

MERCURY RAPIDS

by
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Selected extracts
from the combined
volume

MERCURY RAPIDS

PART I

Robert and Anne retired to their respective bedchambers, but I remained in the living room, sitting on the disturbingly comfortable couch. Despite the opulence of our surroundings, I knew that this suite of rooms was also our prison. I felt like James Bond in Blofeld's secret lair. All Quentin-Smythe needed was a white cat and the illusion would be complete.

I reclined, the soft cushions folding around me, mentally reviewing recent events and made a glum forecast for the future.

Less than two days ago, I had been a sceptical scientist, doing my best to poo-poo the very idea of visits to our planet by extra-terrestrials. Now here I was about to be forced on board one of their ships for a second time. I was of no doubt that if I did not volunteer for the assignment, then Smythe would have all three of us eliminated. Beneath that cultured, polished exterior lurked the heart of an ambitious lunatic - I was certain of that fact.

Sitting upright again, I picked up an empty teacup and slowly turned it over in my hands. Then I leaped to my feet and threw the vessel across the room in a fit of frustrated anger. The cup shattered against the far wall with a satisfying crash.

My options were running out faster than condoms at a nymphomaniac's convention.

Either I went along with Quentin-Smythe's plan and possibly never came back or I refused and we all died. Or we could try to escape.

I mulled over the possibility of fleeing through this labyrinthine facility with its countless, identical corridors and probable hundreds of armed security personnel. Luckily for me, I had a partially eidetic memory. I was certain that it could guide us back to the pink room which housed the Men-In-Black's car, if it was still there. I crossed the room and tried the door. It opened when I turned the handle. Poking my head carefully into the corridor, I scanned up and down the length of the puke-coloured passage. I wondered if the Orion Committee and the Waleford Travel Lodge had the same decorators.

There was no one in sight.

I ducked back inside and tiptoed into the bedrooms, waking Robert and Anne and gesturing for them to dress quickly and follow me. Both of them looked at me quizzically and I mouthed the word 'escape'. Anne nodded, but Robert shook his head frenetically and I had to grab his arm to make him come with us.

We entered the corridor and I followed my mental roadmap to the pink room. We did not see a single living soul during our long, nervous journey. The door slid open dutifully and we stepped inside.

The huge black car squatted in the centre of the chamber, just as we had left it. We hurried over to it and tugged on the door handles. They popped open and we clambered inside. The front seat of the car stretched across from the passenger side to the driver's door, so all three of us fitted snugly in the forward half of the vehicle. I looked around the steering column for the keys or a keyhole, but could find neither. I slammed the steering wheel with the heels of my hands in frustration. Then Anne pointed to a small, red button in the centre of the wheel. I depressed it and was immediately gratified to hear the near-silent engine start up.

Unfortunately, I could not see out of the semi-opaque windows.

Then I saw O'Donnell's black sunglasses perched neatly on the dashboard and a notion struck me. I snatched them up and slipped them over my eyes. Instantly, the black window glass became perfectly transparent.

"Polarised lenses and windows," I explained to my two compatriots. "Very clever."

I shifted the gear stick into reverse and hoped that was the right direction to go. Slamming my foot hard down on the accelerator, the car lurched backwards and raced rearlong towards a very solid-looking pink wall.

Then we were though, the black of night camouflaging our dark getaway car. I looked forward and saw a large, jagged pink blob framed by the immense, black doors of an aircraft hangar. We were on an airbase, I realized. I put the car into gear (it was an automatic) and did an impressive handbrake turn to face the opposite direction.

Suddenly all hell broke loose around us.

Intensely brilliant searchlights winked on, capturing us in their cold glare. I put the pedal to the metal, as they say, and the car screeched forward. A blaring alarm began to sound from the hangar behind us.

I followed the road, weaving the car so that the searchlights had a harder time locking onto us, and hoped that the perimeter gate was in this direction. Above us, I heard the sound of whirring rotor blades, their incessant chatter drowning out the cacophonous alarm.

Soon, my headlights reflected off a small, wooden building beside a huge chain-link gate. Khaki-clad figures rushed out of the structure and lined up between our car and the exit, each of them dropping to one knee as they did so. Almost immediately, stark, strobe light flashes illuminated their silhouettes. They were firing their automatic weapons at us! Anne and

Robert slid down into their seats and I slouched down as far as I could. Evil sparks ricocheted off the car's bodywork.

