

Excerpts from:

The Infinitude of the Sentient Singularity:

The Screamin' Skull Trilogy

by JACK GRANT

Warning: Contains adult themes and explicit material.

This extensive literary work contains any and all 'triggers' seems the tome is one relating to horror in all its forms. Anyone in fear of triggering a phobia or a traumatic memory definitely should not be reading horror content.

This novel also contains some lighter moments, including humour, good cheer, friendship and laughter; in light of this, the book should be avoided by any and all 'miserable gits' everywhere.

N.B.

This is a taster section from the extensive novel:

‘The Infinitude Of The Sentient Singularity - Screamin’ Skull Trilogy’

There are a few select omissions in the carefully chosen extracts
to avoid ‘spoilers’.

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Preface

A number of stories and themes described in this book are based upon true otherworldly encounters as experienced by the author. However, names and locations have been altered. Remember, that to some degree, we are all psychic, for this ability is inborn and far more common than the mainstream would ever dare to admit.

There is nothing supernatural nor paranormal; in fact, expanded awareness is both quite natural *and* normal. Suspend your disbelief and delete the ‘super-’ along with the ‘para-’. If I had a penny for every time I saw or spoke to a spirit entity (ghost) then I believe I’m very likely to be nudging nearer towards a tenner!

Beyond the fleshy confines of mortality
In unrestricted realities that abound
The war to realise realm reduction rages on

Within time and space which cannot exist
An infinity bristling bright with expression does persist
To perceive the true power and glory of the 'one'

The magnificence which is ...
the Sentient Singularity

Screamin' Skull

Excerpt from Chapter Eight

Cody raced around the circuit of the pitch, leaving the fielders to chase the ball which he had just struck with all his might. He went for it, speedily running from base to base with all the power he could muster. The muscles in his body frantically absorbed the oxygen from his blood circulated by his fiercely pumping heart. His ears rang with the raucous cries erupting from the onlooking crowd. A fielder sent the ball spinning through the air. Mere seconds separated him from victory or total defeat.

Cody ran for all he was worth, feverishly snatching short shallow breaths, inhaling through his nose, exhaling through his mouth the way he had been taught. His energy surged and urged him on. With every fibre of his being he leapt towards the last base to complete his home run.

His left heel cut into the track churning up dirt and dust, striking base milliseconds before the ball powered into the catcher's mitt. He had made it and his run was safe.

The crowd erupted with cheers of sheer adulation. The damp baseball strip his body had lathered with sweat was in the colour and design of his favourite team, 'The New York Yankees'. Cody was seriously out of breath. Through gritted teeth he grinned his victory to the spectators. The stadium was packed with adoring fans.

'*Man,*' he thought to himself, '*what a game, what a season!*' He was on top of the world, with his team now top of the league.

During the celebration while the crowd cheered, the other players congratulated him by slapping him on the back with a few victory hugs thrown in for good measure. They hoisted him upon their shoulders to carry him aloft in triumph towards the awaiting podium. He was the eleventh hour hero, the saviour of their hopes and dreams.

A harrowing, amplified scream rang out from the rostrum. The crowd suddenly became silent. They all turned their attention to a figure wearing a dark suit. From the figure's cold cadaveric face, the eyes stared out with a deathly gaze which was devoid of anything natural or normal. The eyes seemed to absorb all light without reflecting a hint of a glint. They were black pits of tar and darkness, ensuring with insistence that this 'otherworldly' individual possessed a penetrating, evil-eyed glare which was a curse to the living.

The 'thing' masquerading in the form of a man in dark apparel spoke with a remote coldness; the inhuman, alien tone to the voice impressed upon Cody that this sound alone could chill the blood to the extreme in all the unfortunates that were unlucky enough to hear it.

“Cody,” the announcer in the dark suit said whilst effecting an unnerving upturned curvature of the lips that could hardly, in the remotest sense, be described as a smile, “*Come, step up here to claim your prize.*”

From all around this huge stadium, the hitherto, once eager fans broke their silence to deliver three very definite, ominous claps. The sound was dead. There was no echo.

The gaunt pallor to the dark announcer’s face lacked any semblance to a normal complexion, in that there was no colour other than the hue of death; morbidly macabre, clammy and dour-looking. So deathly white in fact, that in partially affected patches, the thin stretched skin had a cadaverous blue tinge. The face reflected a doomed spirit hopelessly imprisoned within the grasping embrace of a static decay.

A number of people were sitting on a long bench which was placed on the podium. Their heads were covered in white linen sacks tied at the neck with cord. The entity in the dark suit took position behind the first hooded person it came to. This nightmarish figure then loosened the cord around the person’s neck and roughly ripped away the covering.

Cody gasped when he witnessed the reveal. Sitting there was Ronnie.

Once again the blue lips of death formed an insubstantial curve which only hinted at a sly smirk when the sinister ‘suit’ leaned forward to offer Ronnie a handgun.

“Wow, thanks!” he beamed before checking out the weapon, “Cool, dude!” Ronnie seemed to be childishly excited to the point of giddiness. He waved the gun in the air while emitting extremely intense bursts of maniacal laughter.

‘The suit’ leaned closer to Ronnie’s ear while it motioned from side to side with one bony index finger to demonstrate a warning, like an adult might enact to caution a naughty child. Keeping the index finger in front of the excited young guy’s face the dread figure verbally chastised him.

“*It’s very naughty to smoke weed,*” the ghoul in a suit said.

The part time pizza delivery guy and full time space cadet erupted with an unintelligible, incoherent babble interspersed with laughter. “I ... like yeh, yeh ... tokey-toke-toke ... what I can, I can ... oh yes, lolly lapalooza, yay ... it’s goody good ... yeh!” Ronnie rocked from side to side on the bench never breaking from his impulsive gibbering cluster of chuckles. Through his decidedly crazed undisciplined mirth Ronnie cheerfully called out, “Yeh, well, it gets me out o’ my head.” Ronnie fell into an uncontrollable, thigh-slapping fit of the giggles.

“So,” declared the dark suited announcer, “*Let the punishment fit the crime.*”

Ronnie never calmed in his uproarious hysterics when he simply said “Oh, sure ...” He put the gun to the side of his own head and pulled the trigger.

A fraction of a second before the gunshot exploded Cody cried out, “Stop! Ronnie don’t!” but it was all too late. Ronnie lifelessly slumped to the side with his blood gushing over the white podium floor.

Excerpt from Chapter Nine

The narrow winding country roads of this particular English summer morning were free of heavy traffic with it being only six a.m. Hector and Connie, along with their meagre possessions stacked in the back of the vehicle, were travelling at a very moderate speed. As he manoeuvred his ramshackle charabanc whilst displaying a very definite proficiency, the tufts of hair on Hector's head blew freely in the breeze. This unavoidable air current also affected Connie, what with there being no windshield. Hector smiled at all the scenic greenery he observed from behind his protective driving goggles and occasionally he cheerfully squeezed the black rubber bulb attached to the charabanc hooter.

"Hector stop, you're scaring the cows, it's so childish and irresponsible," Connie scolded while he flicked a smouldering cigarette butt out and beyond.

Graced by a rather jovial mood, Hector was quick to answer.

"Just keeping them on their veritable tippy-hooves Connie, besides I deserve some fun, after all, you have persuaded me to stay in that godawful ghoulish old manor."

Connie didn't have to think about his reply. "We could return to Nasty Curly, dear."

"Yes, er yes, well," Hector hesitantly answered, "You've got me by the short and curlies on that topic haven't you."

"Mmm, suppose so," came the brief response. Connie twisted the cap from a bottle of vodka.

"This old thing is running marvellously, don't you think?" Hector triumphantly declared.

"The charabanc, yes dear, but remember, do keep in mind—"

"Yes, yes," Hector anticipated Connie's concern. He tried to give his friend a grain of solace. "There's no tax and no insurance, I know, but it's six in the morning Connie and we only have three miles to go."

Connie had a swig from the bottle before he berated his old chum.

"Then stop drawing attention to us with that bloody hooter!"

Hector's fingers were already poised around the rubber bulb. He hesitated.

"Who is going to arrest us? The metropolitan sheep police, the cows of Scotland Yard or maybe a pheasant staffed snatch squad?!"

Connie shot him a piercing glance. "Yes well, you're a pheasant plucker at the best of times. Good job there aren't any pigs! Besides, this antiquated old banger will itself attract unwanted attention, it must be more than a hundred years old."

Hector nodded in agreement. After withdrawing his hand from the hooter he then went on to say, "Yes, the bodywork is original, the engine was replaced in the mid fifties, I remember my old man telling me so."

Connie took another swig from his vodka bottle whilst feeling rather relieved that he hadn't received the full lecture. His relief was short lived.

"Of course the wheels and the tyres, they were replaced ..."

Connie grimaced while he listened, given that he was the captive audience to Hector's own brand of continual informative torture.

"... but of course the starting mechanism is vintage. Now the exhaust pipe I believe that must have been replaced, some mornings it blows a bugger that does; concerning the steering wheel's leather bindings, well that is –"

"Hector enough!" His friend cut him short. "I do not need the history of the charabanc nor a motor mechanics lesson thank you very much. I'm already annoyed and irritable, this old thing's a real boneshaker, I can't feel my own arse it's gone so numb."

"Ah well," Hector said before clearing his throat in readiness to recommence, "I can't speak for the suspension, the coiled springs tend to rust and lose integrity. The seats are a little hard for the old posterior I'll admit –"

"AAAH!" Connie cried out. "For the love of sanity go fuck your monkey some place else Hector, you're driving me nuts!"

Displaying a scowl to express his indignation, Hector adamantly stated, "Suit yourself, be an ignoramus, you horrible manky old actor." After Connie's sharp intake of breath, followed by his high pitched squeal in protest, Hector continued, "And I mean manky in the French sense of the word."

Connie's initial look of confusion was quickly replaced by one of sudden realisation when he firmly retorted, "The word is pronounced 'mong-kay'. How dare you suggest that I am an actor *manqué*. I am already a well renowned Thespian of the highest degree and if it wasn't for the vodka, I would definitely take the wheel because you're such a crap driver!"

Connie reached out to the seat behind him in the sure knowledge that there lay the battery powered portable boom box.

"I need some music on now, if nothing else the sound will drown out you and your bloody lectures. I shan't speak to you for the rest of the journey."

He turned the volume up to the max and pressed play. The workings of an old-fashioned music cassette started to turn. The music blasted out of the speakers loud and proud with the infectious chorus being driven on by a pounding beat.

