

The Mandarin's Dilemma

By Joe St.Johanser



## Chapter 1

The general raised his hand to the black plexiglass face mask that covered the front of his flying helmet and triggered the coms link. "Captain Bobbitt ... Captain do you read me?" No reply - just the empty whisper of static.

From a height of 80,000 feet General Sir Jock Saddler KCB, CBE, MC, Commander of Her Majesty's Army Land Forces, could see the sun glittering off the sea far below. The silver sea in which were studded the emerald green jewels that were the British Isles. He peered down left through the tiny cockpit window from the rear seat in a two seater fast jet, a black-project reconnaissance plane, presently cruising at Mach 3.2 and just approaching the Scillies. Sir Jock was deeply patriotic. He felt a surge of pleasure as he enjoyed the sight before him. His beautiful homeland. He was reminded of John of Gaunt's famous 'sceptred isle' speech from Shakespeare's 'Tragedy of King Richard the Second'. Gaunt compared the sea to 'a moat defensive to a house, against the envy of less happier lands'. Alas the moat was now easily crossed.

The plane banked sharply and dropped several thousand feet in one second. At this speed the plane was knifing through the air lanes which contained many other aircraft. The pilot needed to respond fast to orders from air traffic control. Sir Jock felt a surge of nausea as the pressure suit harness tightened hard round his firm but middle-aged midriff. He was tightly squeezed in the cockpit seat and the pressure suit was designed for younger and fitter people.

The general triggered the coms link again. "Captain Bobbitt ... Captain do you read me?" The plane flicked into a yet tighter bank and into a fast descent, dropping down towards RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk through grey-white pillows of cumulus that flashed past the cockpit.

This time there was a reply from his aide. Captain Jill Bobbitt replied, "Loud and clear Sir. I'm standing ready at Mildenhall on the runway. I've got a motorbike and you will be riding pillion I'm afraid. Sorry about that."

The general is not pleased with this news. "Yes - you're too right I'm not looking forward to the pillion seat - I'm just coming up to the British Isles - ETA four minutes according to the pilot - he says there'll be a few broken windows along the south coast with the sonic boom we are generating - Mach 3.2 apparently - Washington London door to door in four hours they promised me - that's classified by the way - the Americans don't want anyone to know how fast their latest recce plane is - aargh!" He is again surprised by the plane's sharp manoeuvre.

"General?"

" God Almighty! ... no I'm fine, this damn pilot is not feeling a thing ... yes yes.. I confirm your orders - get me to the War Room in minimum time - your motorbike leg is within the four hours...short of killing us both Bobbitt!"

"Wilco sir. I'll get you there. Very low prob of death. Ha ha."

"Yes. But not zero eh Captain?...they've got the sigint stacked up waiting for us. All I know for now is what's on the news channels. That bloody Gondwana Great Leader bozo has done it at last and invaded his neighbour and our oilfield."

Sir Jock was impressed with the speed of his journey - door to door from Washington to London in under four hours. Thank God for the Americans! Without their helpful offer of a flight it would have taken at least twelve hours, and a lot could happen in that time. He was grateful. No doubt a large bill would be rendered to Her Majesty's Government. No doubt an offsetting amount would be charged by Her Majesty's Government to the USAF Squadron that currently occupied the Mildenhall airbase.

He had very little information to go on. Some sort of invasion by the Republic of Gondwana into the British Protectorate of South Gondwana. No doubt he would learn more from his gung-ho aide-de-camp, Captain Bobbitt, at Mildenhall. He took no pleasure from the indignity of the offered pillion ride, but it was his duty to get to the command headquarters war-room fast, whatever the personal inconvenience. Only there was the security tight enough to reveal top secret intelligence. He needed to draw up plans and brief the Prime Minister.

Waiting on the side of the runway Captain Jill Bobbitt sat comfortably astride her powerful khaki painted motorbike in her khaki combat fatigues. A little bit of action at last. Great to be in the thick of it. The plane swept in to a fast landing and rolled to the end of the runway. Bobbitt tightened her crash helmet, patted her hip where her automatic pistol lay ready in case of need, and roared off to meet the plane, which had turned around and was ready to take off again. The pilot had opened up the rear cockpit and extended six steps of a tiny metal ladder. The general clambered carefully down, jumping the last six feet to the ground. Good job he was still pretty fit or he would have broken his ankle. Then he ran twenty feet over to the bike as the plane closed up the ladder and cockpit, ran up its engine and took off back down the runway with a roar like a mountain splitting in two.

Bobbitt handed the general a helmet. He put it on and climbed aboard the rear seat, clamping his arms around the rider in front.

Bobbitt shouted over the noise of the plane, now in a vertical climb with pillars of flame from the engines. "Hold tight sir! Round my waist not my tits if you can manage it!

"Oops, sorry". The general swiftly changed his grip and shouted back, "Ever been to Gondwana Bobbitt? Bloody hellhole!"

"No sir, no foreign tours yet. I'm looking forward to it if we go". The bike took off at high speed on the road to London. The general clung on tighter as corners were taken at high speed with considerable squealing of tyres and leaning of the machine. "For God's sake Captain, don't kill me off or they'll have General Bloggett running the war!"

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Meanwhile a deep yellow shaft of sunlight angled down from dark clouds and through the tall windows of the Whitehall office occupied by Her Majesty's Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Tristram Seville. The dusty sunbeam fell across a large old fashioned desk, with its green leather inlay - green Morocco leather that had protected the desk top since it was new in Gladstone's time. The room was large, with a high ceiling. Dingy, beige-colored walls rose twelve feet to an elaborately modeled cornice. Above the cornice another six feet to the ceiling, ornamented with arching ribs and plaster mouldings of roses and small cherubs.

Apart from the desktop the room was dark, save for the flickering multicolored light of a large TV screen mounted on one wall. The TV sound was off and the room was silent. Sir Tristram, an elegant figure with silver-grey hair, swept back in distinguished wings at the sides of his narrow face, neatly bookending his eagle's beak of a nose, was sitting in a winged chair at the desk. He sat upright, though a little stooped by care - a high official grown old in his country's service.

Helena Besty, Assistant Principal Cabinet Office, a neat, very pretty young woman with shiny, clean-as-a-whistle blonde tresses, was sitting silent and upright in the dark corner away from the sunlight, her knees demurely together. Helena too was a high rank official, keen and ambitious. Fast track career. Largely on merit, though her fine appearance and charming smile had not hindered her advancement: promoted by older males past the serried ranks of younger males who were her rivals. Care had not yet etched any worry lines in her high, pale forehead. Or, if it had, they were well hidden by her carefully applied makeup.

Sir Tristram glanced at his watch and rose from his chair. He stepped the few paces needed to reach the TV screen, adjusted the screen to avoid the sun's brightness and turned up

the sound. He returned to his chair and sat frowning at the screen, on which was playing out this week's episode of the ceremonial soap opera that is Prime Minister's Questions in the Commons. The noise from the TV rose louder.

Sir Tristram finally spluttered and gave voice. "God Almighty - what is that pillock doing now?" Sir Tristram was referring to the Prime Minister, at that moment speaking from the despatch box.

"He's only trying to do what you told him to do Sir Tristram," said Helena in the submissive but primly authoritative tone she had perfected.

"Don't remind me. Why didn't you stop me?" Sir Tristram was baffled and exasperated. He was accustomed to being in control, to having events roll on in a predictable sequence. The Prime Minister's words were unexpected. A nasty shock. Events were running out of control.

Helena made a small adjustment to the dials of submissiveness and authority, turning the one down and the other up. Her tone changed a little. "I did try - you called me a foolish young woman."

"As I recall it I called you a silly cow - for which *bêtise* I now apologize. Nevertheless you should have stopped me. I was wrong. A rare outcome of course, but even Her Majesty's hand selected Permanent Secretary may occasionally cock things up. "

Sir Tristram cracked his knuckles and banged the desk with his fists. He had tried to impart a subtle strategy to the Prime Minister, to deal with the current threat. The possibility of war had suddenly materialized in an otherwise calm and peaceful English Autumn. The beautiful dark, almost purple clouds outside the window now looked menacing. The subtle strategy had obviously been completely misunderstood. Under the British system the Prime Minister possessed immense power to do exactly what he wanted at a moment's notice. He was off the rails, out of control. Sir Tristram stood up. He was almost shouting.

"I should have delivered my thoughts personally rather than using that confounded texting phoning machine you gave me - damn stupid name - Eyeplot, Eyeplant, Eggplant..." He waved his arms in the air as he despaired of remembering the esoteric name of this latest gizmo. The gesture was theatrical. His long thin hands protruded from elegant French cuffs fastened with tiny gold cufflinks. He sat down again, his hands now clapped over his ears.

Helena, suitably chastened at the memory of her failed attempt to bring a modern communication device into the office, said nothing.

The TV noise suddenly increased. A full throated roar came from the screen. Vigorous movement from the Members of Parliament as they bobbed up and down, seeming to wrestle each other and generally behaved badly. Like so many naughty schoolchildren who had forgotten to eat or go to the toilet before the long debate, and whose bellies and bladders were now feeling the strain of waiting.

The Prime Minister stepped up to the despatch box once more and this time made a particularly unfortunate remark. Sir Tristram reacted explosively. "And now he's cocking it up. Bloody Gondwanaland! Bloody mad President! Bloody stupid invasion! Bloody nuisance election!"

Her Majesty's Prime Minister, Mr. Gordon Blackead, gravely intoned his message. Oddly he appeared to be speaking in rhyming couplets. This might have been an artifact of the shouted interference of the MPs that drowned out some of his phrases. "The House must listen carefully to the proposals that I make. We must resist the aggressive acts of this mad potentate. Appeasement cannot be condoned - for all our children's sake- for all our children's sake!" The Prime Minister did not have any children, but he knew where the votes lay

The Shadow Chancellor, Ms. Rumena Haaridan, was leading off for the opposition. She too, perhaps impressed by the PM's doggerel and wanting not to be upstaged, appeared weirdly inclined to rhythmic cadences. "This disgraceful muddle shows - it isn't any wonder - you boom and blast and long to hear the sound of cannon thunder - yet what we hear is by all accounts a most appalling blunder."

The Speaker decided to intervene to try and quell the unruly mob that was creating an unedifying spectacle on television. Accepting the challenge, he too made a fist at rhyming his phrases - the plague of rhyming rhetoric seemed to have infected the whole House. "Order, order, honorable members! The House must remember we're on TV. Whatever your passion, whatever your fire, I pray you all to listen to me. These animal noises are really not funny - our behavior is up there for all to see!"

More yelling, shrieking and hooting from the rowdy MPs - shouts of "Gondwanagate! Gondwanagate!"

Sir Tristram had had enough. He turned the TV down and then off. He sat down again heavily in his winged chair. The Whitehall office returned to gloom lit by sunbeams.

Helena Besty spoke first. "I hate that animal howling. It gets worse with this election fever. It never seems to improve. If only there were more women in parliament debate would be more civilized."

"Helena my dear, I don't know if you have noticed, but the Right Honorable Leader of the Opposition is a woman, and so is her Shadow Chancellor - Ms. Rumena Haaridan - they of course hate each other."

"Yes, but the baying chorus behind them is solidly male."

Indeed it was true. The male members, for the most part, seemed to enjoy the role of football hooligan, chanting their war songs in rhyme. The fewer female members mostly sat and hissed.

Helena pondered the situation. The election was imminent. The Prime Minister, a man of immense ambition, would be completely focused on winning again. The invasion from Gondwanaland was an opportunity for him to play the patriotism card. The country would unite behind a war leader as it always had. There were many example in the past of unpopular governments rescued by turning the nation's attention to a foreign enemy.

She came to a decision. "Never mind, Sir Tristram, I'll take Bernard to dinner and see if I can persuade him to attempt a rescue." Bernard Hapless was Helena's boyfriend and one of the PM's speechwriters. Bernard had a large, efficient brain and was very good at solving problems. He had the Prime Minister's ear.

Sir Tristram approved of him. He brightened at this suggestion. "If only it were you in distress my dear, rather than our wretched people in Gondwanaland, I'm sure your poetry loving boyfriend would certainly wish to help. But with the election imminent he will surely be focused on his day job for the Prime Minister .... even more than on his vain attempt to write one decent poem."