I kept my foot hard on the gas pedal.

The soldiers dove for cover as we roared past and smashed through the mighty gate, shattering the windscreen and sending wicked shards of glass flying over our heads. Wind blew in my face as I peered above the dashboard and the sounds of more gunfire could be heard echoing behind our fleeing vehicle. I snatched the glasses from my face and tossed them out of the window, their polarized lenses now useless. As we raced away, the sounds became more sporadic and when we rounded a wide bend, they ceased altogether.

We had made it!

I told Anne and Robert to stay down, just to be on the safe side and drove the car as fast as I could away from the secret base, gazing nervously into the rapidly lightening sky. I could still hear the hum of rotor blades, but no sign of a helicopter could be seen. As we exited the bend, it became quite apparent where the helicopter was.

It was hovering barely two feet above the road directly in our path. A gigantic carnivorous insect ready to pounce on its feeble prey.

I thought, What the hell, and stubbornly refused to slow down. I drove headlong towards the chattering machine and screamed as we passed directly beneath it. I opened my eyes and saw that we were still alive. Looking into my wing mirror, I smiled as the helicopter soared away into the morning sky.

I was steering the car along a bumpy, pot-holed country lane, mile upon mile of unbroken heathland sped by our bullet-riddled steed. I had no idea that the English countryside could be so big, that anywhere in this green and pleasant land of ours could be so isolated. I was getting used to staggering revelations these days.

"You can get up now," I said to my two prone passengers.

Anne poked her head above the dashboard and shielded her face as the biting wind whistled through the non-existent windscreen. Robert stayed where he was.

"Robert?" Anne gave him a gentle shake. He did not move. Then she noticed the bloodstain on the door. "Oh my god!"

I glanced across, also seeing the crimson smear, and brought the car to a screeching halt. As Anne struggled to pull him up onto the seat, I opened my door and rushed around to the other side of the black vehicle. Pulling open the passenger door, I almost gagged at the sight before me.

Anne had managed to haul Robert into a sitting position, his head flopping to one side. She saw my horrified expression and turned his head towards her. She screamed.

An ugly bullet hole pierced the back of his head and the projectile had exited just below his left eye, taking a large section of his face with it. Rapidly congealing blood dribbled slowly down his devastated cheek and dripped onto his T-shirt, creating hideous Rorschach patterns on the pale cotton.

Anne looked at me, her face drawn and lips quivering. "W-what are we going to do?"

"Help me get him into the back seat," I replied after a few infinite seconds. I was unable to tear my eyes away from the grisly sight and had trouble keeping down the tuna sandwiches I had eaten earlier. Anne made a disgusted face at me, as though touching Robert's corpse would somehow infect her. "Come on," I urged. "You take his feet and I'll carry this end." Images of butcher's carcasses filled my head and I was inwardly ashamed that Robert should so rapidly become a thing of abhorrence to me. He was my friend and now he was dead - murdered.

I reached in and pulled his lifeless form out of the car and Anne followed him through the passenger door, carefully, but unsuccessfully, avoiding the pools of blood that had accumulated on the floor and upholstery. Once outside, she opened the rear door and lifted Robert's feet onto the back seat. Then, with some difficulty, we managed to slide him onto the dark vinyl, his head bobbing gently as I slammed the door shut. Anne climbed back into the front as I trudged to the back of the car and opened the boot. I found a grubby, old blanket, screwed into a ball behind a toolbox, and took it with me as I got back into the driver's side.

As I sat down, I twisted around and draped the blanket respectfully over Robert's inert body, shielding him from view. Then I put the car back into gear and we continued our rural journey.

Anne was still trembling, her slender fingers knotting themselves in her lap. "What are we going to do with him?" she asked shakily.

"We've got to find a telephone and tell somebody about all of this," I declared.

"But who'd believe us?" she cried, tears beginning to well in her eyes. "The police will think that we killed him."

"Anne, we have a car riddled with bullet holes wearing government plates and an innocent man with a huge wound in his head bleeding all over the back seat. I think that they'll at least listen to us. They'll at least be able to get their ballistics people to prove that we didn't kill him." It was a conceit, but one that Anne needed to hear at that particular moment.

