalantly; his unwavering stare had unnerved them considerably.

'You fuckin' cowards!' screamed Shirley at her brothers, 'I thought you said you were gonna kill 'im!'

' 'ang on sis,' said Martin, intent on saving as much face as possible, 'you're out to cause trouble - aren't you!'

'Oh no I'm not!' she countered. 'You were the one that said you were gonna do 'im!'

'I'm afraid she's right,' added Billy sarcastically, 'that is what you said, so - are you up for it or what... or have you got a sun-coloured streak down your back!' 'Fuck you!' said Martin suddenly losing his temper, who lunged forward brandishing his switchblade, but seeing it come Billy side-stepped and at the same time grasped Martin's wrist. Twisting his arm he easily overpowered him, then forcing him to his knees he wrested the knife from Martin's hand. Hearing a rustling sound from the trees a few yards away Billy grinned, and seeing the look of horror on their faces always gave him the greatest of pleasure.

CHAPTER FOUR

Having combed the area extensively for days the police had had no luck in finding the missing teenagers, and had now turned their attention to the woods. Members of the general public had been invited to take part, and were considered important by the police in finding them. Covering an area of over three thousand acres the woods were capable of hiding a multitude of sins, and after a two-hour search a rookie officer arrived looking decidedly shaken, then whispered urgently in his sergeant's ear; listening intently the sergeant suddenly paled.

'Everyone - listen to me,' he said hastily, 'I want you all down in the lower part of the wood, ok?' Once the public had vacated the area, signalling at two other officers to follow him the sergeant trudged back with the rookie officer.

'I've never seen anything like it serg,' said the officer with a quaking voice, 'I'm telling you... that's not normal!'

'What exactly did you see,' said the sergeant, 'I mean - they're obviously dead judging by your reaction.'

'Shit, yeah, they're dead alright,' replied the officer emotionally, 'I've never seen anything quite as gruesome as this!'

'How d'you mean?' asked the sergeant, curious to understand exactly what would meet his eyes when they reached the crime scene. It was a question that would remain unanswered, as having arrived the young officer indicated with his right arm a scene of pure carnage.

'Holy fuckin' -' said the sergeant, but the words stuck in his throat as his eyes took in the most unbelievable sight he'd ever seen! Where once life existed, all that remained now were a pile of bones, with a few remnants of flesh and blood spattered liberally across the general area. One thing struck the sergeant immediately, having been completely stripped of flesh the bones were as white as if they'd been bleached in the sun for a few months, apart from the fact that the teenagers had been missing for less than a week, the Sun was no where near hot enough to bleach them to that extent, and the other thing that worried him was that the flesh remaining on the bones was also no where near decomposition. Something had literally ripped these three young people to pieces!

'Cordon off the area, get forensics up here fast, the rest of you get back down there and tell all the other bobbies to get the public out of here straight away, then... return to normal duties.' The sergeant was adamant, this was indeed something he'd never seen the like of, and he didn't want it reaching the press until it was absolutely necessary, especially as he suspected this had been committed by a what, not a who!

Having secured the area with crime tape the sergeant waited with the two officers until forensics arrived, Sergeant Bayliss was normally a patient man, but today he radioed three times during their two hour wait.

'Sergeant Bayliss?' asked a stocky grey-haired man with two assistants in tow.

'You've decided to put in an appearance then?' asked

the sergeant sarcastically.

'Sorry,' replied the forensics officer taking umbrage, 'we only got the call twenty minutes ago, we've come direct from another case in Holmouthe!'

'My turn to apologise,' admitted the sergeant, 'I didn't realise, I'll have to have a word with someone back in the station, seems there's been a lack of communication.'

'Why the urgency?' asked the forensics officer, 'by the way, I'm Dowdswell, uh - Glyn.'

'I'll show you Glyn,' replied the sergeant grimly, and lifting the tape allowed him through.

'What in fuck's name...' said Glyn, his voice trailing to a whisper, compared to most he'd seen many gruesome sights in his career, and therefore more used it than most, but this he had to admit had taken his breath away. This was carnage beyond anything he'd ever seen.

'This was lustful killing, it wasn't done for motive, I can assure you of that.' said Glyn perusing the scene.

'How can you be so sure,' said Sergeant Bayliss, 'you've only been here a couple of minutes.'

'Believe me,' replied Glyn Dowdswell, 'when you've seen what I've seen you get to know the signs!' Accepting his word Sergeant Bayliss nodded, after all, who was he to argue against Glyn's credentials.

'What d'you think did it?' inquired the sergeant after a moments pause.

'Let me tell you this,' replied Glyn sternly, 'if this had been done by a human he'd have had the strength of six or seven men!'

'Shit,' said Sergeant Bayliss hesitantly, 'I hope I don't have to make the arrest, but if it wasn't human what

else could it be? I mean, it doesn't look like the work of a big cat to me.'

'You're right,' replied Dowdswell, starting his examination, 'as I said just now, this was lustful killing.' Nodding, Sergeant Bayliss realised he still had work to do at the station, so instructing his officers to remain vigilant told them to keep the public away at all costs, and he would personally see to it that there was a press blackout until they'd finished their investigation.