*The monkey's in the driver's seat
The monkey's in the driver's seat
The monkey's in the driver's seat
And it's heading for the cliff'*

Connie nearly choked on his vodka, then holding his sides, he rocked with laughter.

Hector didn't look too pleased at first though he eventually saw the funny side and succumbed to a series of hearty chuckles.

Down the winding road they travelled hemmed in either side by hedgerows. Fresh fields of green lay beyond, every few metres of which was randomly dotted with contentedly grazing, cud chewing cows. After his little outburst and when the song had finished Connie turned the boom-box off. He was content with

surveying the vista, warmed and comforted by constant snifters from his vodka bottle; which incidentally, he cradled in his arms like an overprotective parent. Connie realised he may have been a little selfish and being of a generous nature he proffered the bottle to Hector who in no uncertain terms flatly refused the offer.

“Oh better not old thing, drinking and driving, that’s a big no-no in my book.”

Connie withdrew the bottle and therefore the temptation whilst saying, “You’re only this sensible because you’re a tad more sober than usual. After all you did only polish off just the one bottle of Scotch last night; which doesn’t exactly qualify you to join the sobriety and abstinence brigade, I know ... but still I thought wonders will never cease; however, your disciplined moderation didn’t prevent you from performing your usual ritual in the kitchen.”

Hector had a sly smile on his lips.

“That’s because you didn’t notice me polish off the first bottle. I threw the empty out of the window while you were packing.”

Displaying an impassive expression of pure resignation, Connie simply said, “I knew it was too good to be true.”

The day was warm and the sun was bright in direct contrast to the wet stormy weekend which they had just endured. The two friends were elated to at last be free of the equestrian hell hole that they had lived in for the past six months. They rounded a corner in the road and ill fate obliged them with an ill predicament. Parked in a lay-by a few metres ahead a police car lay in wait. The driver, a portly copper, stood beside the vehicle enthusiastically puffing on a cigarette which provided the nicotine his system so richly and readily craved.

“Oh crap!” exclaimed Hector, “A rozzer and he’s waving us over.”

Excerpt from Chapter Fifteen

Zack woke up sore. In addition to a thoroughly aching body and a throbbing head, his dazed senses also quickly became aware of just how extremely parched he truly was. With the flat of one hand he stroked his brow. “Whoa, what did I take last night?” he asked himself aloud. Wherever he was, it was dimly lit. Just two thin slits of daylight managed to permeate the gloom above him.

In stiff agony he slid his body from the hard, lumpy, uneven surface he had landed on. He felt himself drop. Luckily it was only a couple of feet until he found purchase on terra firma.

Zack then felt his way the best he could around what seemed to be racking or shelving. Blindly through the gloom, the impeded young man did this until he felt the flatness of a wall. Using his hands to slowly guide him in the darkness along the length of the brickwork, at long last he found what he was searching for; a light switch that he now clicked on.

The luminous tubing fixed to the ceiling above flickered into life, lighting up the interior. When his eyes adjusted to the sudden shock of brightness he saw numerous sacks stacked on racking. Zack could easily make out the contents through the net bagging and he found that they were a varied assortment of vegetables.

The way he was feeling, the onion sacks ought to have been gnarly sandbags in the trenches alongside the Somme.

He scanned the room thinking, *‘How do I escape from this tomb of broccoli and frickin’ onions?’*

He retraced his steps nearer to the light switch. About a metre further forward there was a small door next to a large metal concertina screen covering the main entrance. He knew this retractable door would be locked from the outside, rammed into a ground lock. The smaller door to the side of it was double bolted from the inside. Zack slid the bolts back and then he shoved on the panelling of the door which easily creaked open onto daylight. He flicked the light switch off and walked out into the open air.

This revealed him to be in another small courtyard at the back of some buildings. He figured his newly discovered location was situated to the rear of some shops. Spying a short alleyway leading out onto the main road, Zack closed the small door and made his escape.

Flabbergasted to so easily find his bearings out on the street he quickly ascertained, much to his own amazement, that the veggie storeroom was bang next to his digs and not more than fifty yards from the main entrance of the hotel. A stark realisation dawned in his mind. He went back into the alleyway and checked his pocket. He brought out the polythene bag that contained the reefers. From his other pocket he pulled out a cheap plastic lighter. With the lit reefer held firmly between his lips, Zack had his first toke of the day. He thought to himself, *‘Just one more spliff to calm myself down before I have to face the wrath of Gregory DiAngelo.’*

Excerpt from Chapter Twenty

He ran swiftly through the dark forest taking in rapidly drawn breaths, which were deep and heavy, forcing his heart rate ever higher. The forest floor crunched in crispness, laden like it was, thick with leaf from the labour of autumn's fall.

The scent of decaying flora mixed richly with the aroma arising from the low lying late fruits and berries. Nature's nourishing morsels were abundantly strewn across a neverending spread which was also profuse with darkening posies and yellowing grasses. The overripe fermenting fullness of the season swept into his nostrils like the spirit of a harvest long lost to the world.

The drizzle rained down, fine wet and soggy upon his form; the prelude to an oncoming storm. Far in the distance above the tall mighty trees which stood like an army of sentinels with their branches swaying in the breeze, a dark and ominous rumbling sounded like the low roar derived from a carnivorous beast.

Something pursued him – a phantom unseen.

In an effort to increase speed by utilising every fibre of his being, moist rotting undergrowth was kicked up in his wake. Roosting birds in this twilight world, now disturbed by his noisy passing, screeched from the boughs above.

At last he entered the woodland clearing. The thrones of the all-knowing a rocky circle did make. He leapt into the arena triumphant in pride, his body now worn, with muscles in spasm, for vigorously his form did shake. A warning he carried deep in his heart for his mistress, the queen of the lightning spark, which he now gave.

“Upon a slimy belly something evil crawls this way, creeping ever nearer with insidious persistence through mulch and decay.”

A sweet voice descended to kiss his ears; “Have you decided? ... Have you resolved upon which way you will go?”

“Not yet!” he shouted in answer, anxious to impart the portent of an ill omen. “All in due course, but I bid you a warning the beast doth come forth.”

The voice of his mistress whispered only two words:

“I know.”

Excerpt from Chapter Twenty-Seven

A young cavalry officer marched alongside his captain in their task to lead the horses up a steep rocky trail. A small troop of men accompanied them. A short distance ahead a soldier waved his arms frantically in the air shouting, "Apaches gone into a cave! Apaches gone into a cave!"

While they led their horses side by side the captain looked to his young lieutenant, "You heard the man Tomkins, give the order to secure the perimeter. Surround the cave. If it has another exit, post a guard. I believe we may have got them trapped. At last *Goyahkla* has run out of luck. Go ... and quick to it!"

The young officer mounted his horse. He barked an order to the two cavalry men following directly behind him. "You two with me!" They both climbed into their saddles and the three horsemen galloped up the trail. The officer began shouting to the contingent ahead, "Surround the cave, surround the cave."

Now that the captain walked alone with the troop following behind, no one was in sight of his face. The darkness within the captain seeped into his eyes. At first it was like a muddy disturbance that clouds a clear pool, until the interior of both his eyes were darker than the shade cast on a moonless night.

A rough looking cur of a soldier hurried towards the young lieutenant. He spat dark chewing tobacco stained saliva after every other sentence he spoke. "Checked all around that hidey-hole," he spat, "Ain't no way no how them Injuns gettin' out o' there." He spat again. "Only one way in an' that's the only way back out."

He spat for the very last time in his life. An Apache arrow cut through the air. The projectile entered the back of the man's neck and the tip protruded through his throat. The unkempt and unshaven soldier fell to his knees dying.

The young officer turned a shade paler. He leapt from the saddle and used the flank of the horse for cover. The man at the lieutenant's feet slowly drowned in a rich mixture of his own blood and the dark bitter spittle of his own saliva. He grabbed at the officer's boots pawing at them.

Another soldier, concerned for his fallen comrade quickly approached. "Beggin' pardon Officer Tomkins, I reckon he wants mercy. You have to finish him sir. It's a kindness, he could choke for hours gasping for air."

Tomkins yanked his leg away from the dying soldier's grip. "You do it," he said to the recruit. He then led his horse away. The mare whinnied and reared at the sound of the shot dispatched into the choking man's head.

The warrior brave, 'Coyote's Shadow', watched the horse that now reared in panic. He saw the frightened animal drop its dung near a bush next to where his successful target had met his end.

The recruit that had given the man release lamented with a frown and a prayer of sorts. "Bless you Farnworth, off to meet ya maker. Hope it ain't too hot down there old buddy." He then looked to the mouth of the cave a distance up ahead and uttered familiar words all too often used by the rank and file. "Damn Apache Scum," he scowled.

The captain reached the rest of his regiment at the appointed rendezvous point. He met his second in command at the bottom of a short rocky slope below the trail to the cave.

“Your orders sir?” Tomkins asked his captain.

Two soldiers dragged away the lifeless corpse of Farnworth. The captain looked down upon the blood covered cadaver while they hauled it away. Tomkins detected a slight trace of satisfaction in the sly smirk on his superior’s face. “Sir, your orders,” he restated.

In answer the captain delivered his commands.

“Keep the mouth of the cave covered at all times. Take a few men to gather brushwood for kindling and tie it into bundles. I suppose we’re gonna have us some roast ‘A-pach’ today Tomkins. Meanwhile I’ll go and negotiate with the enemy.” The captain began to walk up the craggy slope towards the cave, carrying within his form a dark possessing entity.

“Sir, what are you doin’? That’s suicide! Sir come back!” Tomkins yelled in anxious exasperation. He began to worry that his captain had gone totally insane. He beseeched him to return to the safety of his troop. “Sir, have you snapped and gone loco? Only a crazy bastard would just walk on up to a bunch of Apaches!”

His captain never looked back while calmly saying, “Tactics Tomkins, tactics. I know what I’m doing.”

The rest of the troop witnessed their commander walking towards certain death. Confusion swept through the ranks of the military detail. “What the hell’s he doin’?” one soldier exclaimed.

Another of the onlooking cavalry men shook his head in disbelief. He watched the captain who was striding to his doom, getting ever nearer the cave entrance where he would surely face the full fury of the Apaches. “That stupid son of a bitch must ‘ave a goddamn death wish!” the cavalry man shouted.

Tomkins approached the man. “Enough of that soldier or ya gonna be on report.”

The trooper stopped shaking his head and sneered at the lieutenant’s words. “I just carried Farnworth away, we gonna be draggin’ that damn fool’s dead hide away too.”