"I'm scared, Bill."

"Me too, love." I squeezed her hand and told her to keep on the lookout for a phone box. In the meantime, I scanned the road ahead, but also kept half an eye looking up for any unmarked, black helicopters. I knew for a fact that Smythe and his hordes would not let us off the hook that easily.

Suddenly a village appeared out of nowhere. One second we had been driving along a deserted country lane, then the next moment, houses began flashing by on either side.

I slowed the car and we chugged through the hamlet's single, barren street. A lonely lamp burned at the far end of the village and beneath it stood a bright red telephone booth. Victory.

A solitary road sign told us that the village was called Cranbourne.

As I pulled up beside the phone box, a battered Nissan pick-up rumbled by, its open rear laden with full milk crates. The driver eyed us suspiciously, our smashed windscreen and dishevelled appearance causing him obvious concern. Thankfully, he did not stop to ask us any questions and I climbed out and pulled open the kiosk's heavy door.

I dialled 999 and asked for the police. Almost immediately a woman's voice spoke into my weary ear.

"Barnhope Police Station. Can I help you?"

"Er, yes," I stuttered and realized that I had no idea how to explain our situation. I decided on the truth and hastily told her our fantastic story. When I had finished, the line was silent for a long moment.

"Is this a joke?" she asked stiffly.

"No, of course it isn't," I said a little too loudly. "Just send a car out and you'll see." I told her the number of the phone box and hung up, not giving her chance to ask any more pointless questions.

I got back into the car and lit a cigarette.

"Well?" said Anne.

"The police are on their way," I replied hopefully. Actually, I was not sure that they would come at all.

After half an hour, we were rewarded with the sight of a solitary patrol car coming up the road towards us. The driver stopped in front of our battered shambles and I got out to greet him. We met halfway and I brought him to the back passenger door, opened it and showed him Robert's body.

He lifted the blanket and stared in disbelief at the blood and puddings underneath. As he lifted his radio to speak into it, the pick-up truck barrelled down the road and screeched to a halt, the milkman leaning out of his window at the same time. He yelled at us, his face beetroot red.

"I don't know what you've done, fella," he jabbered. "But there's a convoy of mean-looking army trucks headed this way and they look like they mean business. I'm outta here." And he roared off into the morning mist.

As the dairyman raced away, the sound of his engine was replaced by a deeper, more menacing rumble. Anne climbed out of the car and joined us in looking back down the road in the direction of the thunder.

Then, three huge, green military wagons appeared out of the mist and sped past. They came to a stop a few yards farther down the road, blocking the entire width of the highway, and dozens of heavily-armed soldiers began pouring from their murky interiors. Three more trucks arrived and created a similar cordon at the opposite end of the village.

"Charlie Tango Three-One to Sierra Oscar. Can you hear me, Kath?" The policeman was fingering the buttons of his walkie-talkie furiously.

"Roger, Sean," came the reply. "Go ahead."

"Kath, I've got a major situation here. Get all available units out here."

Another, male, voice crackled across the airwaves. "Negative, Charlie Tango Three-One. You are to return to Sierra Oscar; the situation is under military jurisdiction."

I looked at the constable, a gamut of emotions playing across my face. He looked back, the same confusion evident in his own features. He pressed his RT button again.

"Sierra Oscar, to whom am I speaking?"

"Charlie Tango Three-One, that is not your concern." The mysterious male voice was starting to sound more threatening. "If you do not remove yourself from the area, you will be subject to severe disciplinary proceedings."

The soldiers had, by this time, effectively sealed off the entire village, heavy, wooden sawhorses erected at each end of the hamlet cutting us off from the outside world. The troops the deployed around us, weapons drawn, and an uneasy tension filled the air. I felt my bowels becoming very loose.

The policeman stared at me. "Sorry, there's nothing I can do." He turned away. "I have a very bad feeling about all this," he muttered as he returned to his patrol car. He started up the engine and drove away, two of the soldiers removing a barrier so that he could exit.

I looked around the village, curtains beginning to twitch in the handful of houses surrounding our surreal standoff. Then an officer stepped forward, raising a bullhorn to his lips. I was only about thirty feet away from him for Christ's sake!