CHAPTER FIVE

A week had passed since the murders, and apart from a forensic report from Glyn Dowdswell a house-to-house search of the area had also been completed. Visiting the home of one William Locking, Sergeant Bayliss and two officers wanted to question him on suspicion of murder. Opening slowly a head peered tentatively around the front door, and looked inquisitively at three officers wearing pensive expressions.

'William Gerard Locking?' asked the sergeant sternly.

'Yeah, that's right,' replied Billy, 'what's the matter?' 'I have to ask you to accompany us to Holdsworth Police Station, we need to ask you about your movements on the night of the eighteenth.'

'Yeah, sure,' said Billy co-operatively, 'wasn't that the night the Holligans were murdered?'

'That's very perceptive of you.' replied one of the other two officers sarcastically.

'Hey! We'll have none of that,' cut in the sergeant, 'we don't know he's guilty of anything yet - do we?' Thinking he sounded reasonable Billy warmed to Sergeant Bayliss immediately, and was obviously someone who would listen and take onboard another's point of view, but the other officers appeared cynical, especially the one who'd made the sarcastic remark, the other, well, he was just downright unpleasant and stared at Billy without flinching.

Spending three hours in a police interview room

wasn't what Billy had planned for the day, but what the Hell, he had to help them with their inquiries hadn't he? Switching on the tape the sergeant started the interview, and recording the time and date he asked Billy his name and address, age, date of birth, and place of work, as per procedure.

'So Billy, when you had this confrontation with Paul and Martin Holligan, what exactly happened? Take me through it from beginning to end.' Relating the story factually until he reached the part where they'd entered the woods, Billy then changed his story to suit his ends and told the sergeant a pack of lies.

'So after we got to the edge of the woods, Martin said he didn't want to fight... yeah, I remember now Shirley accused him of being a coward, I said I didn't want to fight either, so... we went our separate ways, I went straight home, I was feeling tired anyhow.' For a few minutes the sergeant tried to unnerve Billy by using the "silent routine" ploy. It didn't work, and remaining seated Billy wore a look of bemusement, and periodically glanced casually around the room. His act of innocence fooled even the seasoned sergeant, then leaving Billy alone for ten minutes they observed him through a camera in an adjacent room, but showing no signs of unease they eventually resigned to release him.

'He's guilty as Hell, but we can't hold him,' commented Inspector Hanshaw, 'let him go.'

'I don't think so,' contradicted Sergeant Bayliss, 'I think he's innocent, but I do think he knows something about the crime.'

'You can go now,' said the officer who'd stared at him earlier, 'we have no reason to hold you, it

appears your alibi is water tight.'

'Oh well, thankyou,' said Billy smiling pleasantly, 'sorry I couldn't be of more help.'

'So are we.' said the officer bluntly. Leaving the police station Billy went home again, after all, tomorrow being Monday it was back to work, and there was a new girl at the factory who'd caught his eye last Friday, who'd been hired to replace the hapless Shirley Holligan. Looking forward to taking her out Billy was keen to get to work, plus, she seemed a nice sort of person, and more amenable than others he'd dated recently. Spending nearly two hours at his bench Billy eventually summoned up the courage to walk over and speak to her.

'Hi, Billy Locking, you're new here aren't you?'

'Yeah, that's right, Julie Schumann... what's it like here? I mean, is it a good place to work?'

'It's ok,' replied Billy nonchalantly, 'as long as you keep your nose clean nobody bothers you.'

'Oh,' she replied smiling, 'not like my last job then, that was crap!'

'Why was that then?' inquired Billy.

'There was this woman,' Julie told him, 'she was one of those control freaks, know what I mean?'

'Oh yeah,' replied Billy, deliberately exaggerating a yawn to let her know he was on her wavelength.

'Yeah... she was always on my back for one reason or another, wanting to know the in's and out's of a pig's ass!'

'Well, you won't get that here, they're pretty laid back here... listen uh, would you like to go for a drink tonight, our local's a good little place, no oldies around - if you know what I mean.'

'Oh... yeah... sounds good. Yeah, ok then, I can't get out 'til seven thirty, if that's ok with you.'

'Great! Yeah, no worries, see you at half seven then.' It had never been that easy before, so, tonight it was! Meeting Julie at her front gate he had to admit she was even more stunning now she'd scrubbed up! Dressed to kill Billy felt elated that he was the one who'd walk into the pub with her, and heads would turn tonight, no one would snigger behind his back now! The lounge was noisy, however it changed to a murmur when Julie walked in with Billy right behind her. Sitting in the snug away from the others at the factory they talked on many subjects, and her ability to converse on a wide range of subjects Billy found very challenging and refreshing. This girl was intelligent and astute, and they talked laughed and joked for over two hours until Billy decided he wanted to take things a step further, then suggested they take a slow walk home.

'How about we go back to my place,' he suggested nonchalantly, 'it's not far from here.'

'Yeah, why not.' replied Julie smiling. Billy couldn't believe his luck, here was this gorgeous chick which at first he'd considered too classy for him, and all evening she'd only had eyes for him. Now she was coming back to his place, and was pleased to do so!

CHAPTER SIX

The key clicked in the lock, and opening the door Billy allowed Julie in first, and walking passed him the smile on her face told him that his move had pleased her. Removing her coat Billy took it and hung it in the hall, and again she smiled her approval.

