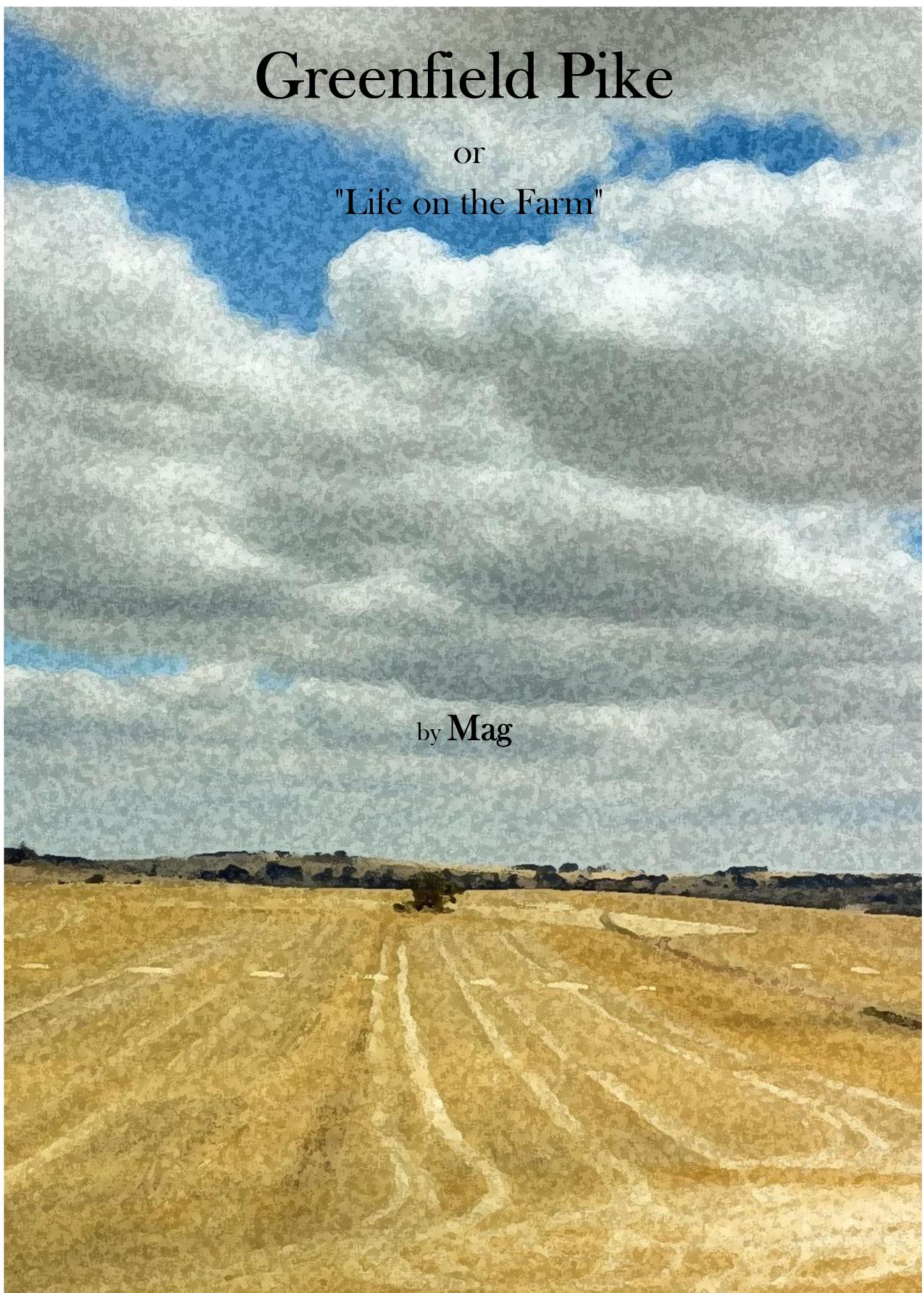


Greenfield Pike

or

"Life on the Farm"

by Mag



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PART 1

Chapter 1 - Pike

Pike woke from a deep sleep to the incessant buzzing of his alarm: he had been having that dream again; the frustrating one where he was holding a log with flailing arms and legs underwater until it was motionless, but he always seemed to wake just before reaching a satisfactory conclusion. He sat up on the edge of the bed, silenced the alarm and tried to focus his mind on the day's farm work ahead, briefly reflecting on last night's conversation with his old college friend Bos and what needed to be done.

He got out of bed and stood in front of the full length mirror admiring himself: a short man in his late forties, but to him rather appeared tall athletically built and in his thirties; he didn't focus on his receding hairline, but instead drew in his stomach and admired his tanned muscles. His self admiration was interrupted by a knock on his bedroom door; he acknowledged his wife with a terse morning greeting, 'O.K., Doroly,' to no response then turned back to the mirror and decided he would do extra work that night in his farmhouse gym and went through to his en suite bathroom.

While shaving, his thoughts wandered to the arrangement he had made with his uncle almost two years back: his uncle, Coniva, had come to meet him in his office in Marvod to make an offer, an unusual offer. Uncle Coniva explained that he'd just inherited an enormous farm from his uncle, Pike's great-uncle; a farm much bigger than his own that had been in the family for generations. He had recently moved to his uncle's farmhouse, but not long after moving there his own son had died in a tragically familiar farming accident, suffocated after a grain pocket had collapsed while he was walking it down the silo, and his wife having died when their son was young, he was left with no close relatives. He had two nephews to whom he could bequeath the farm after his death, Pike and another farmer who was an unreliable and unrepentant alcoholic currently in hospital undergoing detoxification again. His preference was to hand the farm in its entirety to Pike, he said, but there were conditions: Pike had to leave his job as mayor of Marvod, come to live on the farm and assist him with running it,

gradually learn how to manage it. He knew Pike had no farming experience, he had said, but he had been a farmer all his life himself and would guide Pike. After a period of three years, when he had proven he was ready, Pike would take over from him as farm manager then eventually inherit the farm on his death. Pike had thanked his uncle then said he needed some time to consider his offer. He had the farm accounts his uncle had provided him assessed, and he spoke to real estate and farm business contacts; they reported that the farm was in a precarious financial condition, but the land alone was worth a fortune and with some changes in farm management practices he could make a significant income. He had also by then come to the realization that his elderly uncle was clearly in a difficult position; he didn't have many options. If he agreed to the offer and moved to the farm, he could pressure his uncle to hand over the farm earlier; three years was too long but, worst case, if he could manage to tolerate farm life for that length of time then he would take over the farm and bring in contractors to manage the farm on his behalf. In the meantime he could still keep involved in Marvod town council business, from where he had cultivated lucrative relationships with various businesses in town; all the town council had been appointed by and were beholden to him so he could, if he wished, even return to his old job as mayor later. He had his uncle's offer put in writing by his lawyer and it was then signed by all three.