Sir Tristram laughed sarcastically. Helena looked sweetly at him, then rose neatly to her feet, smoothed her close-fitting black skirt with both hands and marched to the door. She was already reaching for her mobile and starting to text a message.

As she passed through the door Sir Tristram had one more remark for her. "Even with your charm you may find him hard to persuade!" Helena smiled back at him. She believed she had mastered the art of persuading her chiefs and colleagues to do her bidding, Bernard Hapless along with the others.

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Helen's dinner appointment had been made for that evening in an expensive St.James restaurant close to Whitehall. Inside the restaurant soft pink lampshades cast an expensive, romantic light, with pools of shadow between each table, making it hard to see clearly - as was intended. The heavy, white table-linen and elegant modern cutlery suited the well-starred reputation of the establishment. A place for secret assignments, meetings of power brokers. A number of tables were already occupied even this early in the evening. Mostly men in pairs. Some women in pairs. The room was very quiet. The waiters moved silently. Waiters of both sexes dressed alike in dark green uniforms with black piping down their jacket lapels and trouser seams. There was the occasional short burst of laughter as a conversational sally made an effect, and the occasional faint clink of wine bottle on glass or knife on plate. The rich smell of butter, garlic and shellfish filled the air. The restaurant was renowned for its 'Lobster Thermidor'.

Bernard Hapless, a tall, thin pale young man, handsome enough in a slightly lopsided fashion, with dark hair falling across his broad forehead, sat at one of the tables. He had walked to the restaurant from his office through the warmth of the early Autumn evening. The sky had been beautiful, with shafts of sunlight shining through dark, puffed-up clouds. Maybe there would be rain later, but he had enjoyed the walk and looked forward to meeting his beautiful girlfriend. They met too infrequently he felt. Busy lives, busy careers. He wondered what she saw in him. She was a tough cookie and could have had her pick of the young men in Whitehall, so he felt, or indeed anywhere else in upper-middle class intellectual London. He winced at the thought of all that male competition. Logic said that she must see in him something she liked, but he was always nervous her gaze might glance elsewhere.

He took a drink from his glass, his throat and belly feeling the burn as the alcohol hit the spot. He reached across the table for his still cold bottle of Pils and poured a little more into his rapidly warming glass. Pulling a slim, black notebook from his inside jacket pocket, he opened it to the page where his half finished poem was scribbled. He sucked the end of his gold propelling pencil. He had always thought it was helpful to work with elegant tools. He began to write. The pencil lead snapped. Alas for elegance. Quick, before the thought should vanish - he unscrewed more lead from the pencil and wrote a line, musing to himself.

"No sign of her... Hope she gets here before I need another Pils... I'll need a clear head with her... I've got time to wait... I should use it... perhaps I can get another line of my poem

... " A well studied fragment of Keats popped into his head. "Truth is beauty - beauty truth - That is all ye know And all ye need to know". This stimulated more internal thoughts, which Bernard carefully assembled in his brain. "A precise statement. A famous line. But what did it mean? Poor Keats. A famous line... An abundance of thought for the mind. If words are to carry their normal meaning... it means that science and mathematics are beautiful and nothing else is. Keats denies the beauty of art, music, and of poetry? Surely not. A puzzle beyond me... I am a poet... I'll cling to that."

Bernard was indeed a poet, though indeed a bad one. Somehow his analytical, logical brain, that was capable of extraordinary insights, could not manage the ambiguities of poetry. Like the line from Keats. Complete nonsense, but so beautiful and evocative; inspiring generations of poetry lovers to think elevated thoughts and dream rich dreams.

He looked up to see Helena arriving at last, walking confidently through the restaurant, side-slipping past the other tables with a little smile on her lips. She wore - of course - a little black dress - that showcased the neat, firm roundness of her figure. Her shiny blonde hair also neat behind a black hair band. Bernard's heart beat faster and his musing pace quickened. "Here she comes. Now there is beauty. Beauty in glorious Technicolor. But truth? Ha!"

He put the thought aside and greeted her "Hello Helena."

"Darling Bernard. How lovely to see you!"

Bernard leaped up and enjoyed the little hug and the air-kisses. She unhurriedly offered him both cheeks. She smelled wonderful. Now his loins felt the burn as the scent and feel of her hit the spot. He backed away. His brain a mushy putty. Just as she had planned. She grinned at him. He waved her down in her seat and somewhat dizzily waved for the waiter. Dinner was ordered and served. Bernard had the lobster, Helena the Dover sole. A single bottle of Montrachet served for them both. Helena did the talking.

Bernard carried on musing and assembling his thoughts in his brain. Words unsaid as he maintained a pleasant expression. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty - but not in her case."

Helena bubbled on. "It's been too long since we had one of our little head to head sessions"

Bernard mused. "She doesn't say "tête-à-tête" she says "head to head." She's anti the whole Europe project"

As Helena continued Bernard's musings became his view of her subtext, a surreal reinterpretation of her actual speech,.

"Wouldn't you like me to put my head next to yours so you could smell the perfume of my hair."

"Of course I would. I can't resist, I'm helpless."

"Wouldn't you like me to sit my neat, sweet little personality next to yours so you could breathe the air around me?"

"Of course I would. It's hopeless to resist."

"I've something to ask you."

"I knew that was coming."

"It's really important."

"Probably it is."

"And you're the one to do it."

"I suppose I must be."

"It won't be much trouble."

"The lie direct - the beautiful untruth."

Bernard snapped back to full consciousness as he forced himself to drop his subtext game and pay attention. Helena was now coming to the point of it all.

"Well Bernard. You must be wondering why I insisted on meeting you tonight. Sorry about your choir rehearsal."

Bernard was rather miffed about missing his rehearsal. He enjoyed his weekly outing with the Renaissance masters in the little Hawksmoor church in the City. The choir was small and none had outstanding voices, but the acoustic was so good that they regularly manufactured beautiful sounds, soothing to the soul. Another kind of poetry come to think of it. Oh well. He allowed himself a small sarcasm. "I hope you think it is worth this little addition to the national debt, or are you paying for this yourself?"

Helena, showing her skill in matters diplomatic, deftly turned aside the sarcasm and put Bernard on the back foot with a flippant remark. "The question is nuncupatory."

"What! Did you actually say nuncupatory? What on earth is that?" Then Bernard's great brain came up with a memory of the source. "Oh Jack Vance - of course - your favorite author. Great Master of Science Fiction."

"Yes Bernard. I just love science-fiction."

Another sweet smile - then a change of mood. "But this is Government business. And rather urgent. And alas - it is not science fiction but science fact"

"Urge away old thing. I await your urging."

Helena again turned the tone of the conversation. No longer flirtatious. "Also very serious business. The PM is in trouble. If we don't fix it, soon the country will be in trouble. People will be embarrassed. Some people will die."

"Of embarrassment?" Bernard was still feeling flirtatious. He caught himself. "Sorry. Go on - I'm paying attention."

"I assume you've read my text?"

"Well I tried to read it - but you know I find it hard to decipher your coded and truncated text speak - all those, what do you call them - emojis? I prefer not to have to use my thumbs for communication, and not to have to pretend to share to share your young persons codebook of expressions. I am afraid I am and will always be, despite my apparent youth, an old fogey. Writing is supposed to be elegant". Bernard slid his gold pencil and little notebook in his inside jacket pocket.

Helena summarized her brief efficiently and clearly. Her tone now cool and unemotional. She was very good at this sort of thing, one of the reasons for her rapid promotion in an organization that valued such skills. "Here are the circumstances of my little difficulty. The Prime Minister unfortunately misunderstood Sir Tristram's text briefing him. Sir Tristram is not good with texting either... You know of the incursion of Gondwanaland forces into our sovereign territory of the British Protectorate of South Gondwana?"

Bernard nodded. "It's all over the news".

"Instead of doing what he was told and uttering an oily string of platitudes in reply, the PM has effectively issued an ultimatum to the Gondwanaland President. A bloody silly ultimatum! The country is on the verge of war with Gondwana. Yes war. Can you believe it? War over a bloody silly oilfield! Sir Tristram is furious."

Helena continued her persuasive speech, like a barrister summarizing for the prosecution. Bernard slipped back into his musing and parsed the speech into the subtext that his brain constructed to reveal the truth. He was very good at it. So Helena seemed to be saying...

"Darling Bernard. You know too well this job, to which I devote my life; I have become a servant of the Crown, and not your wife... to it I apply the talent that is my lot, in part it's true because I want to reach the top... I don't deny my ambition. But in truth it's what I was born to do; to advise the Ministers of the Queen, her subjects too. So they stay free from care as they live out their span, with peace, prosperity and justice for every man...And woman too - man embraces woman - they are all my children"

Bernard smiled as he subvocalised his own subtext. This problem had several obvious solutions. What was the need for his involvement? "I know too well the wiles you Mandarins employ -an offer of a place at Eton for the eldest boy will massage the ego of the Gondwana potentate - simultaneous soft sanctions to frustrate his foreign trips - that usually does the trick! - or you can reveal the fist inside the velvet glove; our airforce can patrol the skies above his palace."

Bernard's subvocalising had become vocal. Helena stopped him by placing her hand over his mouth.

She looked around - their waiter was busy at another table - she leaned in close to his ear "Unfortunately there are complicating factors. Sir Tristram knew of them of course, but the PM - when he issued his ill-advised ultimatum - did not. Sir Tristram has authorized me to let you have level Z clearance for this information. MI5 knows the Gondwanese have refined uranium from their mines. They have made several "dirty" bombs. One bomb left in a suitcase and exploded in the City of London could bring the country to its knees for half a year. The economic effect would be catastrophic. Tens of thousands would suffer radiation sickness. Some people would definitely die."

Bernard was now quite sober. His smile faded, to be replaced by a frown. This problem was not so easy. "What can I do?"

"You have to pressure the bastard until he retracts his ultimatum"

Bernard considered this request and rejected it as impossible. "I write his speeches. I know how he thinks. He can't retract after that. Not with the election next week. He would lose face and then lose the election. I hate to say it, but even if he were told of the consequences he might consider them a lesser evil than losing the election"

"You must blackmail him".

Bernard felt the full force of her blue eyes. They were lovely eyes, classical deep, limpid pools for a man to drown in, but now they glittered in a most unfeminine fashion. He bleated, "I can't blackmail the Prime Minister!"

The blue-eyed gaze intensified. Helen brought the full power of her personality to bear. Underneath the sweet and demure manner there lurked a dragon who lived in a dark cave littered with bones. The dragon lashed its tail. Bernard felt the air between their two bodies crackle with high voltage. He winced as his mind conjured the burnt air smell of an imminent lightning discharge.

Helena was merciless. "If you don't then the ruination of the British economy and the deaths of thousands of people will be your responsibility".

Bernard spluttered feebly. "I don't have anything to blackmail him with".

"That, my dear Bernard, will not be a problem".

Helena's eyes flicked away for a second, again checking the waiter's location. He was still occupied at another table. Once again she leaned in close to whisper in Bernard's ear. He winced again and shrank away an inch, fearing contact that would ground the high voltage. Probably blow all the lights in the restaurant and singe his eyebrows.

"I'm getting the names and phone numbers from my contact. I'll text you the details of what to do later tonight."

Bernard's eyebrows rose higher and higher as she expounded further. He felt the lights in the restaurant dim and flicker briefly. The pools of shadow between the tables seem to expand.

## Chapter 2

Early the next morning Sir Tristram walked with his long stride down Whitehall towards the House of Commons. The air was clear and warm enough, even at this early hour. He wore no coat. His fine leather Oxfords made a sharp click as each heel struck the pavement: the metal ferrule of his rolled umbrella syncopating a sharper click on the offbeat. Rather a military effect.

He had indeed been in the Army - conscripted to serve long years ago when two years compulsory National Service was still the law of the land. Two years out of his career and out of his civilian life. Second Lieutenant Seville suffered considerable trauma, frostbite and dysentery for his country in Korea. The frostbite and dysentery had long gone, but the trauma still lingered to cause him the occasional bad dream. The trauma was particularly associated with one bad period. He and his platoon had mowed down many hundreds of enemy infantry as they relentlessly attacked in human waves with reckless disregard for human life. The enemy had not possessed any heavy weapons, just an ample supply of human bodies. Conscripts like himself. The memory had not left him. His platoon had been entrenched with five Bren guns and had held off several enemy regiments for three weeks until relieved. Thirty men against perhaps a thousand. Each night they had listened as the wounded groaned and died. The resupply of ammunition had been by air drop. They had not dropped any food. The food had run out. But there had been no shortage of water; one only had to melt a little snow.