Tomkins said nothing in return. He glanced at the ground and then quickly marched away.

Excerpt from Chapter Forty-Four

A pair of unconscious, shirtless young men in knee-length camouflage combat shorts were laid out, side by side, on two separate tables. Clearly visible, the contusions caused by bite marks were randomly displayed in distinct markings all over their arms and torsos. One of them had a bandaged arm, though the blood was seeping through the covering. The other had a lint and sticking plaster patch on his right shoulder which also leaked blood to stain the dressing red.

A young woman in a halter top and floral shorts was sprawled spark-out in a white plastic garden chair. She had been nursing her arm when she fainted from the pain. The stubborn damsel-in-distress had refused to accept any differing opinion other than the injury was nothing more than a sprain, though the more mature and experienced people suspected she had a broken arm. No one, not even the victim herself had noticed the bite wound gouged in the flesh of her left calf.

They all carried the marks of this evil day, both physical and mental.

Helen, the kind lady who had guarded the face-painted toddler was worried about the three injured youngsters, in the way that she was concerned about everyone. Concentrating her efforts on the young lady with the injured arm, using the flat of three fingers, she gently tapped her on the cheek. "Pammy, can you hear me love, come on Pammy, wake up sweetheart." Her attempt at revival failed. The youngster remained unconscious.

Helen turned to speak to someone in the huddled crowd.

"You did call the emergency services didn't you Dom?"

Dominic, the fearless father who had valiantly protected his three year old boy, answered her with a certain degree of frustration.

"Yes I did, I got through, but the connection was bad. So just in case I tried again and what ya know? There was absolutely no signal."

Murmurings swept through the marquee.

"Me too."

"And me."

"I've no signal," the various festival attendees confirmed.

Then an older looking guy with long grey hair tied in a pony tail, sporting a well-groomed, tidy grey beard spoke up.

"Must be 'cos o' the storm that's on the way. It's going to be a big one I can tell yer. I have a different problem with my device. The battery's flat and I only charged it up about three hours ago."

Now there were many affirmative nods from a large number of people who had that exact same problem.

Dom was becoming impatient in that he wanted to encourage a more practical approach. He shared his well reasoned idea. "There must be something on that rig or the back of stage that we can use for a charger."

A chubby lady, fully sloshed on cider held up her half empty glass. "Good luck with that mate if you can get over there in one piece. You go first and the best of British but Tracey Brown 'ere," she thumbed at her own ample bosom, "isn't

straying from this damn seat!” While seated in her chair, the buxom lady raised her legs and with a *thud*, she unceremoniously rested her heels on the table. This did nothing other than show off her gold varnished toenails displayed from her cerise coloured flip-flops.

A young man who had already announced to everyone within earshot that his name was Robin, and that he was a DJ for ‘ND radio’, now offered up his own opinion about the situation.

“Well we can’t stay here forever, and a tarpaulin cover is not much protection from the monsters, or whatever those things are roaming around the field. Out of sight, maybe out of mind but I don’t believe those grinning dancing killers think all that much, if they even think at all. I mean to say, we’re all in here protected by nothing more than a flimsy tarp cover, it’s like pulling a thin cotton sheet over your head hoping it will protect you from the axe murderer standing beside your bed.”

Sloshed Tracey Brown hollered out at Robin, “Poet ... don’t know it!” She gave out a belt of laughter before refocusing on her half depleted cider drink and the consumption thereof.

The conversation within the marquee was intense and some pretty wide ranging options were discussed, with not even one suggestion sounding like a perfect solution. While everyone tried to concentrate, focusing all their thoughts on finding an answer, the anguished cries beyond the thin canvas covering had merely become a theme to the nightmare that each person appeared to be sharing.

Now the excruciating cries and woeful pleas begging for mercy flooded into the awareness of the occupants in the tent. With unabated persistence the wailing melded into one unified constant, blending with the unending shrieks cast by the maniacs. To fearful and very suggestible people the harrowing sounds struck terror into their hearts.

Seated at a table with four other strangers, a lady with short silver grey hair placed her glass down in readiness to speak. The quality of her voice had a strictly disciplined tone. She spoke with authority.

“I think there is only one line of action to take. No matter what we have to face out there, we must all make for our cars or the village. It is true we are surrounded by flesh eating lunatics hell bent on our destruction ... but despite this, we must drive home our advantage. We must break out of the field and raise the alarm!” Whilst making her statement, there was an unflinching impassive aspect about her which hinted at a stoic nature and attitude.

Tracey, the chubby boisterous lady held up her glass which now only contained the last few dregs. “I’ll drink to that,” she exclaimed whilst at the same time accepting a top up from a kind young gent who poured cider into her glass from his bottle.

Dominic was curious, so he asked the silver haired lady, “What advantage? Just what advantage can we drive home exactly?”

The silver haired lady cleared her throat to speak.

“That we are all totally pissed off our tits on cider,” she said to a rather stunned captive audience.

“That’s your plan?” For a moment or two, Dominic was temporarily dumbfounded. After gathering his thoughts he then continued. “God knows how many crazies are out there not just biting people but devouring them for good measure, an’ your plan is to get steamin’ on cider and fuck the consequences?” Dominic snatched a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one up to calm his nerves.

The silver haired lady had a gulp from her glass and then she said, “Yes ... and please could you kindly refrain from doing that. This is a non smoking enclosure and you know that full well young man, I don’t think the people here will take too kindly to you polluting their lungs.”

Dominic, who was already beside himself with worry now found his stress levels nudging him nearer to complete aggravation. He plucked the cigarette from his lips. Affected by his trembling hand, a small column of ash crumbled to fall away. This revealed the glowing cigarette tip which burned much brighter upon his next strongly taken draw. After exhaling the smoke he then impulsively executed a series of rapid, sharp, shallow breaths which bordered on a panic attack. He held the slowly burning cigarette out in front of him for all to see. Dominic then addressed the complaint but his comments were for all those gathered. While he spoke he glared directly at the silver haired lady.

“I’ve got a better idea madam, you get hammered on scrumpy while I go outside handing around cigarettes to the maniacs. Maybe they’ll all drop dead from cancer in about thirty fucking years time ... ya daft old bint!”

The lady recoiled with a pained expression to shuffle uncomfortably in her seat.

“Well I’ve never heard the like,” she exclaimed.

Tracey Brown, the buxom sozzled lady raised her glass to loudly state, “Daft old biddy, daft old cow, daft old coffin dodger, daft old fucker of a duffer! Have you heard enough now?” Tracy, the lairy lady, then smiled, though her eyes were glazed over with an apple cider sheen.

A little light relief swept through the marquee with some seeing the funny side and the hilarious absurdity of their current situation. Tracey seemed more interested in the marquee roof canopy than in any of the individuals sheltered within the tarpaulin confines. She didn’t even notice the silver haired lady’s strongly projected scowl.

Just when it seemed the people’s spirits were about to be lifted there was a nerve-shattering scream.

Helen was trying to pull her arm free from the grip of the recently infected Pammy. The teenage girl had clamped her jaws on Helen’s forearm and was attempting to bite through it while savaging the flesh like a starving wolf ripping into a side of raw beef. The blood profusely sprayed everywhere.

While most people’s efforts and attention turned to helping Helen only Robin the DJ noticed the twitching spasms of the two bodies laid out on the tables. The two young men in combat shorts lifted themselves to sit bolt upright. They were frothing at the mouth. Simultaneously their eyes opened to reveal nothing but a deep void of darkness. Robin’s vocal exclamation blended with his own scream when he yelled out,

“The lads! Watch out! The pair o’ lads!”

The two reanimated ‘lads’ both dropped from the tables to charge into the nervous gathering of cider tent refugees. They lunged to bite, rip, tear and gouge. They grinned from ear to ear during the brutal undertaking of their vicious, savage attack.

The crowd in the tent began to disperse, fighting to distance themselves from the three savage aggressors who had now erupted into screams of such magnitude that all covered their ears. The screams acted like a siren call to their vile cannibal clan, who now had a shrieking signal with which to home in on. The shrill cries enticed the maniacs to dance towards the small canvas-covered marquee. They tore through the tarp like the material had all the resistance of tissue paper. The maniacs ripped the covering from the frame which allowed their winged allies to fly in.

The safe haven was breached and torn asunder. The cannibal creatures began to gorge.

Excerpt from Chapter Fifty-Two

While Cody was in the bathroom he had detected a voice emanating from across the hallway landing. He knew it was Connie because his room was only a few feet down the hall from the 'John'. He didn't fancy his chances but he hoped, fingers crossed, that he could persuade Connie to have another darts tournament. He just wanted another chance to trounce Zack again. Victory felt so good.

With her colour drained, ashen faced, Rita gave the cellphone back to her daughter.

"Keep Connie talking on your phone," she said. Immediately, her mother then redialled from the landline.

Cody washed his hands in the bathroom basin and then he dried them with a towel he found on the rack. While he did so he heard a phone ringing. The sound was coming from Connie's room.

Rita listened.

"Hello dear, did we get cut off? Tell me more of what the medium said."

Rita stood in her hallway with Marlene, while Suzi chatted to Connie on her cell.

"Who is this?" Rita spoke loudly into her phone.

"Why, it's Connie dear," the voice said.

"Who is it really?" she demanded.

"Oh have I been rumbled?" the voice said. "I am a servant."

Rita's anger had overcome her initial fear.

"A servant to who?" she shouted.

Cody rushed into Connie's room. Initially he was all smiles but then his face dropped by a mile. At the same time that Rita heard the voice on her phone, Cody saw the thing that was speaking to her.

"I am a servant of the beast."

Rita brought the phone away from her ear to then slam it into the holder.

The featureless doppelganger turned its hairless head to face in Cody's direction. To Cody the unexpressive form resembled nothing more than a life-sized white, wet clay figure which impressed upon him that this 'thing' was dead and eerily ... yet unborn. Without gender nor characteristics it was a naked entity waiting to 'become' ... or indeed a creature lying in wait to become an undefinable 'something'. A slit had ripped into the blank canvas of its face to pass for a mouth. In Cody's transfixed state the specific aspect that terrified him the most was the sound of the entity's voice. The doppelganger exactly replicated the tonal quality of Connie's speech.

“Did you overhear that Cody? I am indeed a servant of the beast. Are you ready to play Cody? I rather think it’s time for you to run.”