However, things had started badly on the farm, he recalled. His first day, Uncle Coniva had introduced him to his team: a young man, Toopitz, the farm manager, Goovie, who was a few years younger than Toopitz, Ivor and Barton who had been with Coniva for years, then peremptorily handed him over to Toopitz to be taken on a tour of the farm and introduced to the rest of the farmworkers. That evening his uncle had called an impromptu farm meeting and standing alongside Toopitz announced the farm would be converting from rape as the sole crop, as had been done on the farm for many years, to wheat as the principal crop in a seven year crop rotation cycle. He had told Doroly the news that night, and said that as he didn't have any farming experience he didn't have any objection, but what had irked him was the fact that his uncle had not at least asked for his opinion, 'After all. I will eventually take over the farm, won't I?' he had said to her.

The next day he had expected to be working in the farmhouse; he didn't have a clear idea of exactly what he would be doing, but had assumed it would be some filing, phoning suppliers, other general administrative and business tasks, instead Toopitz had taken him out to start working in the fields. That evening he had gone to see his uncle and told him that what he had expected he meant by 'assistance' was helping him in the office not manual work, being given instructions by this much younger man, it was demeaning to him, someone who until very recently had been Mayor of Marvod. But his uncle had clearly been anticipating this reaction and said there was no other way for him to learn how to manage a farm than by working through all the farm roles in turn as a junior farm hand: this was how it was always done on the farm. Although not satisfied, he had decided at the time to go along with his uncle's plan, at least for a while. After a couple of months, he had decided to get his contacts at the town council to develop a proposal for changes to how the farm was run, crop selection, farmworkers' pay and conditions, opportunities to save money on farm equipment and many other ideas besides, a radical transformation, and he had presented them to Toopitz at a farm meeting. He had assumed, after a brief discussion, Toopitz would pass them on to his uncle for implementation attributing it to him; instead Toopitz had just dismissed him with a disrespectful wave of his hand and told him that he knew nothing about managing a farm.

His whole body stiffened at the memory and he stopped shaving momentarily; at the time he had just smiled, but underneath he had been a tumescent volcano of roiling fire; even now the thought of the humiliation made him catch his breath; what a childish error, had he learnt nothing from his time on the council, his time as mayor, and before that his college days! He shook his head imperceptibly at his foolishness and vehemently cursed Toopitz under his breath, closed his eyes and repeated reverentially to himself a silent vow to never be put in that position again; no more consultation, then resumed shaving.

After tolerating twelve months on the farm, having seen all aspects of its business: sowing and harvesting of all the crops, processing, purchasing, sales and marketing, storage and distribution, ground preparation practices and fertilisers, pest control and pesticides, having experienced a full annual cycle firsthand, he had met with his uncle to propose accelerating his

transition to manager, but instead Coniva had told him he would have to repeat the process for the next two years to complete the agreed term of apprenticeship. He had tried to convince Coniva that his time on the farm was best spent observing the work and researching farm practices, not in repeating direct farm work experience that would be done by others, and not only that, Toopitz was not up to the job as manager. However, his uncle had been surprisingly firm; he said Toopitz was an experienced farm manager with many years of experience, Pike had barely started learning about the farm, they had made a signed agreement and Pike would have to stick to it. He had expected his uncle to just cave in to his powers of persuasion honed by years in the council, but he had found Coniva to be surprisingly obdurate. He had stormed out of his uncle's office barely able to contain his anger but on reflection, over a sleepless night, he knew he would need to try a different approach. He had noticed that Coniva didn't actually like Toopitz much either: Toopitz had a quick wit and liked to poke fun at others, particularly his elders and he liked to party, especially where heavy drinking was involved, he would drink with anyone and would frequently take the young farmworkers out to bars in Marvod, who then often arrived late for work the next day with hangovers, Toopitz defending them with disarming humour if Coniva tried to discipline them; this behaviour endeared him to the young farmworkers, but not Uncle Coniva who appeared to only grudgingly tolerate Toopitz because he was otherwise a very good manager. He was sure it would only take one error by Toopitz and Coniva's short fuse would do the rest. So he rang Bos, whom he knew would be happy to help after all he had done for him recently, told him to befriend Toopitz, ply him with drinks, then after an appropriate period slip him a Mickey Finn one evening, enough to knock him out for twelve hours and drive him home.

One day after breakfast several weeks later, he had gone to the equipment shed to meet with the others before work as usual but Toopitz was not there. They waited for about ten minutes before Coniva made a brief appearance asking where Toopitz was. On being told no-one had seen him, Coniva told one of the farmworkers, Goovie, seemingly at random he had thought at the time, to allocate tasks for rape sowing that day and left in a foul temper. At lunchtime that day, Pike had gathered with the others in a rape field around one of the tractors; the only topic of

conversation was Toopitz's whereabouts; several of them had been out for a drink with him last night but they hadn't seen him since, one of them said he thought he saw Toopitz arriving late in the morning, then Coniva met him and Toopitz left shortly afterwards but he didn't see him again after that. Towards the end of the day's work Uncle Coniva had called him and asked him to come straight to his study, wait outside. He had assumed it was because his uncle had finally got rid of Toopitz and was going to give him the job of farm manager. When he arrived at his uncle's study Goovie was already there, but he barely noticed him; he had been elated at the thought of finally being able to put right all the mistakes Toopitz and his uncle had been making between them. Coniva had called Goovie in first; while he waited in contented anticipation he prepared what he was going to say, after about thirty seconds Goovie walked out sheepishly and his uncle called him in. He recalled how the subsequent conversation went:

'It's about time you got rid of Toopitz,' Pike had said. 'There's a whole list of things I want to—' but Uncle Coniva had interrupted him by holding up his hand before he even had time to spell out his plans.

'I've removed Toopitz,' his uncle had said, 'and replaced him with Goovie as farm manager. I thought this over hard all day, but decided you're still not ready yet. I know Goovie's younger than you, but he's got more farm experience and you haven't finished the three years apprenticeship we agreed. I know you'll be disappointed ...' Coniva's voice had trailed off as he looked up at Pike.

He had stood motionless at the time, quietly repeating his uncle's words over and over in his head for what seemed to him like several minutes but likely only a few seconds, then said calmly but with deliberate menace, 'You've made a big mistake,' turned and walked out leaving his uncle to contemplate his error. He met with Bos that night in Marvod, their usual place, and formulated a plan, putting in train a sequence of events.

But this was all a few months ago now, and from what Bos had told him last night, his plans had turned out even better than he could have hoped. He wiped his face with a hand towel then went back to the bedroom to get dressed for breakfast.