"Please step away from the vehicle," the electronically enhanced voice bellowed. "You are under military arrest."

A front door opened and a man in his dressing gown stepped onto the pavement, bewilderment evident on his tired face.

"Sir, please go back into your home," crackled Major Bullhorn.

Anne looked across the car at me with wide, terror-struck eyes. A sense of enormous regret washed over me. I had dragged her into this whole, ugly mess. I had got Robert killed. And probably Tovey, too. How many more people would die before my selfish, anarchic resistance to authority was satisfied. I felt like a serial killer who had realized the extent of his degradation and had decided to redeem himself before an angry jury. I made a decision. One that would change my life in ways that I could not even have dreamed of.

"I'll come quietly," I called, sounding like a bank robber in some tacky, low-budget thriller. I gestured towards Anne. "If you let her go."

"You will both be taken for questioning," came the thunderous reply, devoid of all emotion. Was there something in government tea that stripped one of all feelings? Pop into your local dole office to see what I mean. "If it is ascertained that the woman is not a risk to security, then she will be released unharmed."

"We have no choice, Anne," I said, gazing into her petrified eyes. I gave her a wan smile and she reciprocated the feeble gesture.

We stepped forward and four soldiers rushed forward, their rifles trained on us belligerently. I gave Anne's hand a reassuring squeeze, as much for my own moral as hers, and we were bundled into the back of one of the trucks.

Before we were whisked away, I saw an army flatbed pass through the cordon and several khaki-clad men began heaving the ruined MIBmobile onto its exposed back. Goodbye, Robert, I thought.

Major Bullhorn, followed by half a dozen tough-looking infantrymen, climbed into the back of our truck, eyeing us warily. The wagon started up and we roared away from the tiny, astonished village.

"I suppose Sir Donald has something nice in store for us?" I queried. The warriors said nothing, their granite faces staring ahead blankly as if we were not even there. "I thought so."

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PART II

Tovey took a plastic card out of his white coat pocket and held it against a card reader beside the door frame. There was an audible click and he pushed one of the doors open. Smythe, Armstrong and I piled in after him.

We had entered one of Tovey's laboratories. He had several at Orion of various sizes, depending on the types of experiments he wanted to conduct. This was one of the smaller labs. It was still fairly roomy, though, as the double-doors attested.

The chamber was painted dazzlingly white, much like the Greys' *Greeting Rooms* aboard their craft, only not as bright. It made a refreshing change to beige, I can tell you. At the far end of the room, I could see Anne sitting with her back to us. In front of her was a large table upon which something lay. I could not ascertain what that object was until we drew closer. She turned as we approached, her brow beaded with sweat.

"Hello, love," she said to me, smiling and noting my concern. "Oh, I'm alright. I've just been concentrating hard on this, that's all." She glanced at Smythe and Armstrong. "I wondered when Graeme would bring you all in."

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked before anybody else could chip in. I pointed at the bizarre object in front of her.

It was about the size of a shoe box, but irregularly shaped. It appeared to be made of the same, dark material as the consoles in the Grey ships I had visited. There were no wires leading to or from it, but on its upper surface, a set of tiny lights flickered on and off. There appeared to be a small viewscreen of some sort beneath these lights, but this was dark.

"Where did you get that from?" demanded Armstrong. He seemed somewhat irked by the presence of the device.

Tovey grinned beneath his huge beard. His glee at putting one over on his American counterparts was infectious and I found myself smiling with him. Anne joined in for good measure.

"Well, major, before your chaps whisked away the triangle that crashed in your nation's capital, I managed to tuck this baby away under my coat. Purely for purposes of research, you understand?"

"What if it had been a necessary part of the ship's operating systems, doctor?" The brawny American could have crushed Tovey with his bare

hands and I sensed he was having some difficulty holding himself back. I knew exactly how he felt!

“This little thing?” said Tovey, patting the object as if it were a Chihuahua that a neighbour had claimed had bitten her grandmother. “Come now, major. I hardly think the loss of this tiny box could seriously impair your team’s research.”

I was watching this exchange with morbid fascination, my head going from Armstrong to Tovey and back again as if they were playing verbal tennis.