The doppelganger sharply marched towards him, discarding the cellphone from its excuse for a hand. Cody came to his senses and raced from the room. Making a mad dash he ran full pelt down the hallway much too overcome by shock to cry out. He burst into the control room.

“A d-, a d-, a doppler,” he frantically spluttered. “A doppler’s after me.”

Excerpt from Chapter Sixty-Six

Zack grinned, batting at one low hanging mask to send the green ‘grey’ twirling from the attached string. The moulded false face crashed into the others resulting in a Halloween jig of costume horrors spinning in an entanglement of string cords. Zack noticed Cody’s anxious, distressed state, prompting brotherly love to win through in the end.

“What’s the matter?” he said while putting a caring arm around his younger brother’s shoulders and bringing him in closer for a light squeeze. “They’re just a bunch o’ dumb masks. C’mon let’s get out o’ here. I need fries,” Zack said with a smile. He led his brother out of the store. Cody didn’t say anything because he figured the incident was a combination of nerves and fatigue.

They made their way to the nearest burger joint. Cody slid his backside onto a bench set at a table stall while Zack put in their order at the counter. He noticed two older looking dudes, who seemed to be roughly the age of Brandon and Tyler. They were sitting at a corner table and Cody’s stall faced in their direction.

They both had shaven heads and sported black ‘muscle vests’, though what caught Cody’s attention the most were their tattoos. Etched onto the right arms of both guys was a vivid coiling snake. The viper’s head, baring fangs, finished at the side of their necks.

Cody kept averting his eyes; he didn’t want them to notice him staring and yet he couldn’t help himself, the ‘tats’ were just so cool. He needn’t have worried because the two ‘snake guys’ were staring intently at his brother. They got to their feet, then leaving their table, they headed for the rest room. Cody’s cautious discretion seemed to have worked given that the two guys didn’t even notice him. When they passed his table Cody heard one of them say, “Da, da, American dude,” followed by a short sentence spoken in a foreign language and then the guy nodded in Zack’s direction.

Cody was immediately alarmed. How did they know Zack’s nationality unless they had both been stalking them. He went straight over to his brother, grabbed him by the arm and proceeded to march Zack away.

“Hey ... what about the fries?” his brother complained.

“Stuff the fries,” Cody told him while staring directly ahead, “Two guys with snakes inked into their arms and viper tattoos on their necks recognised you from somewhere. They knew you were American.”

Somewhere in the back of Zack’s mind he vaguely recollected something. The memory wasn’t clear but Zack inwardly concurred with Cody’s initial instinct to get the hell out of there.

“What’s the time?” Cody asked when they exited the burger bar.

“Ten after nine ... why?” Zack enquired while they picked up their pace to hurry down the street.

“Because the train’s every twenty minutes, right?” Cody informed him.

“I dunno, I think I left the timetable on my seat when we left Uncle Greg.” Zack did not retain such details in his memory banks, relying instead on printed fact or instant digital info. However, Cody just about memorized everything. He quickly shared his recall with Zack.

“Tube trains every twenty minutes, I think there may be one at nine twenty. C’mon quick.”

Cody hurried Zack along. They then heard the distinct clomping of heavily planted boots marching towards them from the rear. The sound of the footsteps were speedily following in their tracks. The brothers turned to see the ‘snake guys’ in hot pursuit. They were lean and muscular, exhibiting an extremely intimidating presence. The pair of them made very threatening figures.

“Hey American!” one of them shouted, “You owe me twenty grand! Where is my ‘Hi-Q’ ... uh, *Hi-Q?*”

The face of a Rastafarian flashed into Zack’s mind. The face was similar in resemblance to ‘High Jack’.

Zack suddenly remembered.

“Run!” Zack barked out the order. “RUN!”

Speedin' Bullet

Excerpt from Chapter One

The rays from a powerful sun beamed down upon the open ground. The dry red mudflats baked in the searing heat. The atmosphere surrounding the rusty wreck of a compound was affected by an all-pervading shimmering heat haze. This evaporated the moisture, every last drop, which mingled with the dry air, spiralling away in flurries, any hope of relief.

The old, square cut, tin plated sign hanging above the gaping entrance creaked while swaying slightly from the attached antiquated chains. Painted over the rusty surface, roughly written in chipped and dirty white lettering were the words, 'SPEEDIN BULLET TOR – MENT'. Maybe that's how it was meant to be read, or perhaps some letters had been lost to corrosion, ignorance or a combination of both. Next to the letters was the fading image faintly showing a ghostly off-white skull and crossbones which still served to remind the unwary of all the past woes that the sign once represented.

Old rusting buses served in purpose and design to form an oblong corral. These vehicles were the very walls of the enclosure. They formed the perimeter surrounding the old red dirt measure which was roughly sixty yards wide and a hundred in length of hard baked earth. The area was littered with old engine parts, rusting dented petrol cans along with a few upturned oxidised oil drums. The centrepiece was a small mound of metallic bric-a-brac and smashed headlamps.

A thin trail of smoke drifted out into the air, emanating from one particular smashed-in bus window. The shoddy shadow of a tattered old man puffed away in quiet contemplation. Stale and stained, the paper cigarette glowed red at the tip every time the old Native Ozz '*Riginal*' took a deep draw. He stared out into the desert outback intently concentrating on a point far out into the distance. Strewn across the landscape were a smattering of parched, crispy old bushes trying to cling to life with their roots embedded in the dry desperation of the earth.

A few black flies buzzed past the old man's face. Impulsively flicking at the air, he distractedly waved them away which was enough to break him from his trance. With his ruminations at an end he returned his attention to the bus interior. He sighed a little, turned his head slightly and said, "They comin' missus, be here soon enough."

The ghost of a dust storm erupted upon the horizon from where his attention had been focused. The disturbance could not sustain much energy and it quickly faded, dissipating into the atmosphere. He took another draw on his much reduced, grubby cigarette end. Another lungful of grey billowing smoke made him cough and hack a little.

“They on time at least,” the fragility of an old woman’s voice answered from further up the aisle of broken seats, nearer the front of the bus. “Come every year. Same time, same place. They getting thinner now tho’, very thin in the air.”

The aged Native Ozz lady was sitting in one of the double seats. An old board set on upturned oil cans provided her with a makeshift table to place her steaming jam-jar of herbal tea. She lifted the chipped glass container to her lips and cautiously took a little sip. Her face bore witness to the fact that she had endured many a hot arid year; the lady’s complexion was naturally marred by the telling lines and wrinkles of age. Though she had frizzy, flowing locks, the dark colour of her hair was now streaked with grey. Clinging to her bony frame, she was draped in a tatty black dress which was dotted with blue flowery patterns. The thin material was frayed and ragged having been torn in a number of places, though stitched and mended with contrasting white thread. A pair of old sandals loosely hung on to her feet with the straps now replaced by twine, wrapped for anchor around her ankles. She wiggled her toes while she took another sip of tea. Yawning a little whilst stretching out her arms, the lady’s old bones cracked somewhat. When her shoulders sagged, she gave out a slight wince of discomfort.

“No use pretendin’,” she said while gesturing with one arm towards the smashed window opposite her and the wilderness that lay beyond, “This dream-time’s almost over. Our folks all gone home exceptin’ for you an’ me.”

“I know,” replied her old friend from the back of the bus, before emitting a short sigh. He continued, “Soon be time to make a move.” The old man took another deep draw on his almost spent cigarette, exhaling the smoke which drifted above him to hang in the air like a suffocating shroud.

“We clung on too long missus. We tried our best to help him.” A small pillar of ash fell from the stalk of his cigarette onto his black fleecy strides. He brushed the powdery grey ‘spent burn’ away with the palm of one hand before he went on to say, “But this is the last time. We gotta move on. Can’t wait forever.” Using an old rag he swabbed at a little dark spittle that had dribbled onto his grubby grey shirt.

“Do you want some tea?” the old lady asked.

“No,” he replied with a thorough shake of his head, “Don’t like that herbal stuff. Gives me the trots.”

The elderly lady chuckled at this while her friend went on to resolutely state, “I’ll stick with mi liquor.” He took a tentative sip from a dusty green bottle, the neck of which was chipped and cracked. He swallowed which made him cough and hack again.

The aged lady called out to the back of the bus, “So the hooch don’t give ya the squits then?”

He lifted the bottle in a mock toast to no one but himself, after which he dejectedly declared, “Not much left now.” Totally ignoring her comment he went on. “Maybe a bottle and a half. Still, won’t be needin’ it much longer now.” He took another swig.

They both remained sitting in their seats while silently pondering, taking the occasional swig or sip from their respective drinking vessels of bottle and jar.

The body of the bus provided a little shade but no real protection from the relentless heat. The old lady picked up a piece of old cardboard from the makeshift table. She used the flat card to waft and fan her face whilst then saying, “I got to thinkin’, I’ve been here years workin’ to get through to ‘you-know-who’, but what’s been asked o’ me, as a final last resort, well, the very idea still scares the hell outa me.” She shuffled uncomfortably in her seat.

The old man replied, “Evie, these things don’t matter now. What befalls you, befalls me. To hell with it!”

Speaking in such a direct, though calming manner, his words did actually comfort her and not least because he had used her name without mentioning the usual ‘missus’ reference. He cleared his throat and continued, “We can have one last try before we make for the hump. I can feel our kin a-callin’, time to go home.”

A weak twist of dust swept into the dirt square compound, almost silent, like the last distant presence prolonged on a final eerie echo, murmuring in decreasing degrees a lost former glory. The haunting, diminished whisper of discontent, managed to disturb two rusty oil cans. An old smashed headlamp toppled down over a mountain of counterparts, rolling to the ground to cause a fleeting clang. The sign above the entrance stirred on the chains.

Old lady Evie looked out upon the slight disturbance.

“It’s like a sparrow fart in the breeze now Abe,” she said.

“Aye, we had better get to work,” replied her silvery haired friend.

Evie continued to fan her brow, mumbling to herself absent mindedly, “Mmm, kill ’em.” She expelled a faint sigh. “Always the same, kill ’em, kill ’em.” She swatted away a small black fly. “Kill ’em.”

Excerpts from Chapter Six

Raggedy Pete kept up with the pace. He desperately pushed for extra momentum to edge in front of the two cars that flanked him. He had ‘High-five’ to his left and ‘Razorback’ to his right. Neither would give any ground. Pete struggled with his motor, managing to get a half length in front before losing his lead to drop behind again, relinquishing his short lived advantage. Side by side they were equally matched and while Pete was just beginning to wonder if they would spend the whole race locked in these positions, a strange feeling swept over him. He had the weird flurry of a sensation in his ears, like passing through an invisible gale, though the gale raged inside his head.