Chapter 2 - Section Eight

Doroly's alarm emitted a muted tune vaguely resembling a distorted three blind mice. She reached out to tap it off then lay in bed for a few seconds steeling herself for the cold before dragging herself upright in bed, reached blindly for her slippers with her feet then slipped into her dressing gown that she had left on the chair next to her bed last night. On her way down the hall Doroly knocked on her husband's door, to which she heard an unintelligible grunt, Uncle Coniva's door, to which as expected there was no reply, opened her daughters' bedroom door and shook her eldest daughter awake saying, 'Breakfast in ten minutes', to which her daughter just rolled over pulling the bedcover over her head, she left the bedroom and continued half awake down the hall and stairs at the end of it to the kitchen below.

It was another dreary mid-winter's day and she knew the routine: prepare breakfast and dishes, followed by laundry if it was a Sunday, read a book, prepare lunch then dishes, read a book, cook dinner and tidy up, read a book and perhaps call a friend, then an early night. She would have no help from her daughters, May and Kate, who would only appear from their room when called for a meal; if she tried, her teenage daughters would run whining to their father and say they needed to study or any other excuse they could think of, and their father would side with them as always. The highlight of her week would be a trip to Marvod, a large town lying about one hour's drive to the northeast of the farmhouse, to see her friends; but she usually saved that for Friday to give herself something to look forward to and today was Tuesday. In winter Doroly had plenty of time to herself to think, and these days she rarely had positive thoughts.

Doroly had finished college with a management degree from Marvod University and had been intent on finding a job in management; however, she had not been successful, the job market was so tight with all the general financial instability that had been around at that time, and instead had a string of unsatisfying jobs for which she was grossly over-qualified. She was thinking of leaving Marvod to pursue work elsewhere when she met Pike; it was at a classical music recital with her friends, one of whom had invited Pike, having been friends with him from college. Doroly was swept up in the wake of the ambitious young man; they were married after a brief

romance and had two daughters within two years. Pike had been working as a town councillor for a few years when she met him but his rise through the ranks had been meteoric and within two years of getting married he had become the youngest mayor in Marvod's long history. Not long after Pike's appointment they moved to a new house in the best suburb in Marvod and gifts started arriving for her, often every week: a bottle of expensive perfume, champagne, a box of caviar, a new car, a gardener came every week for free, an endless dazzling list. When Doroly asked Pike where this was all coming from, all he would tell her is that they were gifts from his friends and supporters.

Doroly was content with her life in Marvod, and put any thoughts she still harboured about finding a management job to the back of her mind. One evening after work, several years later, Pike asked her to come into his study; Pike explained to her that his uncle had offered him his large wheat farm on the condition that he resign as mayor and move to the farm. After some consideration he had agreed and they would move to the farm in two week's time after he had appointed his replacement. Doroly was initially shocked and outraged; she protested vigorously about why he had not discussed this with her before making the decision, he had no farming experience, the children's schooling, their comfortable life in Marvod, their house, and many other things as they came to her, but Pike had an answer to everything; the children could attend boarding school, they would keep their house with maintenance and gardeners provided, she could go to Marvod as often as she wanted it was after all only one hour's drive away from the farm. Doroly's initial anger gradually subsided, she reconciled herself with the fact that it was her duty to support her husband, he did seem particularly determined, support her two young children and the farm would be worth a small fortune. She reluctantly agreed on a promise from her husband that it would only be for a few years; once his elderly uncle died they would return to Marvod, and after that she would manage the farm, she had a management degree after all, to which Pike had grudgingly acceded. Pike appointed one of his supporters to the position of town mayor and two weeks later Pike, Doroly and their two daughters moved to the farm.

Life on the farm started happily; it was an exciting new life for Doroly and the children, Doroly and Pike would travel weekly to Marvod where

she went shopping with friends while Pike attended what he described as 'discussions' with old friends from the town council; they stayed overnight at their house where gifts continued to be left for her. Pike seemed to get along well with his uncle and was cordial with the other farmworkers; all was outwardly well. However, life on the farm was not as expected in one particular way; Pike would often come back to the farmhouse at the end of a day's work filthy and exhausted and in a foul mood. When Doroly asked Pike to explain he said opaquely it was just part of the agreement with his uncle to gain farm experience before he took over in a few years. When she tried to press him further he refused to provide any details, and snapped back at her that it was not her concern.

Over the next couple of years, Pike's relationship with his uncle seemed to gradually deteriorate; what had started as friendliness on Pike's part was now a menacing sullenness; Uncle Coniva did not appear to notice, likely not helped by the fact that he was frequently drunk. The relationship between Doroly and Pike was also gradually poisoned; outwardly Pike was calm and collected, but as soon as Doroly spoke to him he would snap back at her. The girls were at boarding school most of the time and Pike seemed to avoid them all as much as possible, her in particular, but even the girls when they were at home; he spent more and more of his time in Marvod with Bos and hardly spoke to them. Doroly could sense a seething anger in Pike that must have been something to do with his uncle, it can't have been anything to do with her she felt, but he refused to tell her the reason, even after multiple attempts by her to get to the bottom of it.

One morning a few days ago, Doroly had confronted Pike again and said she didn't know what she had done, but this time said if he was going to continue to treat her like this she would leave home and take the children with her. Pike stared blankly back at Doroly then after a few long seconds said with barely contained anger that his uncle had broken his promise to him. That was it; no further explanation or apology! At least Doroly knew now that she wasn't the cause, but Doroly realised at that moment that her relationship with her husband was doomed, he was completely consumed by anger. She thought for a few seconds then told Pike that he had to resolve his issues with his uncle; until then she would move into the spare bedroom. Pike just nodded and walked past her.

Doroly prepared her husband's breakfast half consciously, standing in

front of the kettle while it boiled and staring out the window dreaming of her old kitchen back in Marvod.

"Doroly, did you hear me?" Pike asked in a rising pitch of annoyance.

"Sorry, what did you say?" said Doroly waking from her reverie, realising with surprise Pike had been talking to her and picked up the long-boiled kettle.

"I said I'm going to confront Uncle Coniva today. I'm taking over as farm manager. I thought you'd be interested!"

Doroly felt it better not to respond and just nodded with a wan smile. She poured her husband's instant coffee, placed it in front of him with his toast and boiled egg then sat in her seat at the other end of the table and sipped her tea.

After Pike had finished a rushed breakfast he got up and walked purposefully out of the kitchen and up the stairs to his uncle's bedroom. He entered without knocking and found his uncle lying face down in his bed snoring loudly. He walked over to this uncle's bed dodging a vodka bottle lying empty on its side, an upturned glass and an overturned cigarette tray, cigarettes and ash scattered on a rug next to the bed, and bent down to his face, quickly withdrawing it as a strong smell of stale spirits and cigarettes wafted from Coniva's open mouth.