“That’s not the point, doctor. You should have informed me that you had removed something from the craft. There are safety aspects to consider. What if you had been exposed to radiation from it?”

“Give me a break, major. The only radiation in that entire ship came from my digital watch!” He gestured to Anne. “Do you want to see what we’ve discovered or not?”

Armstrong’s shoulders sagged so dramatically that I thought he was sitting down! He nodded and all eyes fell onto my former spouse.

She picked up the device and turned it around in her hands so we could inspect it. It was obviously very light as she had no difficulty lifting it. We could see that there were no wires, no connections and no means of inserting a battery. Anne explained that X-Rays of the object revealed it to be more or less solid, with only tiny holes dotted randomly within its structure. She set it back down and told us to watch the row of lights on its surface.

She placed her index and middle fingers on her temples and closed her eyes. My gaze went from her to the device and back again – more tennis, but silent this time. To my amazement, the lights began to grow brighter and the screen below them slowly crackled into life. Row upon row of strange, alien symbols began scrolling down the screen and I was struck by the mental image of a computer booting up.

I looked to Anne and could once again see beads of sweat on her forehead. The strain placed upon her just getting this tiny box to operate was enormous. How could she reactivate an entire starship? I was also struck by another thought...

“Assuming we get the Grey ship powered up, how do we fly the thing?” I pointed to the alien script scrolling down the tiny viewscreen. “How the heck are we supposed to decipher that stuff?”

Armstrong folded his arms across his barrel-like chest. “Actually, Doctor Lewis, we have been able to translate the Greys’ writing for years.

It's actually quite a simple form of script and it didn't take very long for our philologists to figure it out. One thing we can't do is speak the language."

All eyes fell on the American, except for Anne's. She was still busy with the alien computer.

"Is that entirely possible?" asked Smythe. "Knowing how to read a language, but being unable to speak it?"

"Absolutely, Sir Donald," interrupted Tovey. He seemed to have become excited at the possibility of reading Grey writing and was positively hopping around the lab! "Egyptologists have been able to read Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs for almost two hundred years, but exactly how that language was spoken is something of a mystery. Educated guesswork can be used to suggest what that lost language may have sounded like, but in the end it's a mystery."

I glanced down at Anne. She was still concentrating hard and her eyes seemed to be squeezed shut more tightly than earlier. I noticed that her hands had dropped to her sides and were now balled into tight fists, her fingernails beginning to dig into sweaty palms. The text on the screen was scrolling faster and faster now – almost a blur across the screen. I returned my attention to the other men in the room.

"Very good, Doctor Tovey," said Armstrong. "The Greys have never spoken to us verbally; they always use their telepathic powers. This means that we hear their words in our own language. We believe that the process of telepathy itself acts as an automatic kind of translator. It's all very mysterious really. Is Mrs Lewis alright?"

We all snapped our heads round to Anne. She was smothered with sweat, her teeth were gritted together and blood was dripping onto the floor from her hands, her sharp fingernails cutting her palms. Barely discernible amongst the rivulets of sweat running down her face, I could see tears streaming from her tightly shut eyes.

The screen on the alien box was now glowing brightly, the hieroglyphs streaking across the viewer giving it an eerie, green hue.

Suddenly a violent arc of electricity leaped from the machine and struck a nearby computer monitor. The piece of equipment exploded, sending a shower of sparks and melted plastic across the lab. We all dived for cover and I panicked as a red-hot piece of glass from the computer screen landed on my sleeve, burning into my arm almost immediately. I yelled and brushed the debris away quickly.

A blaring klaxon began to sound, deafening in its abrupt genesis.

I could see that Anne was suffering incredible pain, but her link with the Grey technology was still strong. I screamed at her, pleading with her to

disconnect herself from the machine, but she was either unable or unwilling to hear my words.

Another bolt of lightning seared across the lab, this time striking a photocopier. More glass and plastic erupted, this time accompanied by reams of scorched, shredded paper. It seemed to me that the Grey technology was attempting furiously to connect with other equipment. Unfortunately, the equipment in Tovey's lab was not exactly compatible.