He had felt like a wimpy loser all his life. More often than not he had been treated like one; what you consciously or subconsciously broadcast is pretty much all you attract. He wanted desperately to prove to his wife and kids that he could do something right, that he could succeed, even to excel at something. Winning the prize, a new life in the North is all that he desired. In truth he would trade that prize if his family were to pay him just one ounce of respect. This was the reason why he had so obediently put that gun to his head and pulled the trigger. *‘Better to be dead than to live dissed,’* he thought.

He had looked to his right several times since he started to feel strange, to see the face of ‘Razorback’ concentrating hard on the open range ahead, much like himself, trying to gain ground.

This time however, there was something different about him; Razorback’s bearded chin had dropped, his facial features had elongated into an abnormal snout, the man’s ears had grown into points and the whole of his head was much larger. His long black beard seemed to be moving independently.

Sensing he was being watched Razorback looked across at Pete. He noticed Pete’s terrified expression.

To Raggedy Pete’s clear perceptions, the long black beard wasn’t a beard at all; dangling from the lower jaw were scores of wriggling thin black snakes writhing and twisting in a shimmering ebony turmoil. The eyes fixed on him. Even the snakes seemed to be looking in his direction. Pete’s terrified eyes fixed on them.

Razorback took one hand off his steering wheel. He then motioned towards practically petrified Pete who was motionlessly gawping back at him. Displaying an open palm, Razorback mouthed the question, “What?” “What?”

The car next to High-five’s vehicle deviated to diagonally cut in front. Reacting with lightning speed, High-five veered to his left narrowly missing a smash. He looked to the driver so he could vent his anger, but the guy seemed transfixed, looking to his right, without actually concentrating on where his motor was going.

High-five, having just avoided disaster, didn't notice the swishing sound in his ears, although now he understood why the other driver was acting in this strange way. He would have done the same. High-five would most definitely have looked away.

Sitting next to Raggedy Pete in the passenger seat was a clown. The sickening figure was similar to the ones in that old picture book which had terrified High-five when he was a child: the red curly wig and the ever present grease paint smile which deceived the mind into believing that what lay beneath was a hellish mouth. A chill ran down his spine when his confused mind noticed and acknowledged the three other clowns sitting in the back of poor old Pete's car. They were holding different coloured balloons. The clowns started to laugh like riotous maniacs. He was aware that the three back-seat passenger clowns were so much in the throes of hysterical laughter that their eyes were tightly closed during their intense uproar.

They each sported a plain white jumpsuit that matched their pallid faces, which would have been totally blank if it were not for their upturned red greasepaint smiles. The three indistinguishable individuals respectively topped off their image with identical white conical hats, though High-five was almost sure that they weren't hats at all but vertical coned extensions of their hairless heads.

Pete, the driver, who was flat out flooring the car, did not budge in his seat, nor did he seemingly want to acknowledge the existence of the clowns. In his thoughts, High-five comforted himself.

'Thank the gods! Better him than me. At least I'm safe from them.'

Then all four clowns turned to look in his direction. The three in the back seat kept their eyes closed, yet to High-five's creeping terror he sensed that they still saw him.

Razorback spied Pete in the rear view mirror. He also saw the perfect image reflected by two scantily clad, sexy young women who were sitting in the back seat of his own car. They giggled whilst sliding the flat of their palms up and down the sexy dark leg-enhancing fishnet stockings which were delicately attached to suspender belts. In addition they were wearing nothing more than feather boas around their necks; one had black, the other had pink.

The woman with the pink boa raised one of her ample bosoms and playfully kissed the well rounded dome. Her companion rubbed a hand slowly between her thighs; she exhaled a slight moan.

In the front passenger seat the bikini babe gently kissed the side of Razorback's face which served as a precursor to her discourse.

"I can't see us having sex with you if ya let him get away like that, sugar."

"Yeah," Razorback nodded his head. "I should go back and finish off that sucker."

His motor executed a sharp U-turn in the desert which made the sexy ladies giggle with excitement.

Excerpt from Chapter Seven

Chain-male considered himself a provider. He was a life line for the unfortunate wretches eking out a miserable existence in the harsh environment, at the heart of the wasteland. His people had to eat and they were glad of anything. The monks condemned him. They rebuked him for cannibalism while almost being the same; cannibals once removed in the chain of events. That was why they wouldn't barter with him for the three that fell in the chicken game. They stamped the numbers on the foreheads of the slain so they would be sure to identify their vehicles. This was also a very efficient way to catalogue and steal the property of the dead. He had offered a good bargain but the holy order rejected his offer. The bodies would be taken to Monastery in the croc lands to be given a good saintly burial.

Chain-male knew better.

So his plan was to win this thing and claim their prize; take the gas, the food, along with a good supply of fresh water. He would head out to the North where rumour had it, rich pickings were to be found.

He feared little, after all, was he not a warrior, a road kill merchant of the wastelands? His people were few and scattered across the desert lands. He could not afford to be squeamish nor sentimental. Life was for the living and the dead were just food. Although he did have one very definite fear, a terrible thing; when he was a child, he listened to the stories told around the camp fire. Terrifying tales about Icky from Wrath.

Legend told that Icky was a wrath child. Some folks knew this apparition by the name 'lazy bones' on account that it was too idle to kill and cook so this nightmarish thing ate all its victims alive.

Icky roamed the wastes looking to fall upon the unwary, for once the wrath-child gripped on to you, the tightly clenched embrace was impossible to break. This unholy predator would cling to the body, greedily gorging on the fat and the flesh, drinking the blood, cracking the bones, suckin' an' a-slurpin' on the innards.

The monks loved their jokes and innuendos. They named him 'Chain-male' because obviously he was a man dressed in chains, but they didn't reckon on the true reason why he wore such protection. Travelling the great expanses was dangerous but if Icky from wrath ever fell upon him, the teeth in the monstrous mouth would have to chew through chain. *'Always look for an edge, always be on your guard. Don't dismiss old folk tales told around the camp fire, they could just turn out to be true.'*

Excerpt from Chapter Ten

Although Fry was the youngest contender to compete, he was no less keen than his elder rivals. The monks had tried to recruit him into their ranks thinking him easily led because of his youth and imagined gullibility. He had rejected their offer forthwith being that he was nobody's fool. No one told him what to do with 'his' life.

They had mocked him, labelling him with the moniker 'Fry-day the 13th' because he had picked the number '13' from Rattigan's lottery bag, so he was stuck with that. He supposed 'Fry the 13th' didn't quite have the same ring to it. He discovered from the other contestants that in '*old world*' whenever a Friday coincided with the 13th of the month, it was believed to be an ill omen. Fry didn't even pretend to understand.

The rest of the contenders just knew him by the name 'Fry'. '*They didn't take the piss, so up yours, monks!*' he thought to himself.

What he had called his extended family numbered just twenty in all. He wasn't related to any of them by blood. When he was just five years old or thereabouts, he was found, wandering in the wastes. The man who actually found him was the leader of this group, least-ways he was the main man, the alpha male so to speak. He gave him the name 'Small Fry' which became shortened to Fry.

He guessed that at the time he was found, the guy who had discovered him wasn't much older than he was now, maybe twenty-five years old at the most. His name was Bruno. Fry grew to love him, though not like a big brother or an uncle for he loved him in the same way that a son loves his pa.

He had on occasions called him this by mistake, slip of the tongue, an absent minded glitch. When he did this, Bruno always gave him a double look, or a wink and a smile because all in all, it was true to Fry; Bruno was his father and he honoured the man in his heart with that same respectful title bound in the bond of eternal love.

Fry travelled light from place to place in Bruno's clapped out old motor, scavenging gas whenever the opportunity arose, gathering food wherever he could, though he was always hungry. Near starvation had driven him to this tournament with more urgency than his motor could ever manage. He figured, still being in the flush of youth at only nineteen years old, that if anybody could make it to the North, he could.

Fry himself hadn't been taught much in the way of schooling; only the basics along with the practical skills; trapping, scavenging, hot wiring and such. He did have a few tattered magazines from '*old world*' which he glanced at from time to time. '*Old world*' seemed to be a crazy place. Big, endless and frightening.

His motor lagged behind the others driving at a moderate speed. He wasn't too worried if he trailed in last but he was determined to finish within the first eight placings. That was what made this race all the more agonising, having to finish

the dusty chase totally unaware of whether or not you would be allowed to continue in the tournament. To come in ninth was unthinkable.

While he drove onwards there was a slight ringing in his ears. He didn't pay the sensation much heed seems he was concentrating on the sight up ahead. There was a township sprawled out in the desert, very much like the ones in his magazine. He drove through the streets. The urban display possessed quite a few shops: a grocers, a butchers and a hardware store next to the mall. There was a building that contained offices. Close in proximity there was a library which was situated over the road from a park. This place had all the things that Bruno had shown him in those tatty timeworn glossy pages.

He slammed on his brakes. Sure, he was in a race, but the temptation was just too much. '*A quick look around,*' he thought, '*what could be the harm in that?*' He had to satisfy his curiosity.

Fry pulled up near to the open entrance of a very inviting recreational park. He stepped out of his car. The buildings all around him seemed to be new; they looked so clean, impossibly pristine in condition and yet ominously the whole place verged on sterility.

He sprinted up some steps finding himself at what he presumed to be the town square. This was overlooked by the library, the entrance to which was flanked by a pair of impressive stone columns. Believing this place may offer clues to his location, Fry decided to go in there. Maybe the library had more picture books that could help him figure out just where the hell he was.

Inside there were rows and rows of book cases reaching from the floor to high up near the ceiling. To his eyes everything seemed to be perfect, if not immaculate, with not one book placed askew on the shelves, however, the whole area had an eerie feel to it. Perhaps the absence of people made this a soulless place without the remotest hint pertaining to human warmth.

He heard a sweeping, grating noise. He looked to his right and there he saw a ladder which was sliding across the entire width of the high shelving. Standing atop the vertical rise was a monk in a brown hooded robe sorting some books on an otherwise inaccessible part of the bookcase. There was absolutely no one else to ask so Fry called up to the hooded figure, "Hey mate, where am I? What is this place?"

The monk stopped what he was doing and carefully, step by step, methodically descended the ladder. When he reached the floor he turned to young Fry. The face staring out at him beneath the hood had a strong resemblance to the Wanderin' Padré who then immediately asked, "Ya mean to tell me you don't know, child?"