"Uncle! Uncle!" said Pike loudly while slapping him hard on the face.

His uncle stopped snoring. "What is it?" asked Coniva with one bloodshot eye peering at Pike.

"Goovie's gone missing again. No-one knows where he is!"

Uncle Coniva rolled over and sat up in bed hanging his legs over the edge.

Seeing Uncle Coniva's eyes half closing again, Pike continued, "We need to take care of Goovie. He's a drunkard and he's incompetent. When are you going to realise what I've been telling you?"

"We've talked about this already," said Uncle Coniva sleepily. "I know you don't get on with Goovie, but we agreed three years and you'll take over as farm manager when I think you're ready and you're not yet. Goovie is very experienced, he's doing a good job and—"

"Good job! Let's go and find him and see what a good job he's doing."

Pike left the bedroom and waited in the lounge for his uncle to get dressed and have breakfast. After breakfast Coniva came into the lounge

bleary eyed and said with half-hearted authoritativeness, "Right, let's find Goovie and sort this out. He should be doing maintenance on the farm equipment today."

Pike followed his uncle over to one of the vehicle sheds where Goovie was nowhere to be found. Coniva asked the workers who were milling around aimlessly where Goovie was, and they replied they hadn't seen him since late yesterday morning when he went to Marvod to meet the supplier. His uncle told the workers to make themselves useful, Pike adding to strip down and clean the sugar beet digger and scalper, Coniva nodding in agreement.

Pike and Coniva tried the other vehicle shed, the barn, the silo area before his uncle lost patience and said, "I'll give him a call. He must be out inspecting fences."

Coniva rang Goovie without success and left a message telling him to call back immediately.

"I'll go and supervise the maintenance work," said Pike, to which his uncle continued to frown in concern.

Lunch came and went with no sign of Goovie. It was nearing the end of the afternoon when Coniva finally got a call from Goovie. "Coniva, it's Goovie. I'm calling from the police station in Marvod. Can you come and bail me out? They're holding me on some ridiculous charges and I need the bail money. I'll pay you back."

Uncle Coniva was stunned but agreed and immediately rang his lawyer who shortly after went to the police station. After hearing the charges and bond conditions, the lawyer rang Coniva, adding that with the evidence the police already had, in his opinion it was unlikely Goovie would be out of gaol within three years, or even longer if the charges of receiving stolen property and fraud were proven. Coniva approved payment of the sizeable bond and Goovie was released late in the afternoon, got a taxi to the hotel where he had left his car, and drove back to Coniva's farm arriving early evening.

When Goovie walked into the farmhouse, Coniva shouted to him to come to his study. Pike went to his bedroom and picked up a folder, then returned downstairs and waited outside his uncle's study listening with satisfaction to muffled shouting and protestations of innocence behind the shut door. After a few minutes the door opened and Goovie walked out,

his uncle saying while standing behind his desk, 'And I want you out of here tomorrow morning,' before collapsing back into his chair. Coniva caught sight of Pike and beckoned him to come in where he dejectedly told Pike the news. Pike tried to appear shocked but little of this was news to him; he suppressed a smile when he heard about the drugs charges, they were a nice added touch that he hadn't asked for and he made a mental note to himself to suitably thank Bos the next time he saw him.

Pike let his uncle finish, then stated matter-of-factly, "I'll start as farm manager tomorrow morning. Here are my plans." Pike thrust the folder onto the desk under his uncle's nose, his uncle staring blankly at the words 'Farm Manifesto' emblazoned on top.

After a long pause his uncle gave a heavy sigh, "I'll read this through. But no changes without my prior agreement, understood?"

Pike nodded then walked out almost with a light step; he could come to like farming after all, he thought, and went over the plan that he and Bos had hatched together: Goovie was one of the young farmworkers who liked to party with Toopitz, and now he was farm manager Pike knew that he would take the opportunity to entertain himself with his new team. Bos ran a security firm in Marvod that he had helped him set up when he was mayor. Bos set up one of his security team in a shared office to impersonate a farm supply agent. Bos had produced all the necessary fake stationery, business cards, samples, a few freebies. The fake agent announced his arrival a few weeks later by visiting all the farms in the area, making a particular point of meeting Goovie at Coniva's farm, although it was only Goovie who was told about the 'special offers'. He gave Goovie his business card and told him to call ahead when he was visiting Marvod. Their first meeting was shortly afterwards at the shared office: they discussed products that the agent could supply at what he called 'wholesale price', marked down from the legitimate suppliers' prices. Farm supplies that Goovie then ordered were routed through the agent from legitimate suppliers with fake invoices, the difference in cost being covered in cash. The agent cultivated Goovie's new friendship over several weeks with all subsequent meetings in Marvod bars, free drinks, even occasional trips to brothels and overnight stays at hotels; all at the agent's expense. For orders that Goovie placed Bos substituted legitimate products with stolen goods obtained from his black market contacts. At their most recent meeting,

after finishing discussing prices for next year's seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, the agent dropped into the conversation that he had been offered some new model farm equipment at promotion prices and as Goovie was a friend, he would offer them to him first-refusal. Goovie reviewed the prices and the farm equipment models and said it was tempting to replace the whole ageing farm fleet, but he didn't have the authority, he'd take the price list and show Coniva later. Business finished, Goovie asked where they were going out that night. The agent took him round the bars and plied him with drinks, getting him sufficiently drunk then spiked the last, picked up Goovie's favourite hooker and took him to the usual hotel where Goovie passed out. The agent and the hooker then worked quickly in a practised way: they undressed Goovie, left some lines of cocaine on the bedside table and large packets of cocaine and cash inside it, an open laptop on the bed with a copy of the farm accounts that Pike had copied for Bos one evening while his uncle was drunk as well as a second doctored copy of the accounts, a spreadsheet with a fake ledger of all the cash payments to Goovie, then made a pre-arranged tip-off call to the local police station, where the call was taken by one of Bos's friends. Simple. It had worked better than he could have hoped, and even if there were some problems, he could rely on Bos and his contacts in the police to correct them before the trial, and his own friends in the Marvod judiciary to do the rest.

It was not long until spring, the time for sowing sugar beet, sunflower and corn, but today there was nothing that needed to be done on the farm, so he called Bos and arranged to meet him and his brothers that lunchtime in Marvod to celebrate.