'Drink?' asked Billy raising an eyebrow, 'daft question really, we've been drinking all evening!'

'No, not at all,' she replied as their laughter died, 'I'd love one.' Going to his modest drinks cabinet he poured a turquoise coloured liquid into a tall conical glass.

'What is this?' asked Julie quizzically.

'Try it,' replied Billy smiling, 'I think you'll like it.' Taking a sip, it tasted vaguely of Vanilla, but had an underlying taste she couldn't readily identify, possibly honey, or something like it.

'Mmmm... nice,' she said looking up at him from under her eyelids, 'I'm impressed young Billy.'

'Thankyou ma'am, I aim to please... will ma'am require anything else?' joked Billy walking 'round the sofa to join her. Without answering she looked straight into his eyes and continued smiling, and Billy got the message, he was home and dry. A few minutes passed with neither of them speaking, then feeling uncomfortable Billy strived to think of something to talk about, and having done so well at the pub it would be a crime to let her slip from his grasp now!

'I've got something to tell you...' said Billy, and then

deliberately let his voice trail away.

'Go no then,' replied Julie, 'don't keep me in suspense!' Unsure if he should continue he hesitated for a few moments, then making up his mind Billy told her his secret.

'I've got a space-ship!' he blurted out. Laughing at first Julie then saw the serious look in his eye, and her laughter died.

'You're serious aren't you?' she asked, as her brow furrowed with curiosity.

'Yes, totally,' replied Billy straight-faced, 'would you like to see it?'

'Okaaay! Show me this wonderful ship of yours,' she said teasingly, 'let's go to Mars.'

'You're laughing at me,' replied Billy looking hurt, 'you're just like all the others you bitch!'

'Hey! That's not nice,' countered Julie, 'I wasn't laughing at you at all, it must be a figment of your imagination.'

'Sorry,' said Billy suddenly regretting his outburst, and realised he was lucky she hadn't walked out, 'it's just that other chicks I've dated jeered at me, and called me a nutter.'

'Well that wasn't very nice of them,' said Julie ingratiatingly, 'so, I'm a chick am I?'

'Come on,' said Billy smiling, 'let's go... and yes - you are a chick, a very beautiful one!' Leaving Billy's flat they walked 'round the corner to a row of garages, and stopping at the third he lifted the up and over that clattered loudly as he pushed it aloft. Inside was a Ferrari Modena in red, and seeing this icon of Italian engineering Julie's eyes popped out of her head.

'Well I am impressed,' she told him, 'your space-ship seems more credible now I've seen this.' Grinning widely Billy opened the passenger door and allowed her in, then walking around he opened the driver's door and sank into the seat beside her. The staccato roar of the engine cut through the night air like a knife, and having reversed out he snicked her into first gear, then pumping the throttle briefly he let out the clutch. Applying moderate pressure to the brake pedal he pulled up crisply at the end of the road. Turning left he flattened the loud pedal and the car took off like a bat out of Hell as the rear end snaked wildly. Looking to his left he saw Julie looking straight back at him, and smiling at her she readily returned it with a look of promise in her deep corn-blue eyes. Beside himself with joy Billy couldn't believe his luck; now let them laugh at him! He's the man!

Twenty-five minutes later Billy turned left down a dark country lane, and flicking the headlights on full beam they lit the hedgerows brightly either side of the road.

'You enjoy driving fast then?' said Julie smirking.

'Sorry, don't you like it,' replied Billy immediately, concerned he'd upset her again, 'I can slow down if you like.'

'No... I don't mind, it just tells me a bit more about you that's all.' said Julie cryptically, and that made Billy grin, so, he thought, she wants to get to know me, but dare he fall in love with her, could this be it? Damned if he did, damned if he didn't! It had always been that way in the past. There again this wasn't the past, like the engine under the bonnet his

heart raced as he suddenly swung right at a fork into another lane.

'Here we are!' he proudly announced.

'I can't see anything,' declared Julie staring at a tree covered hill illuminated by the cars headlights.

'No, of course you can't,' said Billy teasing her, 'watch this!' Taking what appeared to be a remote control from his pocket he pointed it at the hill directly in front of him. To her utter amazement the hill started moving, slowly at first, as if it was sinking into the ground, looking sideways at Julie Billy noticed her eyes were like a couple of organ stops. Moving slowly forward he drove into the hillside through a massive doorway, and being no longer required he switched off the headlights. They were now in the brilliant glare of the interior lights, and from what she could make out the whole hill had been hollowed out and turned into a massive underground hangar, it was then her eyes met the most awesome sight she'd ever seen, a spacecraft so large it almost filled the entire cavity!

'Shit! You really weren't joking then!' she said, mesmerised by the sheer size of it. Killing the engine Billy got out, and walking around the car he opened the door for Julie to alight.

'Come on,' said Billy, his heart racing, 'let me show you around.'

'Yes, thanks,' replied Julie, wondering what would happen next, 'this is quite... unreal.'

As she approached the walkway she felt a tingling sensation in her feet as if she was floating, and seeing the look on her face Billy reassured her it was nothing to worry about.

'This ship has its own gravity, that's what you can feel through your feet.' explained Billy, then smiling at him Julie cast her eyes around the interior of the ship, once inside she quickly realised the ship wasn't as large as she'd first thought.