Fry had seen the 'boss monk' sitting atop a bus roof, though it was from a distance, so he hadn't seen his face too clearly. That being the case, he didn't instantly recognise the old 'holy man' standing before him.

"N-no, I don't," Fry answered.

While the Padré steadily walked over to one of the book shelves, he informed Fry, "Yet you have been here many times."

The old monk then ran his hand along the shelf of periodicals to pull out a magazine. The copy seemed to be in mint condition, impressing upon Fry the

notion that the actual pages had been printed in that very instant. Holding the magazine in one hand, the hooded monk asked the young man,

“Did you not, earlier this day, share the food of the one named ‘Pesky’?”

“Yes,” Fry confirmed with an additional solitary nod. He went on, “In his car, I was hungry, in fact absolutely starving, so when the guy offered I had no option but to accept.”

Fry noticed the sly smirk on the Padré’s face when he said, “Mmm, did he show you an ‘*old world*’ wildlife magazine, like this?”

He unfolded the magazine.

“Did you not have a discussion with him about the creatures of the deep?”

The Padré then presented the flat front cover, holding the ‘glossy’ at arms length which obscured the image of his own face.

“These subjects are new to you. The pictures of the creatures within these pages you had never seen before, am I correct?” the Padré said slowly lowering the publication.

“Yes ... I suppose so ...” Fry stated nervously with the creeping feeling of apprehension rising within him. His steadily increasing anxiousness prompted him to ask, “... but what’s that got to do with mm...”

The end of his sentence trailed off; he looked on dumbstruck and horrified at the sight staring back at him from beneath the Padré’s hood.

Excerpt from Chapter Sixteen

Dodgy being tall and lanky reached for the last hoop, hooked it, then without taking that much of a leap, performing one graceful swing, his feet touched down on the wooden platform. There was no doubt that the blue haired contender was exhausted. Panting and gasping he fell to his knees, fighting to gain control of his breathing. Dodgy still tightly grasped both hooks in his hands while impatiently waiting for Fry. He called out words of encouragement.

“Come on mate, not much further now!”

Fry answered the best he could between anxious, nervous breaths.

“Easy ... for ... you ... to say.”

While Fry endeavoured to reach out to hook his last hoop the young man’s vision became blurred and he struggled to see. Sweat had trickled down into his eyes, momentarily blinding him. Grappling with the hook, hearing the rasping sound of metal against metal, Fry assumed that he had competently hooked it in. The desperate adolescent was anxiously itching to wipe away the irritating saline sweat from his eyes.

Before continuing he decided to rest his body by dangling with one arm from the hook already attached to the hoop. He expected the other one that he had just secured to hang free but in his eagerness to wipe his face he had not coupled it correctly. His hook handle fell away to the rock face below. Fry had made a terrible error of judgement.

He had only wanted to clear his vision and perhaps rest the straining musculature of his torso for a fleeting moment. The fatigued muscles in his aching limb only required a brief respite before his other arm took on the burden of supporting his full body weight. Now Fry found himself stranded, limply hanging in the air, with the distance being too far to swing and jump. He gazed upward at the hook holding him there; the hoop screw was loose and the novice contender’s body weight was pulling him free; his fate seemed to be sealed.

With one arm clinging on and securing him to the support block, Dodgy leaned forward, all that he could, towards the struggling young man. “Fry, grab the hook!” Dodgy shouted with some urgency. He was holding out the implement by the handle, stretching towards Fry with every inch that he dared, hoping the young man could reach the cold steel shaft which curved at the end into a vicious hook.

“Come on mate,” Dodgy shouted, “swing for it!”

Fry started to kick his legs, swaying back and forth to increase his momentum. This started to aggravate the fixture that the hoop was attached to. The screw above him was perilously close to dislodging. Fry could now measure his life in moments until the sudden hundred foot drop, which would send him into a death dealing descent like a screaming bag of blood and bones. He swung his body towards Dodgy’s hook. Reaching out his arm, he grabbed it a split second before his own supportive hook came free. The steel shaft and handle, which was Fry’s sole grappling device, hurtled towards the ground.

Fry cried out in fear while desperately holding on to Dodgy's hook. The whole of his meagre frame was dangling free in the air. Dodgy strained to take Fry's weight. The banished warrior with the blue hair, in an intense effort of determination pulled and yanked to haul the faltering young contender upwards. The hook pierced Fry's forearm. Dodgy attempted to lift the body weight of the clawing youth using the only object he had, the long thin shaft of the hook. The sharp curved tip began to rip a long gash within the muscle of Fry's forearm. The adrenalin in Fry's system defeated the pain but it did not stop him feeling the distressing tearing sensation of cold steel slitting a jagged line into his own flesh. The blood ran down his arm to wash over his shoulder and his neck; his lifeblood fell like crimson rain to the surface of the craggy rock below.

Future Ghost

Excerpts from Chapter Two

Mrs. McTavish stared into the fireplace. Red embers crackled and popped sending occasional sparks astray. She watched the reflected dancing shadows of flame upon the hearth. The elderly lady nursed in her hand a wee dram from which she took a sip. *'Early morning or no,'* she thought, *'prevention is better than a cure.'* She had already taken porridge laced with whisky into her husband who was languidly lying in bed nursing a very bad cold. The matronly wife now mused to herself, *'You would think, no one could ever suffer more than him, to hear his complaints!'*

Domestically driven, she had risen before the light of dawn to mix and knead dough. Her kitchen was now fully imbued with the enticing aroma of freshly baked bread. *'Trust him to get ill when we are expecting guests,'* the quietly pondering lady thought to herself. *'Paying guests at that, in of all months, October.'* The dexterous expertise honed over the years, now evidenced in her very own homely feminine touch, would be applied to making pastry in a wee moment or two but for now she took respite in a well deserved break. Maureen McTavish stared into the fire letting slip her thoughts just for a few seconds.

She could discern a few figures within gently glowing scenes in the embers of the fire, like her parents and grandparents before her. They were adept at fire gazing which gifted them with the ability to see future events. This sort of insight was so much more than fortune telling. Uncannily, she, along with her forebears knew when friends or indeed strangers approached, oftentimes even before they had decided to visit. Thus, in the tranquil warm glow reflected from the hearth, Maureen and her family would while away the hours on those long cold Scottish nights. In keeping with her modest sensibilities, she never claimed to be gifted by second sight, though on occasion Maureen saw strange things on the moor. She thought it was more likely that the lands which lay beyond her door were haunted by things long in the past and eerily, things that were yet meant to be.

That very morning she had been in her back yard overlooking the moor, feeding grain to their hens before collecting eggs into her basket. Slightly taken aback, she glimpsed a reddish hue from the corner of her eye. Caught so unawares, Maureen turned to see a half naked young man in a long red cape hurrying towards her. She could see a wound through the shortness of his hair. In gruesome streaks, congealed blood marred one side of his face.

The distressed man was shirtless, which revealed that his torso was badly bruised. He had a dark leather kilt around his waist and in his hand he clasped a short sword. He looked her in the face whilst still running forwards in his urgency. "Mater, mater," he shouted. He ran, totally unhindered by material objects, for he passed straight through the panelling of the gate to the chicken coop. Seemingly

this gave the impression that the hard bare wood was nothing more than a mirage to him.

Unless she was very much deceived, to her eyes he had some form of solidity. She felt the need to touch his wiry muscled frame, for one thing to make sure he was real and also to give this lad some comfort but then he was gone. He did not drift away nor did he fade, he simply vanished from sight. She thought she had witnessed something else. Perhaps a trick of the light; a certain something that she couldn't quite be sure of.

Maureen had often heard whispered rumours from the surrounding moors people; legends and myths about a ghostly legion, Romans wandering upon the wilds, witnessed only by a privileged few. She had never discovered if any of this ghostly legion had spoken before or even made eye contact. Privately, the lady lodge keeper thought to herself that seeing was believing but combine that with hearing the voice, then this should have indeed made the incident fact. However, solid facts require solid evidence and she could provide no such proof. If needs be she would swear testimony to the truth of it on a stack of bibles. Alas, with only her cynical husband to confide in, Maureen couldn't envisage this ever happening. A thousands oaths to truth wouldn't convince him. The ghostly happening didn't faze her. She had gone about her chores quite unconcerned.

Emerging from her personal musings, she returned her attention to the task at hand. After sweeping the flat of her palm over her greyish, pepper-and-salt, flour sprinkled locks, she took another nip of whisky. "Now for the pastry," Maureen said while lifting herself from the chair in order to carry on with her baking.



The open Scottish countryside, still blanketed in green, was such a contrast to the bleak smoky streets of Dundee; with grey slated roofs wet with the drizzle that the Scots call *dreich*, which soaks through the clothes much more assuredly than the ravages of a heavy downpour.

The two companions had been discussing everything and everyone. Topics of no real importance. The coach turned into the courtyard of an inn, commonly called a halfway house. Here they would feed and provide water for the thirsty horses. Louisa was absolutely ravenous, hoping there would be more on offer than cheese, bread and ale. In such a hungry circumstance she would have happily placed the horses on the menu. The day had drawn on to early afternoon and Mr. Sinclair expected to arrive at the McTavishes' by early evening if not sooner.

The inn was small with a beamed ceiling. The room was very lightly decorated save for a few brass ornaments. The tables were bare, being that they were without cloths. The benches that flanked either side of the tables were equally unimpressive. The rough stone floor was strewn with hay and wood shavings but at least the room was warm. The red ember heap in the big fireplace gave the room a welcome glow, with this being the establishment's only saving grace.

"Can't believe people stay here," Louisa said to Mary. Unfortunately, her irreverent remark was overheard by the person behind the bar; a big man with a ruddy complexion and long ginger hair tied at the back with cord.

“For the most part they don’t!” he informed a blushing Louisa, “Now what can I get ye?”

Taking the man to be rude and rather uncouth, Mary abruptly informed him, “Food! Preferably hot.”

“Oh!” said the bartender with a broad grin, “Ye come on the right day. It’s mutton stew wi’ root veg.” He continued to wipe the innards of a tankard with a slightly dirty looking rag.

“Needs must when the devil drives,” said Louisa.

“So is that for the two o’ yee?” the bartender asked while hooking the tankard above the counter.

“No,” said a voice to the back of them, “Make that four an’ we’ll take bread wi’ the meals.” The firm words were spoken by Stuart who had just finished the task of giving the horses water. “Mi pa will be in shortly,” the young reinsman informed the two ladies. He then gestured towards the yard, “he’s just feedin’ the horses ... So fair maidens, your table.”