A few days later, Uncle Coniva called Pike into his study and bade him sit down. "Pike, I've looked through your plans; I can see you and your friends in Marvod council have put a lot of effort into this. But these are radical changes; I can't agree to this," his uncle said imploringly shaking a bundle of papers in this raised right hand. "Here for example: '... convert to rape only with no rotation ...,' That might work elsewhere but it won't work here: the risk of disease and soil degradation ... And here!" he said stabbing at an underlined passage and reading out, "... re-introduce stubble burning and tillage ... increased use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers'. There's

no mention at all of the impact on the environment and run-off into Lake Cordiomar, fishing, changes to farmworkers' conditions '... New farm contract to remove workers say in management ... Farmworkers shall live in new housing provided by the farm at rents determined by the farm.' And you want to re-introduce part-payment in crop; I've heard a few farms that still do that, but none of our neighbours; it's like like going back to feudal times. And talking about our neighbours, you want to stop any further discussions with the Wheat Farmers' Alliance and set up your own group of like-minded farmers in Marvod; I know your history with Forket, but that's just petty revenge. It's also the complete opposite direction to what I want and I won't allow it while I still own the farm," said Uncle Coniva gradually growing to a crescendo and rising from his chair.

Uncle Coniva then slowly sat down and put the bundle of papers on the table in front of Pike. He looked straight at Pike, who made no response. After about ten seconds Coniva went on in a quieter voice, "I've looked through your figures and they show an increase in farm profit, but you're assumptions are wildly optimistic and you ignore the impact on the farmworkers, the soil, everything in fact apart from our net profit. That's not the way I will run a farm."

Pike sat motionless for a long time, then slowly and deliberately took the papers strewn across the desk and put them back neatly into the folder, all the time watched by his uncle.

Pike smiled disingenuously and said in a monotone looking straight back into his uncle's eyes, "I didn't expect you to understand at first uncle. It's your farm, but you'll see I'm right," rose from his chair, turned and walked out.

His uncle stared in surprise at Pike's retreating back; he was expecting a confrontation but he thought he saw resignation in Pike's eyes.

Pike dialled Bos's number on this phone once he was out of his uncle's earshot and said, "Bostultus, he didn't agree to it. As expected. We proceed as planned. Understood?"

"Yes, Boss. Understood," said Bos.

Pike rose from bed and drew the curtains exposing large windows with a view across the farmyard to the barn and the fields beyond, the early morning rays of sunlight striking the tops of the farm buildings. He

admired himself in the mirror as he got dressed and contemplated the day's work ahead: it was late summer and the wheat and barley harvest had already been completed a few days back, preparations were being made for tilling the ground for autumn sowing of next year's crops and harvesting of the sugar beet, corn and sunflowers, but for the last time he hoped, once his uncle had agreed to his changes on the farm.

It had been about six months since his uncle had foolishly rejected his plans, but that had given him ample time to prepare. His uncle had been a heavy drinker when he first moved to farm, consoling himself over the death of his son; he'd even had to take his uncle to Marvod hospital for alcohol poisoning when he collapsed after yet another heavy session. He had been diagnosed with alcoholism and a treatment programme had been set up, but his uncle had not kept up the counselling sessions, saying they interfered with his farm work and over time had stopped taking the prescribed sedatives. While at the hospital waiting for his uncle to be discharged, he had found out from Coniva's doctor, Sarlat, this wasn't the first time Uncle Coniva had visited; his uncle had also had treatment for alcoholism at the same hospital after the death of his wife years before. Uncle Coniva had continued to be an occasional light drinker but he thought he could easily tip him over the edge again given his history. After the initial rejection he adopted a friendlier outwardly conciliatory tone with his uncle and took to offering him increasing amounts of alcohol each night after dinner, expensive vodka and whisky from his friends in Marvod. He feigned indifference to differences of opinion over the future of the farm, when Uncle Coniva raised it after a few drinks, telling his uncle over and over when it came up, 'It's your farm, Uncle'. After a few months, his uncle was getting drunk most nights.

He had asked Bos to persuade the psychiatrist in Marvod hospital that it was in his best interests to sign an 'involuntary treatment order' for Uncle Coniva, persuasion being one of Bos's most useful skills. After a few weeks of regular drunkenness, Pike wrote a letter to the psychiatrist describing increasingly erratic behaviour in terms that he thought would demonstrate symptoms of mental illness. The psychiatrist would visit the farm every month on the pretext of visiting Uncle Coniva for follow-up treatment, but on arrival would only visit Pike. After each visit the psychiatrist would write up his notes in appropriate medical terms describing phobia, panic

disorder and schizophrenia amongst other things. For good measure he also added geriatric symptoms such as dementia, delirium, vertigo and accidental falls, which would be entirely believable given Uncle Coniva's age. Yesterday Pike was ready and gave Bos the go-ahead.

Pike checked his phone; no messages, but he didn't expect one until later that morning anyway. He walked down the stairs to the kitchen and sat down to breakfast, opening his copy of the Marvod Gazette as his wife silently put some toast on his plate. He opened the paper and began to read an article on the front page headlined '**ANOTHER VICTIM OF THE MARVOD HEROIN SCOURGE**', below which it continued, Pike nodding gently in appreciation, 'Mr Goovie, a former farmworker serving ten years in Marvod maximum security prison for embezzlement, receiving stolen goods and drug possession, was found unresponsive in his prison cell alongside drug paraphernalia and a small bag of heroin ..."

Pike had almost finished reading the article when he got a message on his phone, 'They're on the way,' it said, from Bos. Shortly afterwards there was a sound of vehicles approaching the house then a knock at the front door of the farmhouse. Doroly got up and answered the front door, Pike overhearing someone asking, 'Is this Mr Coniva's farmhouse?'.

"Yes. What do you want?" replied Doroly in a startled voice.

"We're here to remove Mr Coniva for treatment under Section Eight Paragraph Three of the Mental Heath Act. It's all here in this letter," one of the men said handing a letter to Doroly and brushed past her through the door, Doroly opening the envelope.

Two men in white orderly uniform walked past Pike, followed by two policemen. The orderlies looked at Pike as they came in and Pike gestured imperceptibly with his head down the hall in the direction of Uncle Coniva's bedroom. One of orderlies knocked on Coniva's bedroom door to no response and after waiting a moment entered the room followed by his colleague emerging a short time later with Coniva, still dressed in yesterday's clothes, drunk and mumbling incoherently, and walked him down the hall. As Uncle Coniva passed Pike he seemed to recover slightly and looking up at him asked, "What have you done, Pike?"

"I've saved this farm," replied Pike quietly and coldly.

The orderlies with their disorderly load passed Doroly at the front door and one asked, "Can you bring some clean clothes out to the ambulance

please?"

"Where are you taking him?" she said.

"Marvod hospital, Zabaferm Psychiatric unit," one of the orderlies shouted over this shoulder as he dragged Coniva unwillingly to the waiting ambulance.

Doroly ran over to Pike, still seated with his newspaper at the table, "Aren't you going to do anything about this?" she shouted, brandishing the letter at Pike.

Pike looked back at her blankly and said lowering his newspaper to the table, "I don't need to do anything. It's been done already."