'It seemed huge when I first clapped eyes on it.' she said casually.

'It's a search and rescue craft, but it does have quite impressive armament,' stated Billy now wearing a leer of confidence, 'it needs to, with some of the places I go to!' Smiling again Billy watched her every move as she took in everything that met her eyes, and it was safe to say he was definitely impressed by her.

'Let's go for a spin,' he said suddenly, 'where would you like to go?'

'As I said earlier - Mars!'

'Oh come on Julie, can't you think of anywhere more exciting than that?'

'It's alright for you, I've never been to Mars!' she told him laughing.

'Ok, Mars it is!' replied Billy sitting at the helm.

'Only only thing,' said Julie suddenly, 'how do we get out of this hill?'

'Watch!' Hearing a humming noise emanating from behind Juliet turned to see the entrance they'd come through close. To her amazement the whole hillside began to segment, and each segment looked like a giant curved carving knife pointing skyward, then as the ship suddenly lurched upward Billy apologised for his clumsy piloting.

'These ships take a bit of handling I'm afraid,' he told her grinning widely; the hill closed behind them.

'Are we leaving right away?' she asked, returning his smile.

'Look here!' said Billy pointing to a screen on his console, and casting her eyes on a silver globe against a black background she asked the inevitable question.

'What is it?' she asked, staring at it in bewilderment.

'The Earth!' said Billy, then grinned again.

'You mean... we're in space already?' asked Julie with incredulity.

'We're already a million miles from Earth, another thirty minutes and we'll be on your favourite planet!' added Billy vainly.

'This might seem like a strange question, but is there a loo on board?' asked Julie looking rather pained.

'Of course!' said Billy, laughing at the thought of travelling many light years without a bog, 'go down through that circular hatch in the centre of the floor, you'll feel that tingling again, but don't worry, as I said, it's only the onboard gravity.'

'I'll be back in a moment.' she told Billy smiling him, and as she made her way toward the hatch leading to the lower deck his grin turned to a knowing one. Returning to the helm he kept the ship on course for Mars, and wondered why she particularly wanted to go to there?

'What's that?' asked Julie, then detecting the alarm in her voice Billy turned to look at what she'd seen.

'It's a Carnosaur,' he told her warily, 'highly intelligent creatures actually, but once they've programmed their minds to kill there's no stopping them!'

'Yes, I know.' said Julie, as her expression suddenly

turned deadpan, 'has it killed recently?'

'Hey - who are you? And where did you get those clothes?'

'I'm not Julie - I'm really known as Julas, I'm an interstellar hunter and I know you are not Billy either - are you - Biilis Lok!'

'Ok, so you know who I am... so what do you intend to do about it?' asked Billy. Raising her right wrist Julas pressed a button on her communicator.

'Chakora... I've got Biilis Lok, what do you want me to do next? Ok, understood,' listening for a few moments she watched Biilis without blinking once, 'yes, it's definitely him, I've checked his iris and there is no doubt!' Closing her communicator Julas looked Biilis straight in the eye.

'Well Biilis Lok, it appears your time has run out... I've received orders to start your trial - now!'

'Don't be fuckin' stupid, you don't stand a chance!' said Biilis, and laughed at the thought of a female getting the better of him. However, as he turned to face her she was brandishing an Acidermo pistol.

'You even think about using that thing and I'll instruct Havo to kill you!'

'Oh, it has a name then?' asked Julas totally unperturbed by his threat, then challenged Billy with a threat of her own, 'but I must insist you relinquish the helm of this ship to me - right now!'

'Fuck off!'

'Biilis Lok, you are charged with interfering in the life of a grade 2 planet known to its inhabitants as Earth. You have wilfully used your advantage as a researcher to violate that planet and its people. I arrest you in the name of intergalactic law. The

punishment for this crime is as you know - death!' 'Havo - do your stuff!' ordered Billy grinning maliciously, up until that point the Carnosaur had remained completely motionless, then at a speed belying its size Havo suddenly leapt forward. Bringing her gun up at lightning speed Julas delivered a lethal dose of Acidermo to the craven beast. Stopping dead in his tracks Havo stared at her in his last seconds, and screaming continuously in his death throes five minutes later he'd completely disintegrated.

'Hey look, we can d-do a deal can't we?' pleaded Biilis, having seen his only effective defence easily destroyed, and suddenly realised he was up against someone infinitely better than he was. So she was a female, so what, his skin came first, and he would preserve that at all costs! There were however, no deals available.

'I'll Prepare your trial!' said Julas coldly.

'Look... wait up, wait a fuckin' minute, I can make you very -'

'It's no use trying to bribe me!' said Julas without expression. 'Sit in that chair.' Doing so without question was a bad move on his part as he'd just taken the accused seat!

'Now - close that wrist band on your right wrist.' ordered Julas, and having done so the other bands closed automatically on his remaining three limbs.

'Hey! What the fuck?' said Biilis as his eyebrows flew skyward. Turning the chair to face the onboard screen Julas switched it on, and Biilis saw the stern faces of the judge and jury that would try him.

'You will experience a short spell of interference, as

I plug the receptors in to his skull.’ said Julas informatively.

‘Receptors?’ screamed Biilis in disbelief.