Stuart showed them to the table he thought to be the best, flanked on either side by benches. A short time later Mr. Sinclair joined them.

A few moments passed in silence until a flustered looking woman entered the bar area, presumably from the kitchen seems upon a tray she carried two large steaming bowls of broth. She was mid mature in years and her round, jowled face was feverishly red. For all the world to see she appeared to be in a sweltering state of discomfort, probably from slaving over a hot stove, or perhaps, Louisa thought, from being in the last flushes of the change.

“Over there, Ma.” The barman pointed to their table.

The heavily perspiring lady unceremoniously plonked the bowls of mutton broth on the table. She slid the first bowlful towards Mary and the second to Stuart who was sitting opposite, facing the young lady. A few moments later the aging waitress brought two more steaming bowls of broth for Louisa and Mr. Sinclair.

“Do we not get a spoon?” Mr. Sinclair asked.

“I’m bringing ’em with the bread in a minute!” the server snapped. Briefly fixing the four diners with a stern, scornful look, she then flounced back to the kitchen.

“What tae drink noo?” the bartender called over to them.

“Oh two ales,” said Mr. Sinclair.

“And fo’ tha two o’ you?” the barkeep asked, looking directly at the pair of young ladies.

“Barley water will do just fine,” Louisa said.

The bartender’s mother in her accustomed role of belligerent old waitress returned from the kitchen. The frumpy landlady came clomping across the straw strewn floor towards the four hungry guests. She dropped a basket containing coarsely cut bread crusts in the middle of the table and discourteously slammed down four rather tarnished spoons.

The broth was adequate, ordinary fayre. The four spoke little during the meal, though Mary did ascertain Stuart’s age and her well reasoned guess was confirmed; he was indeed sixteen. Stuart told them, “When I was only fourteen I

wanted to join the army for the adventure and also to face up to the enemy Napoleon.”

Immediately his father interjected, “I didn’t father children so I could see my own flesh and blood shuffle off the mortal coil in some foreign field. To be killed in Europe is bad enough, but I was always afraid that once Stuart joined he would be sent to the Americas to be finished off by a war party of ugly savages, and what’s more they got Frenchies o’er there too.”

Mary thought Mr. Sinclair referred to Canada rather than the United States since the settlers in that part of North America had declared their independence. A fact that didn’t stop the constant skirmishes and warring between the two nations. She decided to stay quiet on the subject for she did not want to correct her elders or cause embarrassment. The rattle of the spoon in the bowl declared that Bob Sinclair had finished his meal and was free to converse further.

“You see, I had two uncles that had the misfortune and ill fate to fall into the hands of the native Huron savages. They were tortured to death by all accounts and I dunnae want the same to befall Stuart.”

His son frowned and turned his attention to the young woman sitting across from him.

“Do you ever feel the need to see America, Miss Mary?” Stuart enquired, after which he paused briefly to mop up the last of his broth with a hunk of bread before continuing, “To perhaps walk the streets of New York?”

She gave a slight shake of her head to tell him, “No,” but then thinking her answer was far too curt, she added, “However, I do wish to visit Europe if ever the fighting stops. I would like to study the many languages and stroll around the city streets steeped in history. Then there are the great forests and lakes with all the wondrous mountain ranges; all this and yet so near. No I have no longing for the Americas.”

Gesturing towards Stuart with her spoon, Louisa asked, “And you?”

Stuart was happy to inform her, “Maybe, one day. If I can afford to, or earn my fare aboard a ship. But for now, Pa needs me.”

Bob Sinclair interrupted, “Ya pa puts up wi’ ya!” The sharp comment was solely aimed at Stuart though his father didn’t mind sharing another pawky remark with the two young ladies. “An’ in mah time I’ve put up wi’ a lot seems Stuart’s labours are bolstered by brass neck cheek.”

Louisa being of an inquisitive nature asked the young man, “And what does your mother make of your plans?”

Bob’s ears pricked somewhat and he sighed, but said nothing while Stuart answered Louisa’s question.

“I lost my mother when I was a babe so I never knew her.”

Louisa didn’t look at all perturbed. She simply smiled and said, “How unfortunate. I’m very sorry to hear that.”

Mary found an instant connection with him, having lost her own mother to a similar complication. It was quite common for people to die young from disease, hard toil, accidents and women the more so from childbirth. This made Mary

despondent so she escaped into literature. She avidly read the Greek plays; for the most part mythology. The dreams of immortality appealed to her. The realms to which the gods aspire, free from ailment and all the worries of the world. She kept such thoughts to herself for she presumed that Stuart, his father and even Louisa would think her a wishful fantasist, besides which, all people wear masks; the true depths of a person always lies hidden beneath the surface. It wasn't just the nature of the moor that appealed to her senses but the contentment she felt from being alone with her thoughts in such a great expanse of land.

She needed no paper or quill, just her imaginings that could be written down later, at a time she found convenient. First the inspiration, then the thoughts that she could channel from mind to hand. Once equipped with a quill she would commit her musings to paper with the intention of enthralling, or dare she hope, sparking the imagination in others with her work. The whole process fascinated her. Were people mere automatons instilled with a consciousness, the breath of God, like clockwork creations designed by artisans hailing from some other unknown world?

She drank the barley water, returning to the unenviable task of finishing her greasy meal.

“Suppose we'll mek for the McTavishes' noo,” Stuart said while placing his cap upon his wavy blond locks. He then adjusted the side seams to pull the blue cap down for a tighter fit.

Excerpts from Chapter Three

Mary inhaled the cool night air which she found invigorating. However, the misty vapour from her breath exposed in the light from the lodge window gifted her a warning. It would be quite unwise to prolong her evening respite exposed to the elements which could possess the makings of a frost.

Mary's musings settled upon the fact that she had probably imbibed far too much elderberry wine. It was a rather rich tippie, claret in colour though to her palate she found the wine tasted very much like a fortified sherry or a full bodied port.

Mary became aware that, while lost in thought, she had been absent-mindedly staring into the side of the coach. What broke Mary from her proclivity to ponder was the disturbance of something moving about in the shadows.

She stealthily approached the coach with extra added caution. However her natural curiosity and inquisitiveness had to be satisfied. Her eyes became more accustomed to the gloom.

A dull shape of an indeterminate size sprang from its temporary resting place upon the flat sill base of the carriage window onto the seat within. This gave Mary scant relief, but relief all the same for the obscured shape certainly was not the size of a human being; too small even to be a child.

There was the sound of movement inside the carriage.

With a reckless abandon to anything even remotely approaching a sober judgement, Mary succumbed to the inebriating effect instilled by the wine. Her actions, executed in a rash manner, were bold and foolhardy to say the least. Grabbing the handle she violently yanked open the coach door.

The handle slipped from her grasp. The door forcibly slammed against the side of the coach with a sudden thud. Her hearing was instantly assaulted by the sound of a sharp threatening growl and a spitting hiss.

Something scrambled over the interior seats while emitting a low rumbling sound that exploded into a predatory screech. The dark creature shot towards her. Mary impulsively jolted backwards to dodge the aggressive attack.

The indistinct shape leapt past her right shoulder and hit the ground to then swiftly dart across the yard. Mary witnessed the shadowy mass speedily scurry up the stone stacked wall to one side of the courtyard entrance. The obscure shape finally came to rest upon a wooden post nearest the double gate. There the dark form remained in unnerving stillness. Mary realised that the creature was nothing more than a dark furred cat albeit a very formidable one. She felt sure that this particular feline was not of the ordinary domesticated variety. This wild beast was tempered with an untamed ferocity. Frequently told tales about the legendary Scottish wildcat came with the insistent warning of the grave danger these feral carnivores posed.

The perilous situation gifted Mary with a little more sobriety though fell well short of a sober sensibility in that she did not flee. The very thought of Maureen's hens in the coop falling victim to a vicious end by tooth and claw was unthinkable.

Mary swept the ground with her foot until she made contact with a loose heavy object. Bending at the knees, she lowered herself to pick up the rock which she believed to be at her feet in the darkness. Indeed, the solid object was a large stone of a good size and weight. Grasping the rock she then stood while never taking her gaze from the dark shape resting atop the wooden post. She drew back her arm to take aim, the best a scholarly young lady could. Using all the strength she could muster, Mary let fly with the rock.

In that very moment she was struck by a severe blinding light. A rhythmic beat assaulted her senses which was overpowered by the discordant sound of clanging. This instilled the feeling that the devil himself was orchestrating the blaring racket with a foundry full of iron bars and metal sheets. The chords had a frantic frenzied speed and a powerful urgency. Over this raucous cacophony a voice erupted to chant not unlike Mr. Sinclair's folk songs but this had a primitive insistence and was far more abrasively coarse.



Stuart, holding his lantern aloft walked a short distance across the small dark yard to the now horseless coach, with the four horses having been placed in the McTavishes' barn to feed and rest.

He clambered up the front of the carriage to stand on the reins man's seat while he then rummaged around in an old case which was lying on top of the coach. He struck discordant strings when he found the item that he was searching for. He hopped from the coach while still holding the lantern aloft and in his other hand he clutched, rather awkwardly, a fiddle and a bow.

'Now, 'he thought to himself, 'the party will get started good and proper.'

He was ready to briskly march back to the cosy gathering within the lodge when he became aware of the nervous neighing from the horses in the barn. His first thought was that he himself had unnerved them from the noise he made scrambling atop the coach. *'Better safe than sorry,'* he thought to himself, so he went to check on the nags. He cautiously reasoned that maybe they had been spooked by an opportunistic fox; alternatively, the pest could be a grain-trough raiding rat, or even worse, a flesh hungry wolf. The general consensus happened to be that wolves had been eradicated in Scotland, though from many a tale told, Stuart and his father knew better.

He drew open the small side door and entered the dark barn. He could see the moving shapes of the horses when he entered. Sure enough they looked to be somewhat unsettled. He lifted the lantern to inspect the horses and to reassure them. They instinctively knew the tone of his voice and they also recognised him from his scent. These four horses happened to be mares.

“OK there bonnie lassies it's only me, now calm doon and stop fussin'.”

The horses had made short work of the oats that had been placed in the feeder before them, so Stuart decided to give them a few more scoops. There was still

more than enough water in the trough. While he dished out the horse feed from the sack to the feeding trough using a short handled shovel he thought or he imagined that he heard a faint whispering from one shadowy corner. He lifted the lantern. Stuart checked every corner of the small barn. Satisfied that the inner area was free of intruders, he dropped the shovel into the sack. He then retrieved his fiddle and bow which he had rested against the wall.