Chapter 3 - The Wives

Gemariah entered the café just ahead of her friend Constance. She had been coming with Constance to this same café now for a few days; it was not far from where she lived, had a very pleasant sunroom with tables placed alongside the windows facing a large park on the far side of which she could see the sun glinting off the ocean from where she liked so sit; it was a perfect place for her to meet up with Constance and talk about old times and they had a lot to catch up on: even though they had been neighbours for over twenty years, until just recently they had never before met.

Gemariah asked at the front desk if their usual table was free then engaged in animated conversation with the café staff, giving detailed instructions on how her coffee was to be prepared, the café staff still couldn't seem to get her coffee just the way she wanted it. On gaining satisfaction that her instructions had apparently been understood, she tottered carefully on gaudy red high heels in the direction of their table, her heels clicking on the floor as she walked, followed noiselessly by her friend.

The two ladies adjusted their chairs so they were seated closer together facing the window, "I don't know why you make such a fuss, Gem. The coffee here's fine," said Constance settling into her chair and putting a small handbag she carried over left shoulder on the table and prising low profile shoes off with her feet.

"I like things just the way I want them," replied Gemariah sitting down carefully and taking a colourfully patterned designer handbag with a dangerously thin strap off her shoulder. Gemariah was a tall, slender, athletic lady in her early forties; dressed in a short skirt and plunging top exposing a considerable amount of bare flesh, long blond hair flowing over one shoulder, and prominently highlighted cheekbones, prominently decorated with rings on most fingers, large earrings and a pearl necklace. She opened her handbag and took out lipstick and a small mirror, then carefully applied a few light brushes of bright red lipstick to her prominent lips until she was satisfied with the end result.

Constance, shorter than her friend, attractive, in her late forties, with

short brown hair, elegantly dressed in a long dress, shirt and open jacket, and subtly applied make-up, looked out at the park through the large window quietly waiting for her friend's preparations to conclude. It was late spring, almost summer, and the late morning air was already waving in anticipation of another sizzling day; she was grateful for a gentle waft of cool air from the air conditioning outlet above the table.

Gemariah was now adjusting her skirt and top; Constance judged her routine was nearing completion and leant forward towards her, "Gemariah ..." said Constance slowly and deliberately, followed by a long pause, "when did you really first meet Pike? There were all those stories about you two—"

"I don't read the papers," Gemariah interrupted indignantly, then after a pause leant forward, smiled and in almost a whisper said, "All right, so we met about twenty five years ago. It was in that bar—You know the one, the old dive right next to my old gym in Marvod, behind the town hall ... I forget the name ... It's a sex shop now ..."

Constance nodded to help her out and Gemariah went on, "I had just finished running my gym classes for the day and I'd gone there with some of the other instructors. We were all still dressed in not much more than our leotards, you know, so I bet we made an impression," she said proudly, sitting back and flicking her long blond hair over her other shoulder. "Pike was with a group of men at the bar—you see, he told me later he was celebrating some deal with his friends from the Marvod town council; they'd gone for a drink after a council meeting. They used to go there quite a lot because it was dark and dingy and they could get drunk at no risk of being caught—he looked over and I caught his gaze. Then I was distracted by the girls for a while and forgot all about it, but a little while later he came up behind me while I was talking to the girls and said quietly, 'I like women that look after their body,'" Gemariah said slowly in a deep monotone voice to imitate Pike, to a chuckle from Constance.

"I turned around and looked at him and recognised him from earlier. He was middle-aged, had short hair thinning a bit at the front, quite short—He's a bit shorter than me actually in spite of what he used to say—but he was pretty good looking. Normally I would have told someone who said that to me how to clean their toilet bowl with their head," said Gemariah to a squeal of laughter from Constance, "he had more hair back then you

know, but I could tell he was fit and he had this aura about him. And he was just standing there smiling with all his friends behind him smiling as well. I don't know. I just fell for him straight away. And we have so much in common you know. We both love keeping fit ..." Gemariah's voice trailed off in recollection. Constance waited for a few seconds, expecting Gemariah to go on with other examples of their compatibility, but Gemariah continued, "... and after that we kept unexpectedly bumping into each other for a few months at the bar, at the gym, lots of places actually when I think about it now. He started to take me out to dinner, the bar, nightclubs; he'd pay for everything. Everyone seemed to know him because we always went in the private entrance without even needing to show an I.D. He always took me to the same restaurants and bars, he said it was because he didn't want to be followed by those liars in the press. He was famous you see, he used to be youngest mayor in Marvod's history you know," she said proudly. "He had so many friends; all these people used to come up to him when we were talking and they'd be stopped by Bos—He was so important, he even had his own security back then, you remember Bos don't you?"

"How could I forget?" said Constance shaking her head.

At that point their coffees were delivered to the table. Gemariah examined hers thoughtfully before sipping it and nodding in acceptance to the waiting café staff.

"Anyway, I used to live in a tiny wee flat above the gym back then. It had its own entrance at the back. And after we'd been seeing each other for a few weeks we were leaving the bar and I told him I just lived across the road; I let him in and, well, you know," she said with false modesty.

"Afterwards he told me he was married and had two teenage daughters at boarding school. He wasn't happy with his wife; they'd grown apart. He said it was because his wife couldn't appreciate his ambition and vision. I loved that about him; he was always so honest. He used to come to my room after work, usually every week. We had this secret door knock, you know. We'd lie in bed and he'd tell me about his life. He'd had such an eventful life. It was lucky he never asked me about mine; all I'd really done was work at the gym, oh, apart from trying out for the athletics team when I was at school. He used to give me lots of things, he was really generous: rings, necklaces, like this one," she said showing Constance her pearl necklace.

"After a few months, he said I didn't need to live in that horrible flat any more, he'd just bought a fancy apartment and I could stay there instead, in Korumpa Towers ..." said Gemariah dreamily.

"Did he help you out with that drugs case? I read about it in the paper. That must have been around then?" Constance said quizzically.

"That was all a misunderstanding," replied Gemariah abruptly, jolted out of her reverie. "I was talking to the gym owner after work one day about work-out and slimming supplements, and he told me he had some that were much better than the stuff I was using and cheaper. I asked him where he had got them from and he said they were from one of the regulars who came to my fitness class. I knew the guy; he seemed nice and he'd been coming for a few months, and I'd known the owner for years so I thought 'no problem' and took a few from him to try out. I didn't think anything about it at the time but next thing I know the police are there, and they're searching me, and they're taking me and the owner to the police station in handcuffs. Telling me I'm going to be charged with dealing drugs!" Gemariah said indignantly. "And that idiot reporter from the Marvod Gazette was already there with his photographer. He must have been tipped off. He took some pictures and I was in the paper the next morning accused of being part of some drug scheme! Anyway, they only found those couple of pills on me, but after they searched my flat they said they'd found two packets of tablets so they were holding me as an associate of the gym owner. I said I didn't know anything about it. I was terrified. I knew the reputation of the police in Marvod. And then the next day they suddenly released me and said all charges against me were being dropped. And the Marvod Gazette printed a retraction you know," said Gemariah proudly. "I wonder what happened to that reporter. I haven't seen him since," said Gemariah distractedly.