‘That’s right Biilis,’ replied Julas coldly, ‘if you remember, to prepare your mind for the mission you were put under anaesthetic, and at the same time they also wrote software into your brain to record all events during your period on Earth... damning evidence wouldn’t you say? It’s not only the judge and jury that will see it, but you will also see the crimes you committed! Poor Biilis!’ Turning deathly white Biilis knew his game was up. Pulling the headrest up to its full extent Julas twisted it through one hundred and eighty degrees, then lowering it over Biilis’ head forced it onto his scalp, and as the two electrodes pierced his cranium he yelped in pain. The judge and jury watched Biilis as his mind unfolded the truth about his time on Earth, and after half an hour the judge raised his hand.

‘You wish to say something?’ asked Julas.

‘Well it seems we’ve seen most of his escapades,’ said the judge with disgust, ‘is there any point in seeing more?’

‘Not really your honour,’ replied Julas factually, ‘there’s only ten more minutes, but it’s more of the same.’

‘In that case I see no point, so I’ll delay my summing up no further,’ he told Julas, ‘is everyone in agreement?’ There was no dissention.

‘Biilis Lok,’ started the judge, ‘it is my duty to pass a sentence on you commensurate with your crime. As we have seen, you blatantly usurped the chattels of the planet Earth, and those of its people. You had

no intention of carrying out your function as a researcher, and you have cost the government of your home planet Palesia three million Skopla! On top of that we have the additional cost of clearing up your mess, an erasure team will have to be sent to Earth to in order clear the minds of one thousand seven hundred and sixty two inhabitants, and also, erase your irresponsible actions. On top of that you also took a non-indigenous species that did cause several deaths to some of the inhabitants of Earth. I therefore have no compunction in sentencing you to the maximum possible under intergalactic law - death!

‘Oh come on,’ shouted Biilis suddenly, ‘this is fuc-’ Without warning Biilis fell silent, having pressed a button on the chair Julas had pre-loaded his body with high voltage.

‘Sorry for the interruption your honour,’ said Julas having silenced him, ‘you were about to say something?’

‘No need to apologise,’ replied the judge, ‘I was going to ask if you would be prepared to carry out the execution?’

‘Yes!’ replied Julas emphatically. ‘I’ll switch off the screen while I carry out the service, and switch it on again for you to verify his death.’

At two thirty the police had finished going over Billy's flat, but finding nothing incriminating the only thing that puzzled them was why and to where he'd disappeared. Having specifically linked him to the disappearance of the new factory girl Julie Schumman, they realised she had also disappeared at precisely the same time, but had no choice but to

dismiss the event as - mysterious.

'Here's something serg,' said a young DC, 'did you know he owned a Ferrari Modena?'

'Yes but we still haven't found it,' replied the sergeant, 'I have a feeling this is going to be one of those cases it'll take us years to solve... if we ever do!'

THE END

Stainless Steel

Chapter One

Running out of cigarettes wasn't something Brandt Skelton liked doing, and it annoyed him having to go out at that time of night just for a packet of smokes, but infinitely better than the alternative! Pulling on his coat he mentally prepared himself to face the onslaught of the North wind. Blowing the upturned collar of his coat the wind also battered his face, and hunching his shoulders against a wind that cut to the bone he shivered involuntarily. The last time he'd gone to the mini-market the sun had shone, and that was only two days ago! Not having bothered with a pullover he turned the corner and shivered even more as the wind's incisors mercilessly bit into him. Spotting the lights of the mini-market fifty yards up the road his luck was out that night, having forgotten to check his watch before leaving he found the door firmly locked, as its dog-eared "Closed" sign stared at him through the window. Realising immediately it was after ten o'clock, and having come this far Brandt certainly wasn't going home without at least one pack of cigarettes. There was another shop two streets away, and knowing it was no more than a ten minute walk he cursed his luck and walked briskly to keep his blood circulating. Those three hundred yards seemed like a march to the North Pole as the wind cut relentlessly through him. Thankfully the sign said "Open"; his luck was in. Pushing open the

faded green door he walked in and saw the cheery face of the proprietor behind his counter, as a dying breed nowadays it was one of those little back street shops that sell all sorts of everything, you must have bought something in a similar shop at least once in your life, and having searched the shop probably remember not finding the item you want on display, so to avoid disappointment you ask the proprietor, who immediately tells you he's got a few in the back of the store, and do you remember how relieved you were when he returned a few minutes later, waving your item in his hand?

Persisting in keeping the door open Brandt was forced to turn and physically push the door shut against the wind!

'I wonder if this wind will ever die away,' said Brandt jokingly, 'Can I have forty Bens'- stopping dead in his tracks Brandt's mouth dropped in total disbelief as he suddenly realised he was no longer in the shop, but was in some sort of stainless steel room! Absent-mindedly apologising for his intrusion he turned to leave to find the door had disappeared! The door was right there in front of him he thought! Needing to see if this was some sort of illusion he was suddenly aware he was making no progress, but the door was no longer there, and with every step he took the room appeared to move with him. It dawned on him he was being plain daft, this just couldn't happen! Stopping suddenly he turned and walked in the opposite direction, but after three steps his heart pounded in his chest as the realisation dawned on him; the room was moving with him! Telling himself there had to be a rational

explanation he turned right, but again made no progress, so turning through one hundred and eighty degrees he walked in the opposite direction only to find himself facing the same dilemma. Gathering his thoughts for a moment Brandt tried analysing his situation, so looking around he could see it was burnished stainless steel, but the other odd thing about this “room” was that there was no lighting, and yet he could see perfectly well! Also, there were no doors or windows!