He was about to leave safe in the knowledge that the horses were unharmed and undisturbed by any stray wild beast, when he heard a clearly whispered utterance.

'You are one of two, and one of you shall perish when the fiddler calls the tune.'

However, he could not ascertain nor distinguish from where the voice emanated. Stuart stared into the blackness which pervaded the back of the barn while a shiver ran down his spine. He called out nervously,

"Who's there? ... Show yourself."

No answer was forthcoming.

He rechecked every square inch of the interior. The phrase was undoubtedly whispered within the confines of the barn but despite his efforts he could find nothing and no one.

"Show yourself!" Stuart sternly repeated.

He received no response, so he decided upon the use of a threat.

"If anyone is in here ya better flee 'cos I'm away to fetch mah musket to finish ya off."

There was no one to hear his words and the horses were now busily chewing their feed.

"Och, listen to me talking tay mysel' and hearing imaginary whispers brought on by a strong grain whisky."

This he had spoken aloud to comfort himself while he slowly backed away towards the door expecting some hideous phantom to dart towards him from the darkness. This was not the case but while he walked from the barn back to the lodge, this strange incident weighed heavily upon his mind.

He was far too young and carefree to pay superstition much heed or the wittering words of an old landlady like Maureen McTavish. However, even if the eerie moor relinquished every last ghost and in a heartbeat vanquished all supernatural phenomena to be forgotten forever, Stuart thought to himself that those whispered words he heard in the dark of the barn would still, one day, come back to 'haunt' him.

The other niggling thought that put the fear in him was the nature of the words. Did it mean that anyone who called for a tune would perish this very night? '*One of two*' had a much deeper meaning for Stuart. The apprehensive feeling

convinced him that the glow from the whisky in his belly was in urgent need of a top up. With the lantern dangling from his wrist, he placed his palm flat against the surface of the lodge door. Just before he entered, he spoke aloud to nought but the cold night air;

“Och, one of two and fiddle-di-dee. Stuff and nonsense.”

Excerpt from Chapter Four

The choice of character the three friends expressed themselves with had never before been brought together, yet each of them knew they had never truly been apart. They were the imagination of themselves. The timeless trio idled through the meadow until they came to the banks of a river which was clear blue, pleasing to the eye and very inviting.

“Skinny dip?” Chica suggested.

“Skinny dip!” Vance and Danny spoke in unison, while nodding in agreement.

Their clothes instantly disappeared leaving all three naked and free. The liberated trinity of souls plunged into the water to effortlessly breast-stroke up-river. The waters massaged every muscle. The experience became the epitome of relaxation.

A tickling sensation revolved around Vance’s legs, the soles of his feet and his toes. With his face in the water Vance gazed down, to see below them a most beautiful escort; a shimmering shoal of multicoloured fish; metallic gold, emerald, aquamarine, rich ruby red. The shades of their scales changed from one exotic colour to another. He and his companions dived down a little deeper, swimming through soft aqua fern grasses which were gently swaying in the current. The river bed was strewn with opal, onyx and silver. Occasionally they saw themselves submerged in their nakedness. The bodily images ‘au naturel’ were reflected from stretches of pure crystal and seams of mirrored quartz amidst an amethyst sheen. This enchanting perspective was cast from the entire length and breadth that spanned the gemstone foundation, which served for the very bedrock of the river.

Emerging from the gleaming strata, a marble white circle of standing stones came into view. The three friends dived deeper and with each measure of submergence that they undertook, each naked body in turn shrank to become diminutive representations of their former selves. Once inside the marble henge, in three very definite twinkles, they vanished, only to reappear a millisecond later. Leaving the marble structure behind, Vance, Chica and Danny returned to their normal size.

The trio swam in timeless harmony before they lifted themselves from the aquatic paradise below. Instantly clothed, with the comfort of being dry, they walked on the water, shaded by the leafy trees that lined either side of the river bank. All the bushes bloomed in vibrant colour, hanging heavy with a variety of blossoms which scented the air with a fragrance so pleasing to the senses.

The three friends had no real need for garments. The modesty insisted upon by narrow minded morality did not apply, for each individual was, without exception, a reflection of everyone else and clothing was illusory, just like their bodies. However, it was of their own free will that they chose to sport stylish attire. They had no need to be separate entities; this was also a choice they made. Even the glorious delights of this entire heaven could not measure in comparison to their true home; *that* was a place *so* much more wonderful.

Excerpt from Chapter Seven

Within the smog, partially formed images of hideous creatures with constantly gnashing teeth sporadically shot forth. Before the horrific visages could be fully realised, they dissipated like evaporating masks of doom. The unseen threat became far more terrifying when lost within the unknown. Each wisp from the dense bank of fog became a potential predator. Mary's companion endeavoured to stay steadfast and strong but the heavy impenetrable atmosphere played tricks on his mind. In his thoughts he visualised a mass of snaking arms equipped with clawlike hands infesting the vaporosity which surrounded his immediate vicinity; claws penetrating the mist to tear at the flesh of his quaking body. These imaginings close to the brink of being made manifest began to erode the last remaining vestiges of his resolve.

With his body trembling and his heart thudding at full pelt, Stuart actually witnessed a host of fog-like claws undulating about his person, caressing the sides of his head whilst also sinisterly probing his upper torso. In his petrified state the claw-tipped digits, becoming more solid with every passing moment, touched the clammy coldness of his skin. Quaking in fear, Stuart suffered a chilling cold sweat while the talon sharp fingers scratched at the heavily perspiring surface of his face and brow. The claws examined his frame searching for a vulnerability to perhaps reach in and rip out the raging tribulation of his fiercely racing heart.

Unexpectedly, hope surged in Stuart's awareness. In the distance he could make out a light. Defying his fear, Stuart snapped from his stupor. Still with her hand in his Stuart led Mary onwards. His relief was palpable and even in this nightmare of the macabre the gladness in his voice won through.

"Mary, it's Mrs. McTavish. She has lit a lantern in the back window to show us the way. We head towards the light."

There was no argument from Mary. His words were like sweet music to her ears. The dense smog could not blot out the small point of light that beckoned the pair to safety.

They did not speak to one another for what seemed to be an age, though truly this was only a matter of minutes. With their senses on high alert to detect the merest hint of a savage assault they journeyed on. The situation did not demand any kind of small talk from either Stuart or Mary; with a determined purpose they pursued their only salvation. They knew they were getting closer, for the illumination seemed to be much nearer. The outlying glow drew them on.

Their hastening pace could have been from Stuart's anxious eagerness to lead them to safety in that he still held her hand tightly and at arm's length while Mary trailed behind him. So much did the thick foggy barrier obscure him that Mary lost all sight of her gallant guide. At first she found his grip to be pleasant and reassuring but now it felt like her hand was in a vice, sorely compressed by the application of his constant pressure. Mary thought the bones in her hand would be crushed by his might.

He pulled her onwards like a parent drags a dilly-dallying child. The pain Mary felt in her hand was so intense that she could feel the rest of her arm growing in pained distress from the severest unrelenting ache.

“Stuart, my hand. You’re breaking my hand. Slow a little and release me from your grip.”

Although she could not see him clearly she sensed and felt Stuart draw to a halt. Even so he did not loosen her hand from his steely hold.

She drew herself closer to his outline in the mist.

“Stuart, let me go, I can’t feel my hand, it’s so ...”

Mary’s words trailed away from her lips at the sight. She was confronted with the fact that she was being led by the hand into the mist and towards the light by something her brain battled hard to fathom. Partially obscured by the mist, her guide turned towards her. Now the figure was somewhat clearer and Mary instantly prayed for the return of a smoggy blindness.

Stuart stumbled, very nearly losing his footing from the jolt he received. The obscured visibility of the misty moor was bad enough though his companion was now attempting to pull away from him and his lead. He thought he could make out Mary’s form laying low to the ground. She must have fallen but Mary made no move to lift herself back up like one would expect. Stuart then thought to himself, *‘If need be, I will gladly shoulder the burden of carrying the young lady the best I can.’* However, he could not drag her across the wilderness while she resisted or recoiled from his assistance.

“Mary?” he said, pulling on her hand to draw her closer, “Mary, what’s wrong? Did you fall?”

He wafted at the thick smog with his hand to get a clearer look at her, and when at last he did, the shock froze him to the spot.

Excerpt from Chapter Eight

Something disturbed the silence above. Mary held her breath. A little shale fell upon her head. *'Good God'*, she thought, *'the beast has found me!'*

Mary feared that she was at the mercy of the beast. She felt like the virgin offering sacrificed to a merciless dragon. The young lady found herself caught in a dilemma between two equally terrifying perils. To fall to her death or be ripped to shreds above. This distressing prospect swept through the totality of her presently ongoing frantic thoughts. Then there was the torment of her situation; unable to move a muscle, nor a single sinew. Even her breathing could dislodge her fragile position.

She felt the last few threads of her sleeve ripping, slowly tearing with each thread becoming looser. She thought of her father who would be beside himself with grief. Tears welled up in her eyes when she became very mindful of poor Stuart Sinclair, out there somewhere, unconscious and alone.

All her life, she had been unaccustomed to prayer, not being religious at all, preferring the arts and the sciences of the modern age. She prayed now. Mary prayed in her thoughts to any holy unearthly power that be, *'Save me! Somehow, rescue me! Please ye gods I pray!'*

Then the final fate did strike her. The very last tear ripped through the light material of the sleeve. On impulse she cried out in alarm. When she felt herself drop she instinctively grabbed for the side of the ravine. Suddenly, if not miraculously, her grip found a hold. A small rocky clump jutting out from the sheer face of the ravine saved her fall, albeit only momentarily. The rock she grasped came loose in the palm of her hand which she folded into a fist so that at all costs she would not lose her grip on the craggy support. Caught between life and death, insanity prevails in the fleeting moments of traumatic shock. She was instantly struck with the bizarre belief that the clump of rock in her hand was akin to a divine magical talisman which could, even now, still save the day.

At the exact time that gravity turned to turmoil and she felt the weight of her entire body fall, something grabbed her by the wrist. In that very instant she thought, *'Oh my good God! The beast has found me!'* Of her two predicaments, she would have preferred the fall to her now violent ending.

She kicked out screaming hysterically, trying her damndest to wriggle free. In that anguished agonising moment of trepidation she desperately wanted to fall.