I leaped to my feet and reached to grab Anne. I had to break her telepathic link with the alien device. Before my hands could touch her, my body was wracked by surging, blue fire. I was flung across the floor, my arms and legs flailing wildly. I landed hard on my injured ribs and roared with pain. As I struggled back to my feet, I saw Armstrong racing towards Anne and before I could react, he had shoulder-charged her from the chair. They landed in an untidy pile and I heard Anne cry out.

A final, terrifying blast of power came from the extra-terrestrial device, this time destroying the card reader by the double-doors, and then everything became calm, save for the alarm which was still yelling incessantly. Tovey climbed to his feet, crossed the room and grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall. He then proceeded to dowse the flames that danced amongst the wreckage of his precious research tools.

I wondered why there were no sprinklers in this room, but soon decided that they might be a bad idea in a science lab. It wouldn't be a good idea to be drenched with water every time one lit a Bunsen burner, would it? I supposed the same could be said of a halon gas fire suppression system. Anyway, Tovey's manual fire-fighting skills soon had the situation brought under control.

I slid across the floor to where Anne and Armstrong lay. They were completely still and that concerned me. I heard Smythe moan off to my left, but decided that the old coot could fend for himself. Tovey's voice began speaking words of comfort to his employer and I grimaced, inwardly revolted by such blatant toadying.

Armstrong's inert form was sprawled across Anne's and I struggled to drag him from her. I shoved him to one side, noting that he groaned slightly and being grateful that he didn't seem seriously injured.

Anne, on the other hand, was hardly breathing! Her eyes were flickering and beneath the lids I could see that they were very bloodshot. Angry, red crescents on her palms indicated where her fingernails had bitten deep into flesh. Her pallor had increased dramatically. She had always been fair-skinned, but now she was frighteningly white. I turned her body so that

she was in the recovery position, lying on her side. I had no idea if it would help, but it was all I could think of doing.

“Tovey, get that door open and get Anne some help!” I yelled.

Graeme saw Anne’s state and rushed to our position, leaving Quentin-Smythe holding his head and groaning quietly. Tovey’s concern for his friend, my ex-wife was plain to see.

“My God! Will she be okay?”

“How the hell should I know?” I answered a little too bitterly. “Just get some help in here!”

The scientist dashed to the door and almost shrieked when he saw the molten blob that used to be the identity card reader. He grabbed the handles of the doors and rattled them furiously. They remained stubbornly closed.

Suddenly the alarm became silent and we heard the clattering of footsteps outside. Tovey stepped back from the doors as a mighty thump shook the heavy wood in its frame. Another thud and the area around the handles began to fracture and break.

Finally the doors burst open and a dozen soldiers rushed in, closely followed by an equal number of medical staff. The soldiers hastily surveyed the room and, happy that there was no imminent danger, allowed the medics inside. At my profane insistence, they examined Anne first, leaving Smythe and Armstrong for the time being. Smythe was sitting up by this time, but Armstrong remained unconscious.

Anne was gently lifted onto a gurney and wheeled out of the room and the remaining medical staff tended to the rest of us. Armstrong was declared as ‘merely concussed’ and he was stretchered out of the lab as well. Tovey was declared fit, as was Smythe, though he objected to this vociferously.

I winced as my upper body was inspected. I was bruised and battered, but my ribs were in no worse condition than before. We were all helped to the medical centre (I had wanted to call it *Sickbay*, but such *Star Trek* jollity was the furthest thing from my mind) and after my torso was wrapped with fresh support bandages, I went to visit Anne.

She was lying in bed with various tubes and needles leading from liquid-filled bags and beeping equipment. I wanted to scoop her up and tell her that everything was going to be alright. Somehow I felt that I had failed her by allowing her to end up this way. I should have severed her link to the alien box the moment I saw her in trouble! This was crazy! If a small device, the size of a shoe-box could do this to her, what would happen when she connected with an entire, three-hundred foot long spaceship?

“It’s not your fault, Bill.”

I hadn't heard Tovey approach from behind. His use of my forename for the first time hardly registered, my concern over Anne was so deeply felt. I appreciated his support at that time, but there was something beneath my worry. Anger. I was angry not only at myself, but also at the Greys.

It was their technology that had injured Anne and if she died because of it, I would not rest until they had answered to me. If that meant throttling each one of their scrawny, grey necks with my bare hands, then so be it.

MERCURY RAPIDS

PART III

I invited Anne to spend a few days with me at my house and was pleasantly surprised when she accepted.