They had given him a Distinguished Service Order. He must have done something right. Now he had done something wrong. The consequence, unless he could put matters right, would offset by a mountain any merit he might have acquired by his actions in Korea.

He hoped Helena Besty would have success with her poetry loving boyfriend, but he doubted that she would. He would need to take action himself to influence the PM in the right direction. An action he had successfully undertaken many times. But not so often with this particular Prime Minister he recalled. Blackead was possessed of a singular obstinacy of mind. And the looming election complicated the situation. Blackead wanted to win at all costs. The cost in this case could be the loss of thousands of lives and the possible devastation of the country.

He walked on. A sharp right into Downing Street. He would take the scenic route. Past the usual gaggle of media types waiting outside No 10, over Horse Guards and into St. James's Park for a few hundred yards of elegant greenery. Then down Birdcage Walk to the Mother of Parliaments. He was invisible to the media types in Downing Street - anonymous in an area thickly populated with celebrity faces. This would also be the case in the House of Commons lobby. He needed his meeting this morning to be in the utmost secrecy - face to face, mouth to ear. No letters, telephones. Nothing traceable.

Soon he was waiting in a corridor adjacent to the lobby of the House of Commons. A corridor of power naturally, so close to the Chamber of the House. The lobby itself was relatively uncrowded at this hour. A cleaner was polishing the floor with mop and bucket.

Sir Tristram flared his aquiline nostrils as he encountered the sweet smell of House of Commons antiseptic floor cleaner mingled with aromatic wax wood polish.

He paced back and forth, pausing in his pacing to gaze up at the lofty ceiling. So high one could almost see hazy clouds forming. Ornate plasterwork with bosses of carved heraldic shields and various sculpted heads gazed back at him. He admired and was a connoisseur of the architecture of the many corridors of power in this area of London. Some old, most of it nineteenth century or rebuilt modern after the Blitz, but generally dignified and spacious. Expansive. Like his lower waistcoat button after dining at the Mirabelle or Le Gavroche, as was his custom. He was not accustomed to this more public corridor. The quiet anonymity of Whitehall better suited his persona but needs must - here he was lost in the crowd.

A TV crew trundled into the lobby and started setting up TV lights, some distance away. A louche bunch, mostly in denims and trainers. One or two moving purposefully, laying out fat cables, but most standing idle or sitting on the large cases that carried the filming equipment. They were a semi-permanent fixture in the lobby, such was the fashion for interviews with politicians with an 'outside' background. A slight young girl in jeans and tank-top was now struggling with a long metal boom, with a large furry cover on the end for the microphone that would catch the speech. The microphone was now twelve feet up in the air and looked very precarious. The furry cover looked like a harpooned squirrel. It took much expertise to avoid the hollow echo that altered speech in this beautiful old hall, making it hard to understand what people were saying. Sir Tristram thought it would have been much cheaper and more acoustically sensible to film in a studio, with half the number of people.

Suddenly he saw his old colleague and partner in many a plot: Sir Norman Persimmon, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office. Sir Norman was entering the corridor from another intersecting corridor and now caught sight of him across the lobby. He was a man of middle height and rather stout. His face broad, dark and impassive, with projecting iron-grey eyebrows. Against Sir Tristram's tall lean angularity he formed a contrasting shorter, broader figure. Like Sir Tristram he wore a dark grey worsted suit, impeccably hand tailored Savile Row in style, the clever cut and faint vertical stripe flattering his rotund figure. His shoes were black Oxfords, highly polished. His shirt the delicate white of ultra fine cotton, with French cuffs and little gold cufflinks. His tie the mauve and green stripe of his public school.

He hustled up, gripped Sir Tristram's elbow and spoke energetically. "Tristram you old sod, what is this all about?"

"Ah, Norman, thank you for coming. I thought we could meet here to prevent rumors forming amongst all our busy-eyed colleagues."

"Yours to command old boy. I do believe I owe you a favor from the Arts Council incident"

"Thank you" Sir Tristram paused and considered. "Norman - we have a little problem. You heard the PM's speech. Effectively an ultimatum to Gondwanaland"

Sir Norman grimaced. "I had the ambassador at my office early this morning. Not at all cowed. Rather cocky in fact"

"Well he would be." Sir Tristram leaned in closer to Sir Norman's ear. This required him to stoop considerably. "Fortunate that you have Z level security clearance."

"Yes, probably. Just me at the Foreign Office these days. So far has our status fallen". Sir Norman was not a fan of the general downgrading in the status of the Foreign Office that had gradually occurred in the years since the dissolution of the British Empire. Once his predecessors had ruled half the world from Whitehall. The grandeur of the buildings survived but now they were mostly glorified export salesmen.

Sir Tristram went on. "You need to know some most secret information, which we seem to have kept from the PM so far. The Gondwanaland military have hidden several dirty bombs in suitcases hidden all over London - Strontium 90 or some such noxious radiation. Apparently they can detonate them at will. The result would be devastation and ruin. The ruin

would endure for a considerable time, perhaps for a generation. We do not want war with Gondwanaland. The PM must back down. You must help me persuade him".

Sir Norman assimilated this information. It took him all of four seconds. Sir Tristram waited patiently and gazed again at the ceiling.

"Oh my God!"

"Yes, indeed."

"O fuck!"

"Fuck exceedingly, indeed."

Sir Norman took another cogitational pause - this time a mere three seconds - it might have been a senior moment, but was in fact a lightning mental trawl through the latest reports from all the relevant foreign offices. Sir Tristram had turned away, gazing moodily at the cleaning woman mopping the floor some distance away, then back abruptly. He spoke. "Your view please."

Sir Norman stepped back a pace and gloomily delivered his considered opinion. "He won't retract the ultimatum. The voters love a nice war. His ratings have shot up. He is a shoe-in for victory next week - and one more triumphant term as the people's leader. We could try to convince him of the bomb threat and the possible horrible consequences. But you know his desire for victory will sweep all reason before it."

"Yes. I have a plan."

"I'm so glad to hear it."

"I am afraid in fact you won't be glad to hear it."

"What do you want me to do?"

Sir Tristram took Sir Normans face between his long, elegant pale hands, gently patted the cheeks twice and then spoke. "I want you to say that the Gondwana Great Leader has agreed to withdraw his forces. He is only occupying the oilfields until he has accrued sufficient kudos among his population for facing down the imperialist powers and then he will withdraw. We have promised him assistance in securing places for the daughters of his third wife at Benenden School and a substantial sum in Foreign Aid."

Sir Norman was impassive as he listened. He then patted Sir Tristram's pale thin cheeks with his thick hairy brown hands. Obviously an old routine between the two of them.

Probably from school. He spoke in turn. "Uncanny - those are the very offers I have had my people make this morning. His third and very favorite wife should be very suitably grateful to the Great Leader. We advised him that the PM's ultimatum was merely to boost his chances at the upcoming election."

"Great minds think alike do they not Norman?"

Sir Norman, however, had a not insignificant rider. He turned away, looking at the TV crew, now finalizing their setup and readying themselves for an interview. "But the Great Leader has *not* yet agreed to those terms."

A moment of silence hung in the air between them before Sir Tristram replied. "A mere temporary difficulty, my dear chap."

The two men communed heads together in lower tones. An onlooker might have made out something like the following exchange, "How fortunate we are in our club ethos - how lucky that we understand each other's mind. How smoothly we together run the country, and much of the rest of the world. How strongly do our Mandarin ties us bind. What comfort do we draw from long association. What pleasure from our mutual taste in art - what fun we have when we see "Giselle" together! What laughter when at last we part: after a long evening."

They drew apart as they laughed together - then resumed their close communion. The cleaning lady edged nearer, still busy with her mop and pail, and paid attention to a piece of floor not ten feet away. Almost as though she were listening. She would have heard something akin to - "Let other countries rulers be corrupt, let them cheat and fiddle fit to bust, let their hapless populations be fleeced and cheated, let our citizens know in us they trust. We just need a little diplomacy..."

Sir Tristram appeared not to notice the cleaning lady. He and Sir Norman walked back down the corridor, still engrossed in conversation.

The noise level in the lobby and the activity level of the film crew increased as the participants in the TV interview arrived. Jemima Peacegirdle, the famous TV anchor, her ash-blonde hair cut cutely short, was in a grey, herringbone tweed suit that elegantly displayed her long, lean angularity. She had her arm around her guest. This morning it was Rumena Harridan, the Shadow Chancellor, glamorous and powerful in a bright red Chanel suit and killer heels. The TV producer posed them standing in the lights before the TV camera. They

got ready to start their interview while the makeup girl fussed over them both with a soft powder brush. Neither needed much touching up.

"We're on in twenty seconds Ms. Haaridan." said Jemima Peacegirdle. "Are you comfortable?"

"As I shall ever be in these circumstances."

"I thought you liked TV."

Rumena Haaridan laughed flirtatiously. A beautiful sound - like little silver bells. "No darling. I like what it can do for my public image. You probing journalists with your penetrating questions! Who knows what you might uncover as you struggle to tear away all my protection and see me wriggling helplessly naked."

Jemima Peacegirdle flushed beneath her heavy makeup. Rumena had a powerful effect on people, even those in daily contact with the great ones of the world like Jemima Peacegirdle, who was renowned for her toughly arrogant interviewing style. "Yes", said Jemima quickly. "Only doing my job."

Rumena Haaridan smiled sweetly at Jemima. showing her little neat, perfectly even, brilliant white teeth - bit like a piranha. She enjoyed her conquests. It was about time she got a little closer to Jemima.

The TV producer gave the nod to start.

Jemima began aggressively as usual. "Ms. Haaridan - we understand your party has agreed to support the government over the Gondwana invasion. Surely that is inconsistent with your manifesto policy?"

"When circumstances change I am prepared to change my mind. What do you do?"

"Yes. Is your leader in accord with the party in this matter?"

"The Gondwana invasion is a most serious matter. We intend to support the government in its strong stance against aggression."

"Please answer the question. Is your leader in accord with the party in this matter?"

"Aggression must be resisted. Appeasement is not a good idea."

The interview rolled on. Rumena effortlessly avoiding answering the questions put and taking the opportunity to restate her case. The cleaning lady moved further down the corridor.

The lights flickered briefly and Gordon Blackead, the Prime Minister, appeared in the dark at the end of the corridor.

He stepped around the cleaning lady as he walked briskly towards the lobby and stopped at the entrance, staying hidden in the deep shadow cast by the arch of the lobby ceiling. The Prime Minister exuded charisma and charm, the qualities that had given him his position. Somewhat short and somewhat round, he had a smooth young face with sweetly chubby cheeks gathered tight over his near-permanent grin, pasted like a platitude under his innocent wide brown eyes. A forty year old boy with sleek dark hair.

He saw his quarry out on the floor of the lobby. The TV interview had finished and Rumena was chatting to Jemima, the TV crew and a small group of journalists. He willed Rumena to catch sight of him. She did so. His brown eyes made an almost imperceptible gesture of invitation. She caught the gesture, left her coterie and drifted over to the shadow of the corridor, standing with her back to the PM, apparently not talking to him.

"Good morning Prime Minister."

"Rumena, I need a word. Just two minutes of your valuable time here in this anonymous spot away from the reptiles of the Press."

"I've just been feeding the reptiles. I throw them a few gobbets of rotting meat and gossip. I love to see them gobble it up. Two minutes is no problem, but then I must get back to them - they are still hungry. If they don't eat my gobbets they may eat someone else's."

Gordon spoke quietly but authoritatively to the air in front of him while Rumena stood three feet off and looked fixedly away from him. Like two spies in an old movie. Gordon's words seemed to come out of the side of his mouth, which, like that of a ventriloquist, appeared not to move. "I'm hoping for support from the Opposition on this Gondwana issue. Sir Tristram will brief you - we have a meeting planned this afternoon and I want you there. You can leave your beloved Leader to face the Chancellor. She will not be in the loop at this stage."

Rumena smiled. A somewhat chilling sight. Her eyes were very dark brown, almost black, and seemed to absorb the light. Her teeth were perfect - perfect as far as the world's finest orthodontists and surgeons could chisel and sculpture them. The same applied to her nose and cheekbones. She now headed a rock-solid organization within the Party in Parliament and in the country. Her TV image was glamorous and shiny. Was this possible accommodation with the PM one that could work to her advantage?