"Yeah, I met Pike a few weeks before that. I asked him if he had anything to do with getting me out and he said he didn't. But I didn't believe him. He knows so many people. I'm sure it was him."

"Maybe he was just helping out a fellow gym junkie," said Constance jokingly.

"What about you, Connie?" said Gemariah ignoring Constance's comment. "When did you meet Greenfield?"

"My story is a lot less exciting than yours, Gem. I met Greenfield at

Forket College and we hit it off straight away. I loved his sense of humour; in private he's a real clown and great with kids, not the serious man you probably see. We started dating in college, then after we both graduated he went to work on his grandfather's farm with his mother and I started working at the town council planning department in Forket, but we kept dating. We got married after we'd been dating for about eight years, about twenty years ago now I suppose it must be, probably a couple of years after you met Pike. We had our daughter, Olivia, about one year after I moved to the farm, Joe was much later. That's it. No surprises. Just boy meets girl really."

"How did you keep seeing each other if you were living so far apart?" asked Gemariah sipping at her coffee.

"My dad was a baker in Forket, at the best bakery in the area he always used to say, and I was still living at home then. Greenfield used to come to our bakery regularly while he was living on the farm; it's not that far Gem, less than half an hour away. He used to joke it was just to get feedback on their flour."

"Ha!" exclaimed Gemariah. "I bet it was your dad's pastries and he knew if he made a 'business trip'," she said triumphantly doing inverted commas in the air, "he could get some free pastries."

Constance let the comment pass, anyway, she thought, there was some truth in what Gemariah said; Greenfield was certainly fond of food. "Did you go to Pike's uncle's funeral?" said Constance changing the subject.

"Yes. I was at the back. I was wearing that lovely blue grey dress with the gold embroidery and a big hat with—"

"O.K., that was you," interrupted Constance before Gemariah could continue to a lengthy detailed description of her outfit.

"And Pike's eulogy was so lovely," she continued a little peevishly. "I wept all through it. I never met his uncle, Coniva. He was already living at a retirement home I think when I met Pike. But I felt I knew him the way Pike described him so beautifully."

Constance bit her lip at this description of Pike's speech; she could still clearly recollect the congregation's and her own reaction to it, a speech almost entirely about the farm and very little about the man as she recalled.

"Were you there too Connie?"

"Yes. I was with Greenfield, his mother and grandfather, and Olivia; we

were sitting just behind Feldland and his family on the left hand side about half way up. Pike invited all his neighbours and everyone came, it was a good turn out. We all got on well with Coniva and remembered him fondly. You were still living in Marvod then, weren't you?" asked Constance, to which Gemariah nodded in agreement while drinking her coffee, "When did you move to the farm?"

"A week after Doroly left," Gemariah said unashamedly. "I suppose you want to know the story about that too?" she said putting her coffee down, Constance smiling back at her. "Well I can't tell you much, Pike would never say much about Doroly. He had wanted to divorce her for years, but he couldn't divorce her because of the kids and his religionness ... his religion ... You know what I mean. They had been sleeping separately for years, hardly spoke to each other, but still lived in the same house; it's a big house you know. Pike said he was having the house fumigated because they'd had a rodent infestation. He said he kept telling his wife to get it fixed because he was so busy, but she'd done nothing about it, he thought his wife must have been feeding the mice to get back at him. Anyway, he'd been waiting outside the house for the fumigators to finish when his wife walked out coughing and shouting at him. He thought she had gone shopping. It was a complete accident. But she just said that's the last straw; trying to kill her; he'd gone too far. It was all rubbish he said. And she just walked out on him and the girls!"

"Hadn't his daughters already left home by then?" asked Constance with a puzzled frown.

"Oh yes, that's right. Anyway, Pike rang me and gave me the good news and said I could move in straight away. She divorced him a couple of months later and got re-married you know. I bet she had already been seeing her other bloke before that anyway."

"So when did you get married, Gem? You did get married didn't you?" said Constance touching the large diamond ring on Gemariah's ring finger.

"Didn't you know?" said Gemariah a little surprised, to which Constance shook her head. "I suppose it's not surprising really. It was a small ceremony about a week after Pike got his divorce."

"Whereabouts, I don't remember seeing anything about it in the papers?"

"Marvod Registry Office," replied Gemariah waving her hand in the

direction of the front desk until she was noticed. "Pike couldn't convince the Bishop to have the ceremony in Marvod Church. He said after he got a letter from Doroly's solicitor advising him she'd started divorce proceedings, he'd tried for weeks, but Cyril said it was inappropriate and sinful to be married twice in the same holy place. Pike wouldn't have his wedding in any other church, so we just had a civil ceremony instead. Pike always followed his priest's advice," said Gemariah admiringly, "He was such a devout man; I know people didn't think that about him, I mean he was too busy to go to church often, but he was always talking to Cyril on the phone, and Pike said they met up in Marvod as well sometimes just to chat."

Constance was intrigued to discover more of Pike's supposed piety and Bishop Cyril's involvement in all of it, but she needed to focus more on Bos; as Pike's chief henchman, Bos had been such a big part of what happened.

"The croissants are very good here, Connie. I'm going to get one, do you want one too?" asked Gemariah, Constance nodded and Gemariah ordered two.

"How did you get on with Bos?" said Constance. "The stories about him; I heard Doroly was terrified of him."

"I always got on fine with Bos. He was sort of my bodyguard. Pike asked Bos to look after me when I went to Marvod—There are some rough areas in Marvod, you know, and I never had any trouble when Bos was with me—How do mean 'stories'?"

"It's what Ivor told me—Nadia wouldn't speak to me, of course—they used to chat quite a lot, even during the troubles, them both being farm managers ... well, de facto farm manager in the case of Ivor—"

"What do you mean by *diffacto*?" Gemariah interjected.

"Just that Bos was the farm manager in name only; Ivor did all the work, made all the decisions ... recommendations rather, if you prefer."

"Oh, O.K., but what did Nadia tell you? Ivor hasn't said much about the early days with Pike."

"Oh, just that he was so strict, even with Ivor," said Constance realising with surprise that Ivor must have kept his problems with Bos from her, so Constance thought better of telling Gemariah all the horror stories she had heard; better let her ask Ivor herself if she wanted to.

"Yes. Bos was certainly a disciplinaryman, but he was always sweet with me, more like a big cuddly bear really," said Gemariah fondly then went on more distantly, "I never heard any stories about Doroly and Bos though."