Close to panic for a moment Brandt tried rationalising the situation and told himself there had to be a reasonable explanation for this, and had to consider his next step. First, he knew he’d have to find the door, if he came in through it, then logically, it must be there somewhere for him to make an exit; it was plain common sense! Secondly, he’d have to find a way of reaching the door without the room moving with him every time he moved in a given direction, but the question was – how! The answer came to him in a flash, if he jumped toward the wall he would undoubtedly reach the door on landing, then - just open it and make his way out! Although he was only six feet from the door, or that part of the wall where he’d last seen it, having leapt like an Olympic long-jumper, despairingly he landed on the same spot he’d jumped from. Now feeling very unnerved he knew his feet had cleared the floor, and should now be standing by the door, but he was still in the same spot! ‘Shit man... shit! What in Hell’s name is going on here?’ he shouted nervously, then turning around he walked to the opposite side of the room, or would

have done had the room not moved with him, then turning left he walked on, but still made no progress, turning again he walked in the opposite direction, and still made no progress!

‘Hello?’ shouted Brandt, his voice now quaking, ‘can anyone hear me? Is there anyone there?’ Although near to panic he couldn’t help noticing his voice had no resonance, as if someone had trapped his voice in a vessel from which it had no escape. Looking at his watch almost made him flip, the readout showed nothing but zeros across its entire face. A look at the ceiling only told him what he knew to be there, and still thought it odd that he was able to see in a room with no apparent means of lighting, but that wasn’t a priority consideration at this precise moment. His face now pale Brandt realised he was in a lot of trouble, and seemingly, trouble he was unable to get out of! But why, and what was this place? Did this room want him, and if so for what reason? Why did it even exist, what was its purpose, and how long would he be trapped here? Indeed would he ever get out? That question threw him completely, and Brandt then walked in every direction in a bid to out-manoeuvre the room, but every time he changed direction the room changed with him.

‘What did I do God! Why me? What have I done?’ shouted Brandt, then sat on the floor and cried openly in sheer desperation. Ten minutes had passed before his sorrow had dissipated, and his rationale began to return.

‘Ok, I’m sitting on a stainless steel floor,’ he told himself, ‘I am surrounded by four stainless steel

walls... with a stainless steel ceiling. Which ever direction I move in... the room moves with me, and I have to get out of here as soon as I can... or I know I'll go insane!' Having no idea of how he would alleviate his predicament it was as if his whole life had no meaning except the entrapment of this box! Was it telling him that this was the only life he was now entitled to? Any other thoughts about his life were irrelevant as long as he was in here! Or could it be subconscious thoughts moving him inexorably towards blind panic? Knowing his mind was being tested to the limit Brandt knew if he couldn't find a way out of this place, he would lose his sanity in no uncertain terms! With thoughts of entrapment pervading his psyche the situation was not just ludicrous, but frightening to the point where he asked himself how long he would last if he couldn't escape! Was he doomed to stare at this tin box until he died, no, that would drive him insane, there just had to be a rational explanation! There had to be a way out! Jumping hadn't worked, so what else was there? Born of desperation another idea entered his head – as yet he hadn't tried diving! Yes – that was it, he would dive at the door, that would certainly fool this room full of enigma. Standing again Brandt prepared himself mentally, and putting one foot back for maximum leverage he leant back and plunged headlong at the wall as if diving from the top board in his local pool. Looking up to see if he'd reached the wall, it was exasperatingly still the same distance away, the only difference being he'd now bruised his knee and elbow, with a sprained wrist to keep them company! Laughing briefly the funny

side of his situation had momentarily taken his mind from the horror of what was happening. This was it then, the end thought Brandt, and realised he had to accept he was here until he went mad or die from hunger. As his subconscious reminded him of his lost freedom the balance was not in his favour, and felt the scales tipping inexorably toward his mental oblivion, he laughed again, only this time having no mental redress it was laughter born of insanity.

'I can get out!' he shouted. 'I can get out! I can get out!' His laughter then turned to tears and he broke down in the certain knowledge he was in a prison from which there was no escape. Something or someone had eviscerated against him, and knowing he had no real enemies why had this happened to him, but what was worse he didn't know.

Chapter Two

The salt from his tears caked on his cheeks as he sat up to take stock of his situation again, perhaps he should study every inch of his “tomb” minutely, and suddenly realising he’d very lax it was something he’d overlooked ‘til now. Starting with the wall where the door was, “was” being the operative word he thought; from the top left corner he worked his way down and across moving from left to right without even knowing what he was looking for. All he knew was he had to look, to find something, anything, that might just turn out to be a weak link in the armour of this place, it might just be his only chance of escape! After forty-five minutes he’d finished his search, and had found nothing! On the verge of despair again his heart sank, but bolstered his mind with the thought that he still had three walls, a ceiling, and a floor to search!