She smiled again, apparently greeting a colleague across the lobby, and spoke decisively over her shoulder. "We must put the interests of the country before party advantage Gordon. If my beloved Leader can not understand that and wishes to be an appeaser then she deserves to be promoted to the other place."

Gordon Blackead also smiled - his quarry was nibbling at the bait. "Yes we must see if we can persuade her to accept a peerage. The House of Lords needs someone with her talents. I can facilitate that as required. I know how ambitious you are. And ruthless enough, my dear, to make it happen. This afternoon then."

He walked off down the corridor with his distinctive gait, smooth, oily, asexual; like a shark gliding through a tank of herrings, leaving Rumena to contemplate the turn that events had taken. She glanced across at the journalists. They were still preoccupied with Jemima Peacegirdle and the TV producer, buzzing honey-bee like round the glamorous hive of national publicity Jemima represented. Some new gossip no doubt.

Rumena Haaridan began to assimilate the information she had just learned. Her Dear Leader, the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, was in truth her deadliest rival. For decades the two had smiled at each other in public and dropped little poison globules to colleagues and journalists in private. Two spiders in a jam-jar. Here, just possibly, was an opportunity to conquer at last. She would have to take great care to make the most of the opportunity but not to put a foot wrong. Easy to make a stupid mistake. She who hesitates is lost. Look before you leap. The clichéd proverbs were as usual no help at all. She would have to do her own analysis and assessment with all the information she could gather in time. In this brief moment of stasis she reflected on her struggle with her rival.

"The other place"; she mused, "not Hades, but the House of Lords - to join the nearly dead. In truth for her the promotion I truly desire is indeed to the life after this: I wish her truly dead! Transplanted to the Realm of Eternal Fire to stand in my way no longer. To that end I'll conspire with Gordon."

Her reflection went further back; to her early life of poverty and ugliness as a fatherless refugee from genocide. "I've come far since mother fled with me from the Balkan inferno, an ugly fat child with ugly dirty clothes, ethnically cleansed but unclean, to live in a Bradford ghetto: do you suppose she would recognize me now? Now that cosmetic surgeons have chiseled my cheekbones and breasts and shaped my overlarge nose? Dear Gordon."

She had made her way in the world by the means available to her. "Many middle-aged lovers paid for my cosmetic operations and my wardrobe: and I've repaid each one, climbing up on each lap, climbing into each bed, up the party ladder. Put myself on the map." And now her career was peaking. She exulted. "Now a dozen ex-lovers, senior party men, in thrall lest I tell their wives all, dance as my fingers may snap. Oh yes Gordon!"

Her smile broadened still further as she contemplated the blackmail opportunities available. She walked back beaming, with her own distinctive gait, a long-legged sexy strut, like a model on a cat-walk, to the TV lights and the waiting journalists.

\*

Later that afternoon the military contingent of the war advisory committee were waiting in the Whitehall War Room for the arrival of the Prime Minister and his advisors. The room, buried deep underground, had seen many somber meetings. When Great Britain had been in peril in the early days of World War Two, and stood alone, it had been Churchill, the arch anti-appeaser, who stiffened the spines of the top brass against surrender, desperately cajoling the reluctant Americans to join the war against Hitler's armies. When Great Britain had recklessly invaded Egypt over the Suez canal imbroglio it had been Eden, Churchill's fellow anti-appeaser, who this time failed to get the Americans on board, and had to make an ignominious withdrawal of his army from Suez, as the pound sank on the foreign exchanges and the canal threatened to start flowing through his wife's very drawing room.

The room was long and narrow, with a high ceiling and no windows. Outside the day was brisk and sunny, but in here the atmosphere was stuffy. The claustrophobic feeling due partly to the lack of windows, but mainly to the fact that the room was sealed in an iron, anti-surveillance Faraday cage, tightly sealed against leaks, and air conditioned rather poorly. There was a dusty, musky smell in the room; most of it coming from the carpet, but some from the bodies of those who had not showered for more than 24 hours. A long narrow table, covered in a heavy green baize, ran along its length. Tea had been served. Delicate tea-cups of fine bone china and small silver milk jugs and sugar bowls had been set out on the table. A tea-lady had arrived, filled the cups with tea from a large pot and departed.

Lieutenant-General Sir Jock Saddler KCB, CBE, Commander of Her Majesty's Army Land Forces, took a cautious sip from his tea-cup and replaced it delicately in its saucer. The tiny ting made by the fine bone china broke the heavy silence in the room, where the group had been waiting for some time. Sir Jock was flanked in his seat at the long boardroom table

by two other General Officers, well into middle age and both largely bald. Three younger aides, a major and two captains, one a female, stood behind.

The female was Captain Jill Bobbitt, Saddler's aide-de-camp. Five foot three inches tall, she was neat and petite in her combat camouflage blouse and trousers, with a Royal Corps of Signals brown beret hiding most of her short brown hair. A Sig Sauer 9mm automatic pistol was holstered at her hip. As aide to the General she was also his bodyguard, which suited her temperament well. She was a very good shot with the pistol. An all-action woman, she was a judo black belt. Her gender and size made her a very effective bodyguard - she was very unobtrusive. Any attack on the General would be snuffed out by her counter-attack seemingly from nowhere. She had enjoyed the motor-bike dash through London with Saddler on the pillion, but enjoyed rather less the frantic all night cramming of intelligence data that had followed. She was struggling to retain it all, and struggling not to yawn. Saddler and the other generals had eventually gone to bed in the bedroom in the command centre. She and the other captain had stayed on duty and updated the situation hourly.

The silence continued. Captain Bobbitt smelled her own body and that of the young Captain next to her who had also been up all night. She kept her focus on the data in her head. Eventually the major-general on Saddler's left, General Bloggett, coughed and spoke.

"They're making us wait today, Jock."

General Saddler replied languidly, "Ours not to reason why old boy."

Another sip from the cup. Another ting. Another silence which stretched. Once more the major-general spoke to fill the silence.

"I wonder where they are planning for us to do or die today."

Captain Bobbitt was now emboldened and blurted out. "My money is on Gondwanaland." she said.

There was a faint but discernable note of sarcasm from the Commander's reply. "Thank you for your insight Captain."

Bobbitt flinched and drew herself more stiffly to attention. Perhaps she should not have ventured an opinion, but these old farts needed a bit of juicing up. Clearly Gondwanaland was the place that was about to see the action and she wanted to be there. She had never been in action and was anxious to start doing the job she had signed up for, namely crawling through the mud in far flung places and killing people if they tried to kill her. She thought

furiously to herself. "I hope we're going to see some action, let off the leash the dogs of war. I'm tired of being an action virgin, my nature's red in tooth and claw!

The other officers, older, more cautious types, had all seen much action and had very different thoughts. "We serve our time, the thin red line, we do not independently opine. Ours but to do or die. On our bellies we crawl supine, onwards and up each steep incline, through shot and shell and personnel mine. IEDs they call them now. Perhaps in due course to be butchered like swine. "

General Sir Jock Saddler's thoughts were of his own previous war experience. "I hope this is a false alarm. I've no desire to see war again. When one is Commander of the Army, then one is the one to lose his men. And women too nowadays - God help us." This last with a glance at the female captain.

The group resumed their silent wait - then the door opened suddenly. In slid Gordon Blackead, the Prime Minister, followed by his small train: Helena Besty, Sir Tristram Seville, a male secretary and the Right Honorable Rumena Haaridan, Shadow Chancellor. These all sat themselves without preliminaries opposite the military officers at the long table .

Gordon Blackead spoke briskly. "Morning gentlemen - and lady. I have not convened an official COBRA meeting because I prefer to get things organized at this more ad-hoc level - without fuss and general hooah. I assume you all know the Shadow Chancellor. Rumena is here as we have and wish to retain all party support in this matter. She has the full support of the Leader of the Opposition and the Shadow Cabinet I believe."

Here the PM glanced sideways at Rumena, aware that all present knew of the undying enmity between the Shadow Chancellor and her Leader. There was a moment's pregnant silence. Nobody moved a muscle save Captain Bobbitt, who snorted and stifled a guffaw by assuming a savagely fixed grin.

Rumena Haaridan took her cue. She said "We all want this matter handled carefully - the possible downside in case of a cock-up could be most unpleasant."

Blackead carried on. "Yes... General please brief us."

Jock Saddler swiveled his neck round, gesturing to Captain Bobbitt, who focused a laser pointer at the unfurled wall map on the wall. He gave his briefing, speaking clearly and quickly, in the clipped tones he was accustomed to use for these briefings . "The Gondwana forces comprise some 10,000 to 11,000 infantry, probably most of the President's Guard

division, twenty tanks, old Soviet types, maybe forty pickup trucks with heavy machine guns or AA artillery mounted - so called "technicals" - and probably ten Apache helicopters - I'd like to know where they got those from - they have penetrated unopposed some twenty miles across the border and currently hold the BP oilfield and the copper mine. This intel is from the CIA satellites of course. We think some two hundred British subjects are effectively held captive." He paused and looked enquiringly at the PM.

The PM proceeded confidently to set the scene. "I have as you know issued an ultimatum to Gondwana to withdraw. If they do not we should take suitable action."

Saddler stared at his folder.

Blackead continued. "For the avoidance of doubt - by suitable action I mean of course military action - to attack and destroy the invading Gondwana forces, recapture the oilfields, and the copper mine, invade Gondwana in retaliation, occupy the capital, depose the Great Leader and not withdraw until suitable reparations have been paid over. " Then he paused for a moment. "Perhaps, General, you could outline your plans."

Saddler's stony face became even stonier. He spoke in a flat monotone, devoid of emotion. "I have ordered a frigate to steam at all speed to Gondwana. It will be on station in twenty four hours. It carries twenty three Marine Commandos and one Apache helicopter. No other forces are available at short notice."

Then he paused. Again silence filled the room. He continued. "Our men will of course do their duty if ordered to do so, but I would counsel against an attack with those particular odds."

Another pause. More silence. "The American 19th Fleet is also twenty four hours sailing from Gondwana - it comprises two aircraft carriers with a complement of four hundred fast jets, fifty Apache helicopters, some twenty thousand Marines, supporting vessels etc. " He paused again, this time very briefly. "It would be prudent to have an understanding as to any support that might be provided from that direction before issuing attack orders."

Rumena Haaridan contributed her comment. She knew the US President. "Not very likely to be forthcoming I imagine. We all know that our current US Presidential incumbent was elected on her fundamentalist Biblical credentials, her ability to shoot a moose and her extreme dislike of foreign adventures."

Major General Bloggett agreed. "Especially those adventures that would be in partnership with one-time imperialist powers." No good hoping for support from the Americans in this one then.

The PM smiled thinly. A heavy silence once again took possession of the room.

Saddler at last broke into the silence. "Of course Her Majesty's Government has more powerful and immediately deliverable military capability at its disposal. We have a Trident submarine somewhere in the Atlantic and another at operational readiness in Faslane. Either could lob a nuke or two on the Gondwana President's Guard Division within twenty minutes of the order. I'm sure that would somewhat dissuade them from further aggression - any of them that remained to even think of it. But no doubt you will wish to keep that weaponry in reserve for defense of the realm against stronger forces as is our normal practice."

The General's attempt to lighten the atmosphere met with small chuckles all round. Except from Sir Tristram, who rose to his feet, his face tightened with strain. "Alas I do not find that sally amusing General," he said. "I feel that now is the time to enlighten you on one or two recent developments". He paused, then gave a small apologetic cough. "I am afraid I need to ask those without level Z security clearance to leave the room please. That will be all save Sir Jock, Major General Bloggett, myself, Ms Besty and the PM."

There was a further silence, this time a shocked silence. After a moment people came to and gathered up their bags and folders. Captain Bobbitt looked at General Saddler; he nodded her to leave. She marched swiftly from the room followed by the others, trooping out in single file. Rumena was last of all, departing with a very quizzical raised eyebrow at Blackead as she went. Blackead stood up as she left. His look was completely neutral. He sat down again and waited .

When the leavers had all gone, the last closing the heavy door behind them and once more sealing the Faraday cage against any electric spying or leakage, Sir Tristram took a folder from Helena Besty, checked an item and handed it back. He cleared his throat softly. He remained standing and his tone was somber, his delivery precise and even paced, as he related the secret information.