We borrowed a car from the Orion pool and headed out along the winding country lanes of North Yorkshire, where the main Orion Committee base was located. The trip was uneventful and pleasant, the sun shone brilliantly and the roads were surprisingly quiet for the weekend. The only excitement happened when we hit a road block in the tiny village of Mutchrose and a grim-faced policeman diverted us around a cordoned-off street. We would later learn that an armed siege had taken place in that peaceful hamlet, reinforcing my view that when shit happens, it happens in the most unlikely of places.

Millfield was a small village on the outskirts of Stockley, a medium-sized market town about a hundred miles north of Wakeford, the city near which I had first been abducted by the Greys, and roughly an equal distance south of the Orion facility. My abduction event seemed like ancient history now, yet it had only been a few short months earlier.

My house nestled in the centre of the village, equidistant from the general store (which also acted as the Post Office) and the lone pub. Handy. I pulled up outside and rushed around to open Anne's door. I wasn't being chivalrous or anything, she had all the bags and her hands were full.

The air had turned cooler and the sun was low on the western horizon, painting the few, wispy clouds pink with its fiery brush.

We stumbled up my overgrown garden path and I fumbled in my pockets for my house keys. A quick turn of the lock and we were inside my palace.

"Bloody hell, Bill!" exclaimed Anne, her nose curling. "You've let things go, haven't you?"

I admitted that the place could do with a bit of a clean, but the rank odour that assailed our nostrils was not down to my tardy cleaning habits.

"Strewth! It stinks like something has died in here," I said, burrowing the lower half of my face into my sleeve.

I followed the stench from the living room and into the kitchen. The sun never got round to this side of the house, so it was a little dark in there. I flipped the light switch, but nothing happened. Then I recalled that the last time I had been home, the bulb had blown. I had a spare in one of the cupboards and entered the kitchen to search for it.

A low growl stopped me in my tracks.

A shadow moved in the darkest corner of the kitchen and my heart began racing, threatening to burst from my chest and scurry out the door to safety. I heard the unmistakable scraping of claws on tiles and feared that this was a stray dog that had taken shelter in my semi-abandoned hovel.

“Anne?” I whispered. “Anne!” A little more loudly this time.

She came barging in. “What are you whispering for?”

The growl turned into a snarl and Anne cursed under her breath and grabbed my arm. The shadow moved again and I thought I could make out long, bristling fur on the dog’s back. There was something not quite right about all of this. A tiny voice, deep inside my cavernous, and largely empty, mind kept repeating over and over that this was no dog.

“Good dog,” I said, ignoring that voice and trusting in the louder voice of my common sense. “Good boy. What are you doing in here, eh?”

I used soothing, non-aggressive tones as I inched towards the beast, but inside I was petrified. The scraping of those claws, its growling and the spine-like bristles that were silhouetted against the lighter-coloured paintwork of my kitchen wall had set my nerves on edge. The creature snarled again and I sensed a tensing of its form.

A dull glint caught my eye and I slowly reached out and gently picked up the can opener. Crap! Where was a steak knife when you needed it? I clenched the opener tightly and hoped that I didn’t have to use it.

“Good boy,” I sang. “Who’s a good boy?”

I could see the dog more clearly now, even though the light was fading fast. It had to be one of the ugliest brutes I had ever seen and looked like no dog I had yet encountered. It growled again, and this time I saw rows of sharp, needle-like teeth, saliva dripping onto the tiles below. Its fur bristled again, but this time a rustling, rattling noise acted as an accompaniment and I saw that the fur on its back was actually comprised of hundreds of thick, porcupine-like spines. I could also make out that the animal’s claws were more akin to a sloth’s than to a canine.

This was no dog, it was some hideous and bizarre chimera. But what was it doing in my kitchen?

I heard a click from behind me, no doubt Anne finding something to use as a weapon. I hoped she did better than my tin opener.

The noise stirred something within the beast and it launched itself at me, silently, but with incredible power. I didn’t even have time to raise my utensil and I sensed that my end was in sight.

Then a deafening crack followed by the distinct smell of gunpowder (or whatever it was they used in bullets these days) had me hitting the deck.