Turning clockwise he faced the adjacent wall to start another search, and hopefully find the tiniest flaw or clue that would allow him out of this infernal trap. After thirty minutes he again found – nothing! At this stage it occurred to Brandt he may not find anything at all, in any of the walls! That thought brought him very close to the abyss of total insanity, and with the presence of overwhelming fear his stomach knotted to the point where he felt physical pain. His head buzzed as if it were about to explode from sheer pressure, but knowing he’d have to stay calm he forced himself to rationalise once more, after all, he still had two walls, a ceiling, and

a floor to search, and was bound to find something! Suddenly he realised there was something else he'd overlooked, he was in fact able to turn a full circle in one spot without the room following him! Perhaps he should try jumping or diving at the wall again, maybe, just maybe he might have more success this time! Standing again he metted himself for his second assault on the wall where he'd last seen the door, but then freezing on the spot he pondered as to what he'd do if lost his sense of direction. Might he forget which wall the door was in? To keep a sense of proportion and direction he should put something on the floor to indicate his position, at least that way he would know which wall was which! Placing his biro on the floor as a compass needle again he dived headlong at the wall in his quest find the elusive door, but on looking up to his utter and total dismay he found himself still in his original position.

'I will get out of here! I will get out of here! I will get of here! I will get out of here!' Breaking down once more he cried bitterly at his involuntary imprisonment. Twenty minutes later with his tears spent he wiped his hand across his eyes and looked around, then turning clockwise again he took care not to disturb the biro and stood facing the third wall. Again his eyes traversed the wall from side to side as they swept slowly from top to bottom, but having found nothing after forty-five minutes he fell headlong into a pit of desperation. It was now almost more than he could bear, and having scoured three walls with unerring accuracy he knew his chances were getting slim. It was now only a matter

of time before he would lose his sanity for good! In order to retain his mental equilibrium he would *have* to find something in the ceiling or the floor, but with the advent of failure he might have to face a truth he dared not think about! Should he carry on, or should he stop? Of course he had to carry on, stopping now he might never know if he'd missed something, and that something might just be his ticket out of here! There again, if he continued, and found nothing... 'Ok, ok,' he said out loud, 'let's carry on, let's see what the last wall has to offer.'

For the fourth time he scoured the wall from side to side, and carefully dropping his gaze inch by inch another spent another thirty minutes before tears again fell uncontrollably from his saddened eyes. 'Only the floor and ceiling to go now you bastard!' he shouted at his unseen or imaginary adversary, now close to losing it in a big way, he was fully aware his mental faculty was teetering near the point of balance, and the scales of sanity Brandt knew would take only one metaphoric speck of dust to tip the fulcrum, and him, over the edge! Considering his position for what seemed like the millionth time he stopped to think about his life, and purposefully ran it like a film from his earliest memory. Sitting in silence he smiled now and again as he remembered particularly pleasant moments from his childhood and youth, his subconscious then threw Mattie at him, and she had singularly been the most tragic episode in his thirty-four years on this planet! He still loved her, although dying from cancer nearly nine years ago he couldn't forget her. In his mind's eye Brandt saw her smiling at him, and smiling back

was briefly unaware of his situation. Unmercifully tears again fell in his wretched state, and on top of his fearful predicament he now had to cope with the memory of Mattie.

‘What am I going to do?’ shouted Brandt vehemently, and now experiencing anger he was at a loss to know what to next, but the tiny thread of his remaining sanity told him he had to continue, after all if he gave up now he would never know the possibilities of escape. How would he cover the ceiling? Craning his neck would allow him to cover half the ceiling, but supposing he missed something while turning around to scan the other half! Realising his only hope was to lie on his back he moved the pen that was his compass to his right out of harms way, then lying on the floor he tilted his head back and surveyed the ceiling from left to right, and hoped to find - anything; a hairline crack or something resembling the edge of a panel that would herald his exit from this cell of despair. Having traversed the remaining inches of the opposite end of the ceiling, and still finding nothing Brandt’s despair gripped him again. Gritting his teeth he sat up to take stock once again, but he was aware now his mind was telling him that it was over, and there really was little point in going further.

The floor would hold the key, it had to! Taking on a new bravado Brandt’s mind insisted there had to be a way out; it was a racing certainty! Thinking carefully about his next task he had to ensure the safety of his biro, and placed it in a new spot at the end wall he would naturally move away from it as he shuffled back. However, he hadn’t considered

that he would still be in the same spot!

This was it! His final chance of freedom depended on finding something now, but knew also if he didn't he was finished, of that he was certain! Should he start? At least not knowing was better than madness in the face of total captivity. There again, if he didn't know he would go insane anyhow – or die of hunger! Aware of his growing uncertainty Brandt fought it off, but imprisonment had compounded his mental stress, and Brandt knew full well had he not been trapped here the situation wouldn't even exist! The will to survive and retain his mental equilibrium finally got the better of him, so starting in what he'd bench-marked as the top left corner his eyes moved across the floor scrutinising every millimetre as he went. Moving backwards Brandt progressed until he felt the toes of his shoes touch the far wall, then putting his finger on the floor where he'd stopped he turned carefully to face the opposite wall. Having only three feet of floor remaining his heart pounded with fear as he patiently scoured the residual area, but as his peripheral vision caught sight of the wall Brandt's fears grew considerably, in less than ten minutes he would have the answer he wanted, or succinctly - the answer he dreaded! Blurring his vision tears fell like rain drops and forced him to stop, so placing a finger on the floor to mark the spot, he used his other hand to wipe his eyes. Waiting until he'd regained a modicum of emotional stability he continued, and hoped he wouldn't have to stop again before reaching the final corner. Suddenly it hit him like a bombshell, if his toes had reached the wall

before he'd turned 'round, why was he still in the centre of the room? This new enigma sent his mind reeling, and he almost lost it completely.