"We have learned from certain most secret sources that Gondwana has a degree of nuclear capability in the form of suitcases packed with highly radioactive material extracted from the uranium mines in the south of the country - transuranic isotopes - Strontium 90 and so on - some with a half life of some 10,000 years I believe.

Were one of these suitcases to be blown up with a large charge of dynamite or similar explosive in the City of London it is probable that our economy would suffer a catastrophic and possibly permanent decline. Large parts of London would need to be permanently evacuated. Several million jobs would be lost. Tens of thousands would die from the radiation over the ensuing years. An unknown but probably large number would die from poverty related causes - like hunger - in the ensuing years of economic collapse."

Sir Tristram had finished his briefing. There was a dead silence for several moments, then General Sir Jock Saddler responded. "I see." The General's military training was now obvious in his decisive response to this appalling news. He rose to his feet at attention, his jaw like a rock and his eyes flinty. A geological marvel. "I await your orders Prime Minister."

The Prime Minister also stood up. He absorbed the new information and digested it. It mingled with hopes and fears and ambitions already well churned in his stomach and gut. He began pacing up and down the room, his arms folded behind him. He looked a little like Napoleon deciding to invade Russia. Then he spoke decisively. "I see no reason why Gondwana should not be apprised of our own nuclear capability and our resolve to defend our vital commercial interests and Her Majesty's subjects - perhaps a small detonation - say twenty kilotons - off the coast. Might kill a few fish and the odd fisherman - justified in the greater cause."

He smiled. His brown eyes grew cloudy with vision. His fresh cheeks made him look younger than ever. He continued on - outlining a possible move in the war game.

Sir Tristram now feared the worst. The time had come to carry out his little deception. Undoubtedly it would in due course destroy his career and possibly result in his prosecution for treason or the like. But needs must. And no one would be taking notes that might become material evidence. The PM had to be diverted from his dreams of glory.

Sir Tristram shammed receiving a message and then a consultation with his mobile phone, holding it up to his ear, turning his back and squinting at its little screen. He plunged in. "However, Prime Minister, I have just had good news from the Foreign Office. Excellent news! The Perm Sec at the Foreign Office, Sir Norman Persimmon, has just informed me. It seems that the Great Gondwana Leader is minded to accept your ultimatum. He will shortly withdraw his forces. You may claim a victory."

The PM lost his smile. A new expression came over his face. He spoke decisively, in a flat monotone, with the full weight of his unchallengeable authority as Prime Minister. "He

may be minded to accept it. It expires at the stated deadline in time. If he has withdrawn by then well and good. If not then poof to the sardines! You shall have my order in writing General, within the hour. See that it is executed."

The meeting was obviously at an end. The PM glided from the room, which returned to its heavy silence as the two generals and the two civil servants remained motionless in thought.

### Chapter 3

It was lunchtime the next day. Another fine Autumn day. Still warm and mostly sunny, with a light wind from the South-West. Bernard Hapless was in his tiny office off the Strand. He had received Helena's text and acted upon it, arranging it so that the Prime Minister would receive the planned blackmail threat. Not a pleasant job, but one he felt was in the national interest. He had been puzzled at the feeble nature of the blackmail, but assumed that Helena knew what she was doing. It was very difficult to deny her anything. Her beautiful face swam before his eyes, serene and cheerful. He gulped. Love was both pleasure and pain. Now whose poetic line was that? He was eating his lunch on his knees at his desk. Avocado and anchovy on rye and a double espresso - all out of a box.

Crash! The door cracked open and Helena Besty crashed in, her hair disheveled, her face pink flushed, her eyes wild, her language foul.

"Bernard you bastard! My God! Christ almighty! Bernard, you mindless crackbrained idiot! You walking dungheap! You cesspit of incompetence! You total crock of stinking shit! What in your hopelessness have you managed to achieve this time! Aaahh!

She kicked the furniture and threw several folders to punctuate her fury and despair. Bernard's mouthful of avocado and anchovy appeared to acquire a distinctly unpleasant flavor. He was, it seemed, in bad odor, and, in this miasma of scatological language, so had become his sandwich. He grimaced. "Help me Helena, I haven't a clue what I am supposed to have done."

Helena threw another folder. The papers in it exploded into the air and fell about the room. She screamed "Sir Tristram is in despair. His little stratagem failed. So it was down to me. Now I have failed! The PM is insisting on the ultimatum. My backup plan to dissuade the PM also has completely failed to have any effect whatever! The PM is charging ahead with his ghastly attack plans! General Sir Jock Saddler is all set to push the nuclear button! Armageddon looms over the City of London! and you...you...you..."

She spluttered incoherently, unable to talk, then calmed herself a little.

"And you eat avocado and anchovy sandwiches - how disgusting!"

She willed herself even calmer.

"I can't believe my little bit of blackmail had no effect at all. Did you do as I said?"

"Yes of course I did. Though I did find your detailed instructions in the text you sent me rather odd."

"What do you mean - odd?"

"Well....I wondered why you thought you could blackmail him by threatening to leak to the newspapers his failing to pay his dues at the golf club."

"What? The evidence I gave you was that he employed several foreigners as servants and didn't pay NHI tax or provide paid sick leave or any retirement benefit. As the law requires." This information, had it been leaked would have damaged the PM's reelection prospects severely. Surely a sufficient threat to deter him.

Bernard now saw what he had not seen before. "Ah foreigners - so "4NR" - the number 4 then capital N capital R - that means foreigner?"

To Helena it was obvious. "Yes of course."

Not "for a number of rounds"?

"No."

There was more. Bernard had now twigged the problem. "Sick leave - ah - maybe "7k" - number 7 then little k - means sick?"

"Yes of course."

Not "seven thousand pounds"?

"No."

"Now I see it - "rtrmt" - retirement - obviously."

Helena was patient. "Obviously."

"Sorry."

Helena could not believe that Bernard could have been so ignorant. Sir Tristram was still stuck in the last century but Bernard was a young man. Younger than she was come to think of it. Had he not the largest brain in Whitehall?

She screamed. "Oh my God - but everybody knows those abbreviations!. Where have you been living?"

"In my ivory tower I suppose. I'm sorry". What else could he say?

Helena's composure crumbled. Her chin wobbled. Her eyes filled with tears. Her basically gentle female nature came to the fore. She started to tremble and gasp. Perhaps from frustration, perhaps from helplessness, more perhaps from the thought of the thousands of radiation deaths of men, women and children in the near future.

She gave in to the feeling of helplessness and guilt, wailed a long despairing cry. She scabbled for a tissue in a lower drawer on the far side of the desk, burying her head in her hands, her hair falling down over her face. Bernard was presented with a view of her rear end as she sobbed violently, great heaves that shook her body.

"No Bernard, it is my fault. It never occurred to me that .... I shall have to fix it somehow...Oh God. the possible consequences!... Oh God... I can't think what to do". The wailing and sobbing went on.

Bernard pondered the view before him. Her rear end was a beautiful sight. Her despair moved him to his foundations. His basically male warrior nature came to the fore; he did his fighting with his brain, not his fists. Adrenaline kicked his brain to supersonic mode. A blinding headache would doubtless follow. His thought process began a long logical journey. He silently verbalized the trajectory of the solution to the problem. "You know that I admire your finest feature, I contemplate with pleasure what I see. A silhouette sweet Nature made its creature. A perfect, polygonal construction: targeted like an arrow straight at me."

His love and compassion for her stirred his blood, which blood in turn nourished his brain. He felt a throbbing rhythm with a subterranean pulse like a massive earthquake as his veins expanded. His head began to explode. He shut his eyes and breathed deeply. The answer came creeping.

He muttered sub-vocally. "Some joke that my brain is the size of a planet. It's true that I seem to see much deeper than most. When a problem's before me I focus in on it. Ten billion synapses click out complexity: and the heat from my brain is enough to burn toast! The problem is far from being facile. Helena's stratagem would never succeed. The PM is not very easy to blackmail. And expert blackmailers are ipso facto obscure. But I know of one, an expert among experts in the gentle art. One who can serve in our hour of need."

Bernard went to Helena. He pulled her up and held her shoulders between his hands as he emphasized his message, point by point. All was clear to him. He had to make it clear to her.

"Here's the plan. It involves Rumena Haaridan. Blackhead is getting closer to her and reaching cross-party. She can make a blackmail happen. Her reputation goes before her in the corridors of power. This must be kept away from any possible witness or observer."

Helena nodded her head. "Rumena Haaridan is a real power broker. What do you have in mind? "

Bernard charged on. "We have a perfect occasion. She has organized her annual parliamentary fashion show for tomorrow. You must be there. Secretly. You have the authority to offer a deal. Most secretly. To proposition her. She will be very pleased to meet you. Very pleased. Undercover... You can go under cover and no one will know. You can model a dress..."

Helena quieted a little under his hands. She had regained most of her composure, though her cheeks were blotched with tears. She looked very beautiful. But she was baffled. "No Bernard I've never done anything like that - please no!"

Bernard was definite. "It has to be. We'll make sure she knows her supreme career chance is available if she acts. You need the intimate location and time with her alone and you need it soon. Let us pray she has lost none of her ambition. We get this one shot at it. Later will be too late."

Helena confirmed Bernard's judgment. "That woman's ambition is infinite. She could lose much of it and it would still be boundless!"

Bernard was now cheerful. He smiled encouragingly at Helena. "You'll be fine - the show is just for charity - nothing serious. If the matter wasn't so deadly you could even have a little fun"

## Chapter 4

The next day dawned once more bright, sunny and warm. A little mist over the river. The light had that strangely faded transparency beloved of many for its beauty and tranquility, and disliked by others, who were reminded of the short dark Winter days soon to come.

It was indeed the day of the annual Parliamentary charity fashion show. The imminent election had not been allowed to interfere with this most important event in the Parliamentary calendar. A fashion show catwalk with a dressing room adjacent had been set up in one of the larger halls in Westminster. Warm bright lights on tall stands and shiny umbrellas focusing the lights on strategic spots in the catwalk gave the scene the look of a giant photographers studio. Tall stacks of amplifiers emitted the regular thudding at one hundred and thirty beats per minute that was de rigeur for fashion shows.

The smile on Rumena Haaridan's face was high, wide and toothsome. Her brilliantly white teeth flashed in the multicolored pulsating lights illuminating the audience area. She was close-up - cheek to cheek and arm in arm, beneath the catwalk, with the TV anchor Jemima Peacegirdle. Surrounded by adoring colleagues from Parliament who had come to enjoy the show.

Jemima Peacegirdle daily had meetings with glamorous people: world leaders, Hollywood film stars, famous astrologers and the like, in her line of work as an interviewer of those lucky few whose agents had wangled the free advertising of a TV appearance. Routinely exposed to fame and charisma, she might have been thought to be impervious. Not so in the case of Rumena Haaridan, who seemed to have something extra. Jemima was flushing with pleasure and quite star struck as Rumena's arm briefly went round her waist before alighting once again on her lapel.

The music pumped and boomed and flounced, as did a series of male and female fashion models, down and up the catwalk. One or two young men, ridiculous in green and pink pastel suits with bits of chiffon hanging off and ludicrously tight trousers: the tight trousers ogled through dark sunglasses by all the female fashion journalists of a certain age and by the odd appreciative homosexual male. One or two older men, Parliamentarians in fancy dress, inveigled into making fools of themselves for charity: these had wide smiles which suddenly froze as they were met with a barrage of flashes from the dozens of cameras, set on preserving their embarrassment for posterity and the next morning papers. Most of the models were young females who strutted boldly down, pausing at the catwalk end amid a

storm of flashes and a burst of applause, before twirling and cantering back up. These had wide grins as they offered themselves to the gaze of the journalists and cameras, the grins becoming pitying smiles as they posed before the gaggle of male MPs positioned at the catwalk turn, each MP surreptitiously striving to appraise each model's underwear as well as each dress: a task made fairly easy by the height of the catwalk above the audience, but complicated by the skimpy designs, whereby it was hard to tell dress apart from lingerie.

Two of the crowd of spectators were a pair of elderly MPs, who did indeed regularly pair to be absent together when both wanted to avoid a day in the House. They were gossiping. One remarked. "Rumena Haaridan is enjoying herself with Jemima Peacegirdle isn't she? I was in love with Rumena once - a blissful few days- I never knew she liked girls as well."