The creature yelped and fell back into my kitchen cabinets, sending filthy crockery flying in all directions. It lay quite still after that, broken plates looking like pottery lilies on its inert form.

I looked up and saw Anne holding an automatic pistol, her hands shaking. This was the second time that she had used a gun to save my life and each time another life had been lost. I stood and she dropped the gun, flinging herself into my arms, wracking sobs convulsing her body.

“It’s okay,” I said, stroking her long, brown hair. “It’s over now.” We stood there for what seemed like hours, but was really only a few minutes, and I wished it could go on forever.

Over the past few months, Anne and I had been on an emotional rollercoaster ride. I had thought that we may end up getting back together, but then circumstances would tear us apart again, like the death of her good friend and Orion colleague, Graeme Tovey. My brief obsession with the delectable Professor Pepper McCartney hadn’t helped things either!

I hoped that all those events were behind us now and in a pique of selfishness, I wished dearly that we could make a go of it.

“Where did you get the gun from anyway?” I asked eventually. After she had shot and killed one of Orion’s agents in my defence, I had assumed that she would never hold a weapon again.

“I picked it up from the Orion arsenal when we got back from S-4,” she explained, still sniffing. “I don’t know why I did, but something told me that I might need it.”

“Looks like that latent psychicness of yours has saved the day again,” I smiled.

“Psychicness?”

“Whatever...”

We both looked at the strange animal that was sprawled across my kitchen floor. It was obvious that the stench we had smelled earlier came directly from this beast and it seemed even more pungent now it was dead. At least I hoped it was dead.

Recalling those scenes from horror films where the killer leaps up for a final lunge at his victim, I slithered towards the creature. The room was quite dark by this time and it was getting more difficult to see properly. It didn’t appear to be breathing to me.

I grabbed the mop from where it was leaning against the sink and prodded the beast in its side. I expected some give, but the animal’s hide was extremely tough, almost feeling like wood when I tapped it with the mop handle.

What the hell was this thing?

“You know what it reminds me of?” said Anne. I shook my head. “It looks like some of the descriptions of a Chupacabra.”

“Oh, give me a break, Anne!”

I had heard of the Chupacabra, or goat-sucker, and always dismissed it as nonsense. I mean, weird, smelly animals, some flying, some not, attacking and drinking the blood from livestock in the Americas. Alien beings that were impervious to bullets and could appear and disappear at will? Come on!

Suddenly the mop was wrenched from my hands and I cried out loud, slipping onto my bottom and turning to see the monster staring directly into my face. It had the mop in its mouth and I watched as it bit down, shattering the wooden shaft with ease. The pieces fell to the floor and the beast advanced on me, saliva dripping from its bared fangs. I recoiled as the nightmare stalked closer.

I backed up, entering a shaft of light from the grimy window and the creature followed, giving me my first good look at its head.

It was definitely no dog!

Instead of a canine snout and wet, black nose, I was presented with an almost hairless, skull-like head, as long as a large dog's, but more avian. A pair of large, unblinking, black eyes gazed at me and I was reminded of the huge eyes of the Greys. If this was an animal from the Greys' homeworld, I supposed it would be possible that it might evolve similar-looking eyes. After all, to a layman, many mammalian eyes are more or less indistinguishable from species to species. Below these, the skull curved down, terminating in those deadly-looking jaws beneath a pair of slit-like nostrils.

It was with these tiny orifices that the beast sniffed me, a delicate procedure that seemed to belie the tense ferocity of the creature's physical presence. I saw the gun on the kitchen floor, barely inches from my right hand and thought about making a lunge for it.

The animal mewed, looked to the gun, then back at me. The corners of its mouth curled up in what seemed like a smile. Then it roared directly in my face, almost forcing me onto my back, turned and leaped out of the kitchen window.

“Holy shit!” I heard Anne say and I agreed with her sentiments entirely.

I struggled to my feet and faced her. She was pointing at the unbroken window, her hand shaking like a puppet-on-a-string. I looked to the kitchen window and realised what her problem was.

“It just melted through the window!” she stammered. “Like a ghost.”

The combined Mercury Rapids trilogy can be purchased from the E-book store at <http://www.ufodata.co.uk>

The individual volumes can be purchased in paperback from most good book stockists, such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble etc.

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