Chapter Three

It was all too much, having spent the best part of four hours going over every inch of his silent trap Brandt fell apart. Now falling freely tears blurred his vision as he shoulder-charged the wall in sheer desperation, only to bounce off and fall heavily to the floor. It was then it occurred to him he'd actually moved across the floor, so standing stock still for a minute he took in this new information! Why was he now able to move freely around the room where previously he'd been limited to occupying one spot, or had his thinking been wrong? Was it purely a case of concentrating on when he was able to move freely as opposed to how? So, there is thought Brandt, a chink, a definite chink in the armour of this place. When did he notice he was able to move freely? The only time he'd been aware of it was when he'd shoulder charged the wall, although in retrospect it might have been before, but how long before! Admitting he just didn't know Brandt realised he'd have to recap over the last four hours or so, and hopefully recall exactly when he was first able to start moving around. Also, if he were to survive he'd have to remain calm enough to think it through rationally, as to let his mind race would only make matters worse. It was then it occurred to him he'd been moving around this cursed room since starting the floor. Yes of course, that was it he thought, and remembered distinctly being rooted to one spot as he scrutinised the four walls and the ceiling; but the floor – that was different, he'd

moved through space without even knowing it! Suddenly getting up he walked around to prove he could still move within his space of confinement. ‘Yesssss!’ said Brandt with a great deal of zest and satisfaction. Tapping the wall he heard a dull thud and noticed that like his voice it was acoustically dead, the noise had no resonance and died instantly. What to do next? This would take some thinking; first he had to make himself fully aware of the difference between moving around and not moving around. Then he would have to ask himself why was there a difference? What had stopped him from moving around after he’d first become incarcerated? What had changed that allowed him to move around after searching the floor, or was it even important? Dismissing that last thought as rubbish he knew instinctively it was important! Ok, it was time to take stock and make a plan of attack, to regain the freedom that he valued so highly, it flashed through his mind that he hadn’t valued his freedom at all until he’d fallen into this trap, and if he got out of here he would certainly value it more highly in future! If he got out of here? No, that wasn’t right, when he got out of here! Yes, for now at last he felt he had at least a chance of escape. How would he get out, that was his next question, it suddenly occurred to him that his ability move around didn’t actually guarantee him a fresh advantage, so why the difference? Spending the next forty minutes tapping the other three walls from top to bottom and left to right it was to no avail, and Brandt quickly realised there was no difference between them and the first wall. Beginning to feel dejected again he sat in the

corner to re-think his strategy, if only he could get his brain into gear, why couldn't he think of something... lateral! Of course, that was what he needed, lateral thinking! Ok, now what? How much lateral thinking can you do in a place like this? Especially when your mind isn't exactly thinking rationally! Considering his present position he now had to imagine he was not trapped in this box, that there was a door he could open and... just walk out! Getting to his feet again he walked around the room tapping each section carefully as he went, but with its walls remaining acoustically dead Brandt knew nothing had changed. His next task was to jump up and tap the ceiling, which would be the most energetic job he'd tackled so far! Twenty minutes later and slightly out of breath he sat down to consider what he had gained by way of information – nothing!

To all intent and purpose Brandt was now non-compos mentis, and with his mental faculty having fragmented rapidly he sat in the corner rocking back and forth and sobbed uncontrollably.

'Why me? Why me God? What have I done to deserve this? I never harmed anyone as far as I know, so you'll have to tell me I'm afraid... 'cos I just don't have a bloody clue! His mind raced to recall everything he'd done and thought since his entrapment, as his mind's eye ran his life before him like an old movie, he watched everything with urgency as it moved at double speed, then unable to carry on he buried his head and curled up in a ball. Having thought of and tried everything he'd found nothing had worked; it had played tricks on his mind

and had won! Unable to even think about caring his mind was gone, and what remained was an empty breathing shell that had no rhyme or reason, had no concepts or ideas, just – existence!

‘Oh, you’re back with us then!’ hearing the voice Brandt looked up to see a police sergeant standing in front of him, attempting to stand Brandt found his movement somewhat restricted, and looking down realised he’d been incarcerated in a straight jacket!

‘Caused quite a stir in that shop you did,’ said the sergeant staring at him quizzically, ‘are you going to behave yourself now? If you are I’ll undo that thing and let you walk around the cell.’ Brandt didn’t reply verbally, he simply nodded and remained where he was.

‘We’re gonna charge you with affray, damage to property, and grievous bodily harm,’ the officer informed him, ‘will you admit to those charges?’ Although Brandt had heard the sergeant’s words they had no meaning for him, and remaining silent he sat staring at the wall.

‘I’ve got to get out of here!’ said Brandt finally as the sergeant locked the door, so dropping the viewing hatch he looked in at Brandt, and stared at him for a short time.

‘Put any thoughts of escape out of your mind son, if you try you’ll only make things worse for yourself!’

The end

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