The other replied wistfully. "Nor I - apparently Jemima Peacegirdle thinks she may do. Yes - I was in love with Rumena too - in my case a blissful half hour! She has fondled half the shadow cabinet I'm told, but apparently now fallen out with her beloved leader."

The first spectator said. "I wish I had one tenth of that woman's influence on the TV crowd. You know Rumena was the one who instituted this pleasant little annual Parliamentary event. Angered, so she says, by the lack of attention given to the country's vital fashion industry."

"Yes - as I recall she said the industry was a large contributor to Britain's export balance."

"Whatever the truth of that, the industry is certainly a large contributor to Rumena's fashion wardrobe!"

The MPs laughed heartily at this sally.

Bernard Hapless was among the gaggle of MPs, somewhat to the rear of the group, smiling nervously. Now Helena appeared, cute and perky in shiny pink satin, her dress cut very short and clinging tightly. More of a swimsuit than a dress, though the material was far too flimsy for swimming in.

The first spectator was impressed. "I say - this one's a smasher - doesn't look like a professional model - where did Rumena get her from?"

"Rumena looks pleased - she's definitely smiling encouragement. "

"As a crocodile smiles at a baby zebra about to cross a river!" Another hearty laugh from both the spectators as they craned forward to see Helena's modeling run.

Bernard's heart blipped - he was hopelessly in love. He averted his gaze as Helena wobbled down the catwalk, smiled sweetly at the MPs admiring the light reflected by the pink dress on her legs and the lace of her pink knickers, and teetered back on her impossibly high heels. Clearly she was a tyro at the catwalk strut, but her apparent innocence charmed the crowd and she drew a strong burst of applause. Bernard sat back down, relieved. The show continued. Helena exited upstage and entered the dressing room.

Rumena Haaridan saw that Jemima Peacegirdle had noticed Helena's success with the audience.

"Isn't she lovely? A real find. Now you're not to be jealous but I need to chat to her after the show. What time is your deadline?"

Jemima was jealous. "I can pop it in the evening news at the last minute . I'm not jealous. Don't make me jealous."

Rumena reassured her. "I shan't my darling. Just make sure you get the news out the way I told you. The message is I'm leading my party to resist aggression whereas my dear leader is an appeaser."

There was a burst of bump and grind music as one of the MPs on the catwalk clowned for the audience.

Inside the dressing room the air was thick with sweat and scent; and dusty from the powder brushes that had been vigorously wielded by the girls, to mop up the sweat on their faces at least before their next appearance. The temperature was kept very warm, as most of the time the girls were largely naked. When they were clothed the clothes had not been designed for warmth. A hoop of bright white lights fringed each of the dressing room mirrors behind the dressing tables that lined the walls.

Helena sat down in front of one after her appearance. She too was sweating from the excitement and fear of her brief fashion appearance. Not something she was accustomed to at all. The girls in the dressing room were laughing together as they wriggled out of their haute couture dresses and high heels and put on the track suit bottoms, tank tops and trainers that were their day wear. Bobby, the stick-thin, nervous, little male dresser gathered up the dresses. He was tut-tutting as he hung them up carefully on the rack, occasionally darting in to help one of the wriggling girls before she ruined a dress that was proving hard to take off.

Helena gazed at herself in the mirror, blue eyes steady but her brow etched with a worry frown. She needed to deceive Rumena, who was herself the arch-deceiver. Outside the show was winding down, all the dresses now displayed. She could hear the crowd beginning to disperse. She stood to take off her pink dress. Then she draped herself modestly with her dressing gown as she removed her pink knickers and threw them on the dressing table, where they lay, looking at her accusingly. She closed her eyes, firmed her little chin, then sat down and looked again in the mirror.

Rumena Haaridan came gliding into the dressing room, full of charm and powerful charisma and accompanied by a nose-numbing blast of expensive perfume that obliterated the other scents in the room. She threw out compliments and congratulations like confetti. The girls were much flattered and impressed. The little dresser almost swooned.

Rumena was exuberant. "Congratulations! Excellent! Well done Chelsea! Darlings you were wonderful. I adore you. Such pizzazz! Such embonpoint!"

Bobby the little dresser gushed. "Ms. Haaridan so wonderful to see you again! I've always been a great admirer of your fashion sense. You are gorgeous! You are inimitable!"

Rowena chuckled. "Bobby sweetheart, I do aim to please. The voters expect me to keep up appearances."

The conversations bubbled on and gradually subsided as the girls finished dressing and left. Rowena patted the dresser on both cheeks. "Now Bobby do leave us alone for a moment."  
"

She sat down in the chair that Helena had carefully left vacant beside her. Bobby stared. Rowena winked at him. He quivered. "Of course Ms. Haaridan."

He knew the rumors of Rowena's wide love interest and sexual prowess, but had not thought her tastes extended so extensively as it were. He should have realized - of all people. He fluttered on tip toes through the door and closed it behind him.

Rumena became business like. "Now Ms. Besty - Helena isn't it? I hear you have an urgent need to see me. You see the lengths I must go to keep my dealings from my colleagues - hiding in a dressing room! You were marvelous by the way. Not at all what one might expect from a civil service Mandarin such as yourself. Sir Tristram's under secretary are you not?"

"Yes. Thank you. Sir Tristram is most grateful. "

"And I am grateful to Sir Tristram for providing his beautiful assistant to enhance my little fashion show."

"Yes. Thank you." Helena cleared her throat and delivered her message in a somber tone. "Sir Tristram has asked me to suggest a little stratagem to you. You do not have Z level security clearance, but I can tell you the substance of the background to our military operations in Gondwana. I must ask you to keep this most secret. This is a matter of top-level national security. If it were to become public the consequences would be disastrous."

Rumena had no trouble with this request. "Of course. The Prime Minister knows he has my support in this Gondwana matter, though I do wonder why he hasn't yet sent in a gunboat, or rather a couple of Apache helicopters, which I suppose is the modern equivalent. The public will love him for it. He surely needs a boost if he is to win reelection. My lot can't oppose military action - even if I wanted to which I don't - we have a lead in the polls but it is not that large and my dear leader is delightfully trying to be an appeaser."

Helena hesitated for a moment. "The fact is the Gondwana people have planted several dirty bombs in London."

Rumena was shocked. She took a moment and thought of the implications. "Dirty bombs? In London? Does that mean what I think it means? Radioactive material? Plutonium? Strontium? Radioactive contamination of parts of London?"

Helena was solemn. She thought once more of the implications which had occupied her mind unceasingly for days. The deaths, the chaos, the ruin of the country. "Yes. Half lives of 10,000 years or more some of it. If the bombs were exploded it would cripple the country. Ruin our economy. Kill thousands. We would probably become a third world poor country for decades."

Rumena digested this information "Sending a gunboat not a good idea then? "

"The PM wants to use a nuke instead."

"What! I always thought he fancied himself as Napoleon, but not that he was as mad as that!"

"Purely a demonstration - fry a few sardines a few miles off the coast as he puts it."

Rumena had thought of the possible outcome. "Supposing that does not intimidate the Great Gondwana Leader? What then? Armageddon?"

"Quite. Is there anything you can do to change his mind? The matter is most urgent. We are prepared to countenance any tactic that might - shall we say - intimidate the PM- and prevent Armageddon."

Rumena took in this message. She cogitated for a moment, then smiled. Her black eyes grow blacker, sucking in all light and allowing none to escape, as though gravity had assumed infinite proportions around her. The room appeared to grow dark as power seemed to drain from the lights.

"I think there may be a little something that I could try." She pondered. Her mind raced with the possibilities. Her chance had come. The dirty, ugly, little immigrant could be on the verge of even greater power and success.

She thought rapidly as the chess pieces clicked about on the chess board in her brain. She put her arm around Helena and leaned in to whisper in her ear. She could smell Helena's body. The sweat from the catwalk and the perfume she had used. She could feel Helena's body underneath the dressing gown. She whispered huskily and slowly. "I hear Sir Tristram will be retiring soon. His position as Cabinet Secretary will become briefly vacant. The Prime Minister and his closest supporters should indeed be overwhelmingly grateful. Not beyond the bounds of possibility that he - or she - might stretch out his - or her - arm for a long reach inside the promotion procedure. It is not unheard for a rising star to skip two levels."

Helena held herself still and refrained from shrinking away. She could smell Rumena's body. The expensive perfume and a rank, sexual odor. Like a cat on heat. Perhaps there was a solution here to the country's jeopardy. Perhaps there would incidentally be something more for her career. Perhaps every action had its price. Duty, ambition, blackmail, sexual availability. Here was the dilemma. Had Bernard's brain realized all these moves on the chess board? Surely not. Duty called, a loud long blast on a horn, blown by a god from a high mountain. It might have been Olympus or Valhalla. She heard the call. She knew the honourable path to take. Rumena had to act. The mandarin made her decision.

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Captain Jill Bobbitt now smelled a little sweeter - soap, shampoo and a rather metallic anti-perspirant she favored. She had slept and showered and was now hunched over the radio in the command centre communications room at PJHQ Northwood. A group of senior officers stood around the room. Her wish for action was coming true and she reveled in it - no point in being a soldier if you didn't go to war now and then.

She was in encrypted communication with a Royal Marine Commando Captain on the ground in South Gondwana. He had deployed from the frigate with his twenty-two soldiers as ordered by General Saddler. Fifty-five miles by Apache helicopter from the ship to the shore and eighteen miles on foot to a hilltop position overlooking the enemy base, some five miles distant on the plain below.

Now he crouched in the sand and dirt, his platoon lying flat behind him. The sun beat down. It was very hot, The air was clear and the view over the valley below was excellent.

The Commando looked through his binoculars and spoke into his radio, "I have a good sight of the main body - I can see fifteen tanks and all the Apaches drawn up just outside the oilfield buildings. Probably five thousand infantry in this location, the others must be enjoying themselves in the local township"

"Thank you Captain. Standby." Bobbitt turned to Saddler and the other generals with him, who were all listening as the heavily encoded voice message came over the loudspeaker. Saddler gave his order. "Tell him to maintain cover and get some rest".

The message was relayed. In Gondwana the commando platoon deployed fifty yards to the rear by crawling, then a further two hundred yards in a crouch, then lay down and rested. There would be no food for a while, but some water could be drunk from water-bottles.

Bobbitt had been relieved of duty as bodyguard so that Saddler could have her as a direct communication to the troops on the ground. Her replacement was now at Saddler's side; a fit-looking Captain about six foot tall and heavily built. Saddler knew full well how the command chain would thicken and become convoluted. He had had to struggle to keep the Royal Navy out of it. There were four admirals and one air-vice marshal in the next room, along with the Defense Minister and his underlings. Even the Prime Minister could not go to war, especially war involving the use of nuclear weaponry, without involving the whole command structure.

Inside the room there was the head of MI5, bland as ever. Her outfit had now managed to find another of the dirty bombs. Its destructive capability was as reported. The search was hampered by the PM's insistence that the matter be kept secret to avoid panic.

Also inside was an SAS colonel. A ten man SAS squad would be dropped by parachute as soon as night fell, some five miles away, thence to join the marines on the ground. Another twenty would be dropped by the shore, together with anti-tank weapons, to be ferried onwards by the frigate's Apache. Every sinew had been bent to deploy the soldiers. There

would soon be more of an attack capability, but the odds were still impossible. Saddler knew the soldiers would attack if ordered. He knew he would give the command if ordered; he had sent men to their deaths before. But he didn't like it.

He had not yet been ordered to launch a nuclear strike, but he had alerted the Navy. They knew their target and had been made ready. They had protested mightily but had eventually been satisfied of the chain of command and the necessary authorization. Inevitably in all this the top secret security was being compromised. More and more people now knew the situation. The press had reporters in Gondwana and were screaming for action to rescue the captured British citizens. The majority of the press certainly wanted war; only the 'Gurdian' wanted what it called 'negotiation' and others labeled 'appeasement'.

He grunted to Bobbitt, "Ask Admiral Johnson if he would kindly join us. Gentlemen, except General Bloggett - please leave us for the moment while we discuss Navy matters". If the command came he too would do his duty.

\*

In Sir Tristram's office in Whitehall once again a deep yellow shaft of dusty sunlight angled through the tall windows and fell across the room on the war sub-committee of mandarins Sir Tristram had convened to handle the situation. The three mandarins in question were Sir Tristram, Sir Norman and Helena Besty. They were in gloomy conference around Sir Tristram's desk - meeting to discuss the latest phase of the crisis. Sir Tristram provided his assessment of the situation. "My dears I'm afraid we must face the fact that our little attempts at bribery, lying and blackmail have proved ineffective."

Sir Norman followed up. "We seem to have lost our touch."

"Quite." from Sir Tristram.

Helena Besty said. "Shall I summarize Sir Tristram?"

"Please do."

Helena was crisp and concise. "One. Your inducements to the Gondwana President have not been taken up. Two. Your false assertion that they had been taken up has not had any effect on the Prime Minister's warlike disposition. He is maintaining his order for a nuclear demonstration on the expiration of the ultimatum in twenty -nine hours from now. Three. We all agree that this could result in the devastation of the country, but it seems the PM doesn't believe this will happen. He thinks the Gondwana President will back down after the nuclear

strike. Four. My own attempted pressure on the PM has failed. I apologize for the farcical nature of the failure. Five. We have now released top secret information to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the hope that she may make use of it to influence the PM."

Sir Norman agreed. "Bribery, lying and blackmail having failed we are now trying treason."

"Quite." From Sir Tristram.

"For the greater good."

"Quite." From Sir Tristram.

"Quite." From Helena.

All three mandarins were clearly in agreement. They were in agreement about much else. They mused as they gazed silently at each other, hoping that an idea might come. Their thoughts were almost indistinguishable and went approximately as follows, as they mentally rehearsed their mandarins code of honour: the proud boast of the British Civil Service.

"We are the sea-green incorruptibles, servants of the Crown. To us a bribe is quite contemptible, all corruption we disown. Not for us the foreign holiday, not for us the stuffed envelope. Not for us the high-class call-girls, not for us the furtive grope."

Here Helena had a variant thought. Although the sale of sex, for money or favors, was always an option for a pretty young woman, purchased sex was not a temptation. It might perhaps become so in her later years. More likely she would keep a cat. She thought of Rumena. A small shudder went through her. Sir Tristram noticed and gave her a look of concern. She smiled back at him. What obligations she might or might not be incurring with Rumena at this very moment! The group sat on in silence. More thoughts and mental images as they contemplated their dilemma. The dilemma of well-meaning people in charge throughout the ages. Did the ends justify the means?

"And yet for us to do our duty. Peace and order to maintain. We must lie and cheat and blackmail, - not once but twice and thrice again. This indeed is our dilemma. This indeed is what we face. Our reward is, in a small way, to be the saviors of our race."

No thoughts were stimulated by this musing in the minds of Sir Tristram and Sir Norman. For Helena the question was not moot. Could she and should she undertake the role of savior if called upon? The sunlight began to fade. Evening was drawing on. One more day to go before the election. The Prime Minister knew he was likely to lose it. Would he be

tempted to start a war to gain popular favor by standing up to the foreign aggressor? There was much historical precedent for that. But Gordon Blackead would not just be risking the blood of Her Majesty's loyal troops - who were paid for that sort of thing, but the life of the whole country.

Helena silently prayed that Rumena Haaridan might accomplish something.

\*

Later that night in a corridor of power adjacent to the lobby of the House of Commons a cleaner was polishing the floor with mop and bucket. Rumena Haaridan entered and talked earnestly to the cleaner. They seemed to be old acquaintances. Curiously it was the same cleaner who had been there for her initial tete-a tete with Gordon Blackead. The conversation lasted a moment or two, then Rumena moved away. The cleaner carried on briefly with her mop and bucket, unnoticed as ever, then finished and left hurriedly.

Jemima Peacegirdle entered the lobby with her TV producer. They were both dressed for warmth and protection. Rain was forecast. Indeed a few drops had already fallen. Jemima's light raincoat was speckled with dark spots. She saw Rumena, said a word to her producer, who walked away. She walked quickly across the lobby to Rumena.

Rumena smiled her blazing smile of welcome. "Good evening my pet."

"I got your text. You need to see me urgently."

Rumena spoke deliberately "Yes. I want you to place another little tidbit of news before the great British public. Should make them choke over their cornflakes as they decide which way to vote later that day. Timing is crucial. It's a matter of a bomb threat - no ordinary bomb.

I will also give you an exclusive on a rather surprising change of Prime Minister that I fully expect to see materialise."

"You think your party will win, despite its line on appeasement?"

Rumena spoke even more deliberately, accenting each word. "Whichever party wins I think there will be a majority in the House for urgent and decisive action." She paused for effect. "It is merely a matter of who leads that majority."

Jemima was puzzled. "I don't follow"

Rumena smiled her wonderful smile again. "Stay close to me my pet. All will be revealed."

\*

An hour later Rumena Haaridan entered her private office in the House of Commons annex. She moved around the room turning down the lights. She plumped the cushions on the large sofa prominently positioned in the centre of the room. Its back visible in the dimmed lights but its front facing away from the door and partially obscured in the darkness. The little office desk and attendant chair was set off to one side, apparently of minor importance in her scheme of things. Satisfied at last with the ambience she poured herself a drink - something pink in a long slim cocktail glass, and lay back on the sofa, displaying her legs to the door through which she knew Gordon Blackead would soon appear. This routine she had played many times. Gordon Blackead, however, might prove a harder nut to crack than most of those on her long list of cracked nuts.

The door opened. In came the cleaning lady carrying a bucket and mop and with a camera case dangling from her shoulder. Rumena waved at the drinks cabinet. The cleaning lady went over and poured herself a drink, downing it in one swig. Then going through into the little annex, where she switched on the light and gently almost closed the door. It was left open a crack, giving a view of the front of the sofa and illuminating it: with what was known in the cinematographer's trade as a pencil light.

A few minutes passed, Rumena sipped her drink. She heard steps in the corridor. The door opened again. Gordon Blackead came through. He sidled around the door to be met by Rumena's legs, which he studied intently. Then Rumena's head rose into view. She smiled seductively and let her skirt rise a little higher, revealing a glimpse of exotic red frilly knickers over her smooth inner thighs. His face was impassive for a moment, then he too smiled. His charisma was working again as it had so often in the past. Women did tend to throw themselves at him. He was often happy to catch them.

"Hello Gordon. Thank you so much for meeting me here. So much more comfortable for us both and away from prying eyes."

"This matter is most secret. No word of our agreement must get out".

"Of course. I understand completely. A most appalling situation. The country must stand together. You and I Gordon - we are the country. If we stand together then all will be well."

She noted Gordon was standing quite well already. He was enthusiastic then. He agreed with her. He summarized smoothly in his rich brown voice. "Thank you. Indeed - the country must stand up for itself. Her Majesty's Government can not give in to the aggression of petty dictators. The last government - your lot - ran down our armed services to such an extent that we can not act decisively with conventional arms - the Americans are uncharacteristically non-belligerent under the direction of that mad born-again moose-shooting female - too many American oil firms in Gondwana I suppose - they will not help".

Rumena had undraped herself from the sofa, poured the PM a drink - a large heavy tumbler of whisky with just a splash of soda - handed it to him and draped herself around him, taking off his jacket and tie.

He continued as he allowed her to undo his top three shirt buttons. "Indeed there is a faction in the intelligence community that suspects they may be partly the cause of this invasion. Our recourse must be a nuclear one - merely a demonstration off the coast."

Rumena undid his remaining shirt buttons. She asked the obvious question. "What if the demo fails to achieve the required withdrawal."

"Nobody calls my bluff and gets away with it."

The PM's eyes glittered with Napoleonic fire. He took a large swallow from his drink, coughed as the power of the liquor hit him, and allowed himself to be taken down to the sofa.

"I need you to split your party after the election and join with me in a pro-war coalition in the House. My party will no doubt split as well, but together we will have a majority against appeasement."

He continued invisibly from the depths, his speech punctuated by the sound of his shoes coming off and being dropped on the floor. More intimate bits of clothing appeared over the top of the sofa. Rumena's red lacy bra, then her red frilly knickers, then his striped boxer shorts. Evidently the coalition was already being formed.

In between grunts. "I've worked out ... the numbers.... very carefully. With the ... majority... we...can...do...anything we ....want."

Huskily. "Yes Gordon. I agree. I'll do it. It will be my pleasure to see my leader possibly winning the election but not gaining power. Ghastly bitch! I have a large enough following in the Party. Many more hawks will join us. I'm sure it will work."

"You will of course be Deputy Prime Minister, under me as PM."

"I'm sure I shall enjoy being underneath you Gordon".

Ensuing sounds verified that notion, as the sofa rocked and bounced. The annex door opened a crack. The cleaning lady poked her video camera through and quietly filmed the proceedings.

Outside the wind had picked up as a storm front rolled in from the North-West. Muffled thunder from distant thunderclouds. The odd flash of lightning lit up the dark sky and the flying shreds of clouds blown by the wind. Election day was tomorrow. It was going to be a wet one.

## Chapter 5

It was the evening of election day. Sir Tristram had escaped from his duties at the side of the PM and availed to the ballet. There existed a delightful custom of providing the top rank of the Civil Service with complimentary tickets for the premier ballet company's first night performances at the premier opera house. He didn't know when the custom had originated. It went back many years. He didn't know the price of the tickets - they were certainly the best seats. He had his usual place in a secluded box with an excellent view of the stage. The cost did not seem to appear on any set of accounts he had ever perused, though no doubt the accounting was recorded somewhere. Other expenses, or some such. Part of his brain knew full well that the quaint custom was not unconnected with the huge annual subsidy given to the Opera House from the public purse. The other part of his brain thought little about it, except to accept vaguely that his honest efforts on behalf of the public deserved some kind of recognition.

At any rate his own invariable custom on election day was an evening at the ballet. He lifted his champagne glass to his nose and sniffed the perfume of the bubbles through his aquiline nostrils. A delicate smile came over his worried face. "Life's small pleasures remain," he said.

His companion in the secluded box was Sir Norman, who was perusing his programme. "So they do, old boy. Though at these prices I hesitate to call vintage Bollinger a small pleasure!" The complimentary tickets did not include complimentary drinks - that would have been unseemly.

Sir Tristram gazed around him. The House was full and buzzing. The crowd the usual elegant, excited collection. The males no longer these days dressed in white-tie and tails, as they had been when he was young ... many years ago ... but the females glittering in their finest. Lots of make-up and décolleté necklines with necklace or brooch carefully positioned. Sir Tristram raised his opera glasses and enjoyed the downward view from the box. Yellow warming lights fell across the enormous heavy red velvet curtains gathered in folds across the stage. At the same time bright with highlights and dark with shadows. He could also see down into the darkened orchestra pit. More lights - little halogen-white twinkles on the music stands. Some seventy five musicians in pit blacks carefully stepping between desks and around each other to their places. Shuffling their music parts on the stands, tuning their

instruments. Then furtively practicing little tricky bits where they might have an exposed bar or two.

Late that afternoon he had been asked by Gordon Blackead to resign his position and to accept retirement. He had accepted. This would be his last election night ballet. The realization of these matters was slow in sinking in.

Sir Tristram started to relax a little. He succeeded in offloading the worst of the Gondwana affair's effect on his muscle tone. Matters were out of his hands. Others would have to deal with the impending catastrophe. But in a sense it was all his fault. He was a servant of the Crown, or had been until a few hours ago. It had been his responsibility to manage affairs properly, regardless of the wishes or desires of the electorate or their elected ministers. His spine was still rigid. He remained overly tense.

His companion continued. "One must make full use of one's free ticket privileges, of course - another pleasure to see our beautiful Prima Ballerina Assoluta again - but one wonders why she picks this modern stuff to perform."

"Oh its danceable enough", said Sir Tristram. "It will serve its purpose if it blots out the progress of the masses through the ballot boxes as it is endlessly regurgitated by those ghastly TV pundits".

Sir Norman was also not a fan of the profession of TV journalism. "Yes, the leak of the dirty bomb danger has apparently paralyzed their brains while galvanizing their jawbones. But one can't entirely blame their panic. There won't be many more little pleasures if that stuff is spread around the City. I envy you your retirement. I have to stay in town. They have prepared me a little bunk in the Foreign Office bunker. I'm afraid we expect the worst."

The reference to bunkers and the thought of civil servants staying overnight in their offices brought Sir Tristram unwelcome memory echoes of London in the Blitz. When he was young he had worked for those for whom those memories were fresh. If this war came it would be very different. London would be abandoned to the radiation.

Sir Tristram tried again to relax his stiffened spine. "Lucky you. I shall be tucked up in my Cotswold cottage and free of all care when whoever heads the new Government takes over tomorrow."

His beloved wife had died long ago. He had bought the cottage thereafter and now lived with a housekeeper and two dogs. The dogs would welcome his retirement - they would get to go for nice walks on the downs.

He continued. "One prays to avert a hung Parliament. My successor is Helena Besty as you know. The PM insisted she be jumped up two ranks - she was his choice, nobody else would do. Extraordinary. But she has no experience of hung Parliaments."

Sir Norman had indeed learned of Helena's astonishing promotion. He quickly defended her. "To be fair old boy neither do most of us." Technically she was now his superior. He was an expert in smooth accommodations. There was indeed every likelihood of a hung Parliament - the outcome of that was unguessable. "The wisdom of the electorate is inscrutable. We shuffle the cards and they deal us a hand. Every once in a blue moon it is a Royal Straight Flush!" In the morning, in addition to his new superior, he would no doubt have a new Minister to report to, new policies to respond to.

Music swelled as the ballet started. The two men leaned back in their seats and enjoyed the splendid sight of their favorite performing with her troupe. Despite her advancing years her legs were as elegant and beautifully formed as ever. Her splendid troupe of young dancers also displayed near perfection of beauty in human form. Female and male they were magnificent creatures. Lean and supple. Graceful and agile. Back to back and belly to belly they twined and twisted, arching their spines and elongating their limbs. Sir Tristram was grateful that the choreographer had preserved the beauties of classical dance. Fortunately the choreography had not been too affected by the jagged, so-called modern atonalities of the music: modern atonalities that were already old hat when Sir Tristram was a young man. Pas-de bas no less, entrechats and jetees. The Prima Ballerina twinkled and spun her artful web of enchantment. Beauty might or might not be truth, but art was certainly a comfort for the soul. Sir Tristram's spine finally relaxed.

## Chapter 6

The election was over. The Great British Public had turned out in large numbers despite the stormy weather. The counts had taken place during the night. The TV pundits had jawboned the night away, fuelled by coffee, adrenaline and who knows what tinctures and odd substances. The new Parliament had been chosen by the hopes, fears, prejudices and considered opinions of the voting public. The Gondwana crisis, Blackhead's belligerent attitude, the dirty bomb revelations and imminent threat had all influenced the voting. Young people's emotions - hawkish or dovish in nature, old people's memories of this or that past appeasement or foolish military adventure; all went into the mix. The storm front with its wind had passed over, but a steady downpour had begun. Much more rain was forecast.

Helena Besty, newly promoted to the top of Her Majesty's Civil Service and now Head Mandarin, inhaled the sweet smell of House of Commons antiseptic floor cleaner mingled with aromatic wax wood polish. As befitted the service she kept herself in the background but was making herself available to brief ministers as required, and, most particularly in the rapidly changing situation, was keeping her finger on the pulse. The damp air enhanced the smell of everything. The Commons lobby corridor was crowded with MPs being interviewed for the TV cameras. Journalists buzzed. Such was the crush and excitement that the floor polish was now overwhelmed by the pungent odor of anti-sweat preparations, and the even more pungent odor of sweat, as the crowd pushed and yelled.

Helena had her cellphone to her ear. She turned to Bernard who was close at her side.

"Bernard you are wonderful. It all worked like a charm. Gordon has now left the Palace after his resignation was accepted and Rumena is on her way to meet Her Majesty and kiss hands. She will be the new PM in a matter of minutes. The electoral turnout and the defections gave her the advantage. I think I love you"

"I know I love you". Bernard was still besotted.

"Is it the aura of power that surrounds the youngest ever Chief Secretary to the Cabinet?" Helena's blood was racing with excitement and that made her flirtatious. She would have to stamp on that.

"Perhaps. More likely the aura of Chanel No 5 that wafts from behind your dainty ears."

"Bernard stop it! People will notice us." Indeed the stream of officials that came up to her with some piece of news or to receive instructions did seem to register the closeness of their connection.

Roger was undeterred. "What's a bit of sex among civil servants? The public might appreciate our being alive. The Cabinet Secretary will need to get used to being noticed".

"Yes". Helena once again had her cell phone to her ear. More news coming in.

"Extraordinary thing... I'm hearing from the Foreign Office that The Great Gondwana Leader has now agreed to withdraw his troops. Amazing. It seems that Sir Norman's offer of places at Benenden for his daughters has actually worked at last. Also it seems he has a little prostate trouble and would welcome a visit to Harley Street, for which we are very happy to issue the necessary visas."

Bernard brain analyzed the news. "Probably that was what it was all about in the first place. He could hardly visit Harley Street while his country was at war with us! His misfortune is our good fortune."

Bernard thought that the good fortune should be celebrated. He embraced Helena and gave her a kiss on her forehead.

She reacted strongly and pushed him away. "Bernard, please! I have to set an example. We mandarins are dignified above all are we not?"

"I must admit, old Sir Tristram was something of an atrabiliar sea-green incorruptible."

"What?"

"Carlyle - of Robespierre."

"Oh yes... "

"Now you have to deal with Rumena - and she is even more ambitious than Gordon was."

Helena's brow furrowed. The furrow looked like becoming a permanent worry line. "Yes indeed. I haven't yet worked out how she managed to negotiate the leadership change. She does have a large following in her own party and the split with her leader was not unexpected, but the takeover of Blackead's group was a shock."

Her brow furrowed a little deeper. A second worry line appeared. Helena was visibly ageing as she settled into her new responsibilities. She mused, "Momentarily my ambition is satisfied by attaining the top of our particular greasy pole - one hopes the same is true of her."

The news of the Prime Minister's appointment as leader of the new government had now reached the journalists and MPs. The level of excitement increased still further. Bernard looked around at the mob before the TV cameras. "Do you really think Gordon would have fired off a nuke? Do you think he would have followed up if they had called his bluff?"

"We shall never know, thank God." Helena exited swiftly down the corridor of power, Bernard and the rest of her train following behind. Much work lay ahead.

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## Chapter 7

A steady rain had been falling for twenty-four hours. Such was the state of emergency in the country that Parliament had been reconvened immediately by the new Prime Minister, Rumena Haaridan immediately she had come from seeing the Queen. The newly elected MPs had hardly had time to realize they had been elected than they were ensconced in their Parliamentary seats, most of them soaking wet. The incessant rain had caused a dearth of taxis.

The floor of the Chamber was crowded to overflowing with many new MPs and the rump of the old guard. Rumena's splitting of both parties and the forming a new coalition with herself as the decisive leader was causing great confusion. There needed to be four sides to the House of Commons at least to accommodate the changed allegiances. But the House had only two sides. The British two party system was in many ways supported by the very architecture. Much pushing and shoving from the damp, the displaced and the confused.

The Speaker made himself heard "Order, order! The Prime Minister, Ms. Haaridan!

Rumena was squeezed in tightly on the front bench between her eager supporters. She wore a little black suit cut very tight, with a very short skirt. She wriggled out from her seat, performing miracles of agility in keeping her knees together in ladylike fashion, and sashayed the few steps to the despatch box. She smiled steadily at the TV camera operator, holding her gaze until the operator changed focus from her knees to her face.

"Thank you Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank all my supporters in this House and in the country who have showed they are against war and barbarity and in favor of firm decisive leadership by electing me to this high office of State."

Howls from the opposition - now on all sides - cheers from her supporters - also on all sides. Scuffles and shovings intensify. One or two fights break out.

The Speaker shouted louder "Order, order! The members will cease behaving as animals at feeding time. The Prime Minister!"

The Prime Minister now spoke. Truly it was she. "The house will know of the latest news from Gondwana. All troops have been withdrawn from the oilfields in our protected

territory. The President of that great country is now undergoing treatment for his unfortunate complaint in Harley Street. He has our sympathy. I shall insist that he is cared for properly."

Another steady smile to the camera. Diverse reaction from the members according to their sex - the females wryly amused, the males wincing. Prostate trouble was no joke. Rumena probably knew full well that 'proper care' could mean cutting bits off. Her broad smile swept round the House like the beam from a lighthouse.

"The house will also be pleased to hear that several suitcases of a toxic substance have been retrieved and are being taken to one of our power stations where they will contribute their substance to help in keeping our old people warm this winter."

She sat back down amid a storm of applause and catcalls.

"Order, order. Order! Order! The Leader of the Opposition!" The Speaker had to shout loud to be heard.

Rumena's one time leader, still apparently the leader of the Opposition, now rose. The catcalls intensified - much hissing. A few barks.

"Mr. Speaker - I congratulate Ms. Haaridan on her appointment as leader of the coalition government. She has succeeded in splitting a great party with a proud history. History will be her judge. I commiserate with Mr. Gordon Blackead on his failure to form a government. We would have gladly supported him in his resistance to aggression." This blatant volte-face and instant rewrite of recent history drew screams of rage from some MPs, those few with a more logical bent. The majority of her blindly loyal supporters cheered wildly. She rode the noise for a beat: then delivered her little joke. "How ironic that his new appointment as President of the International Monetary Fund will involve him in providing loans to Gondwana paid for in part by money extracted from the pockets of the British taxpayer!"

The animal noises, now including whinnies, yappings, grunts and strange moans, intensified further. Business as usual then.

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The weather front was passing through now, the sky clearing, the rain stopping, the temperature rising a few degrees. A sunny late Autumn day was in prospect. Helena Besty was watching the House of Commons proceedings on TV from her Whitehall office desk.

She sat where Sir Tristram had so recently sat. The green Morocco leather desk-top once again lit by dusty shafts of sunlight coming through the tall windows, leaving the rest of the

large room with its high ceiling in a gloomy shade. The office was still occupied by Her Majesty's Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet: which high position was now occupied by one Helena Besty.

The weight of the high position had already worked a change in Helena. She wore a woolen tweed suit that was rather loose fitting, the skirt now knee length, the heels flatter and more comfortable. Her high pale forehead now had tiny worry lines. She now looked her age. Already past forty. A week ago she also been past forty, but artifice and attention to detail had made her seem much younger. Henceforward her attention would be on other matters.

She would not need charm to manage her junior colleagues. Her powers of patronage, promotion and dismissal would be quite sufficient authority. She narrowed her eyes. Should they condescend to her, as an over-promoted junior and a woman, they would see that her whip could crack, and, if on a rare occasion it might prove necessary, her dragon tail would lash and a shriveling tongue of fire descend on the unfortunate disobedient one, incinerating the unfortunate down to their boots and leaving only a burned skeletal crisp .

But perhaps charm should not be underestimated. She would also need to control her Ministers. In particular the Prime Minister Rumena Haaridan, now triumphing on the TV. Helena made a mental note to keep her weight under strict control and find time, somehow find time, for her beloved dance classes.

With her in the office was Bernard Hapless. He sat in the dark corner she had been wont to occupy. Now he was out of a job and would need a new one. Lots of choices would no doubt present themselves, but where would his amazing analytical skills and problem solving brain be best used in the country's interest? She would need to give some attention to that.

She flicked the TV sound off with the remote on her desk and spoke to him. Her voice was gentle. "Ambition is a powerful motive and driver, Bernard. Look at that animal behavior. Are humans different from animals? Is there any hope for us?"

"So is love a powerful motive, Helena, that's pretty animal too." Bernard was himself in love and could think of nothing else at the moment. He stood up and moved over to her desk.

Then he leaned over her and put his face close to hers. "Let's see what the next generation does with human nature."

He kissed her on her forehead. He wanted to sooth away the worry lines. Helena allowed herself to be kissed. He grew more ardent. Helena hesitated - she saw the baby in his eyes. That was his ambition.

She recalled her earlier words - she had said that momentarily her ambition had been satisfied by attaining the top of this particular greasy pole. Was that still the case? What about staying at the top of the greasy pole? That would take work - and total dedication. The country would not run itself. Very probably no room for babies. There were dozens of ambitious rivals.

Clearly there would be no end to dilemmas for this mandarin. She drew back deliberately and firmly from Bernard's embrace. She would deal with that dilemma soon. She flicked the TV sound on again. "Watch the TV Bernard - her speech is not finished yet".