"Can I tell you something that Feldland told me about Doroly?" said Constance.

"If you must," said Gemariah unenthusiastically.

"I heard it from Feldland himself. Apparently Doroly had arranged to visit Feldland's wife—they were old friends you see—she'd driven herself, but Bos and his brother turned up unannounced and said Doroly was due at Pyklit's for a pre-arranged lunch appointment. It was very embarrassing said Feldland, it was clear Doroly didn't want to go, but Bos said Pike insisted so she reluctantly left. When Bos and Doroly got to the cars in the yard, Feldland said he saw Bos grab Doroly's arm and half drag her into the back seat of the car, before the car was driven away by Bos's brother and Bos drove off in Doroly's car."

"Ha, you make it sound like Doroly was an escaped prisoner!" Gemariah said after pausing to see if there was any more to the story. "But Pike said although they were separated in the same house, he made her life as comfortable as possible, she could go to Marvod whenever she wanted. He did tell me that she was disorganised and forgetful and he would often have to remind her of appointments. And don't forget the problems Feldland had with Pike; it's likely that Feldland's memory is a little unreliable. No, I can't accept that Constance and it's got nothing to do with me anyway," said Gemariah turning her head emphatically away from Constance towards the window.

"Perhaps you're right Gem," said Constance conciliatorily. "Maybe things were more democratic than the rumours suggest. Pike certainly had problems with most of his neighbours, not just us. Did you ever meet Feldland?" she asked sweetly.

"No, I never did. I overheard Pike talking about him, but only when he was talking about the Alliance. We hardly ever met other farmers in the Alliance. Pike said that they were all untrustworthy and only wanted to see him fail so he had no desire to see them. The only neighbours we met often were the Pyklits; they used to visit us a lot and we went to their place several times. Oh, well sometimes we had visits from other farmers much further away, Asian looking sometimes, sometimes Middle Eastern as well,

but I was only introduced to them with interpreters then Pike met with them in private by himself. He said it was just business and I would be bored: so many breaks with an interpreter. I never liked Pyklit you know," said Gemariah brightening, "he was always so anxious ... you know, oily," she clarified when Constance looked at her confused.

Constance smiled and nodded knowingly; Pyklit was certainly unctuous, that was clear from any time you saw him together with Pike: fawning, obsequious, sycophantic, ingratiating, servile, smarmy, toadying, boot-licking would have been equally appropriate she thought.

"I liked his wife though, we had lovely trips down to the Lake together with her children, while her husband oiled up Pike," said Gemariah rolling her eyes, Constance muffling a laugh and putting her hand over her mouth. "We played in the water, rowed around in the boats, sunbathed while the children tried to catch fish, had lunch on Bull Island—Oh, I'm sorry Connie," said Gemariah when she saw her friend recoil at the mention of Bull Island, "I forgot that was a sore point. Oh I *wish* there hadn't been all these problems between Pike and Greenfield!"

Constance sighed and glanced at her watch, "Gosh, it's already almost one. I'm getting hungry now, Gem, do you want to get something to eat here?"

"Is that the time! Sorry. I can't today Connie. I'm already booked in to have my nails done at one. I better be going. I'll be there for hours. How about we meet tomorrow, same time?"

Constance nodded, Gemariah picked up her handbag and glasses, collected her jacket and hat, walked with Constance to the front desk, kissed Constance on the cheek and said her goodbyes, leaving Constance to settle the bill, leave a tip and reserve the table for tomorrow.

Chapter 4 - Pike's Farm

Pike looked out his window with satisfaction at the recently ploughed fields as the farm vehicle bumped along the uneven farm track, muddy from yesterday's heavy rain. It was early autumn and temperatures had started to drop; the rains had started, harvest and sowing needed to be completed before the ground became too muddy. Nearby he could see a few scattered tractors towing seed drills and beet scalpers and diggers highlighted by rays from the late afternoon sun, and far off puffs of smoke evidence of other tractors and harvesters too far away to see on his farm in that direction.

Pike reflected on the changes he had brought to the farm in the several months since he took over. The day after his uncle had been removed a few weeks ago he had called together those workers on the farm and made a brief announcement: Uncle Coniva had been taken to hospital for treatment and he would be running the farm in his uncle's absence; Bos was appointed as new farm manager; and the farm would be reverting to rape, just as his great-uncle had done. Pike never discussed his views with anybody these days other than his old priest, Cyril, from his home town, but he felt it was his civic duty to inform the town of important changes: he wrote a public notice and sent it to this friend, Vyron, the editor of the Marvod Gazette and it was published the next day. To an outsider, there appeared to be no immediate visible change on the farm: the sugar beet, corn and sunflower crops were being harvested as usual, although for the last time, sowing of next year's rape was being carried out after the ground had been tilled to aerate the soil, although on close inspection by an expert the first shoots would be found to be rape not wheat or barley, fields that were fallow remained fallow. But already some farm equipment that was not required for rape production had been forward sold; Bos handled that and managed to get very good prices Pike thought with a fleeting grin briefly flashing across his face. The first visible changes on the farm would not appear until next spring: instead of burgeoning fields of wheat and barley, rape would appear, and instead of sowing sugar beet, sunflower and corn in some of the fallow fields as part of Uncle Coniva's misguided crop rotation, he would instead spray herbicide, the fields then remaining fallow

until the end of summer when they would be tilled and fertilised. By the end of next year, he thought with satisfaction, the whole farm would be growing rape only: the transformation would be complete.

For most other farmers the selection of crops is a prosaic and unsentimental process based mainly on analysis of the environment and the economic benefit: the environment at the specific location of the farm determines the range of potential crops, and the economic benefit of the crops determines which is the best combination, some complementary crops being selected as part of a crop rotation to maximise overall benefit. Both the environment and economic benefit can change: rainfall and seasonal temperatures are subject to climatic influences, fertilisers can be applied, and prices obtained for crops can decline or increase due to the balance of demand and supply. There are also other less tangible influences on crop selection: some crops have significantly different equipment requirements and market availability, familiarity with the equipment and the market also has to be considered, availability of processing equipment, government and environmental regulations may be altered. But all of these factors can be taken into consideration and the appropriate crop selected to maximise the benefit to the farm owner.

But Pike's reasons for reverting to rape were not known to anyone but himself; he had not detailed them when he wrote to the Marvod Gazette, he had merely briefly notified the factual changes to the farm; he had not even shared his reasons with Bos. For Pike it was simple; growing the same crop as his great-uncle and his predecessors for generations before him, was a direct, almost primal, connection to his ancestors and the land. He had no interest in the environment, he would change that if required, and economic benefits could be manipulated to his advantage with the right friends; his crop selection was based on far more than some bland analytical judgment. And Cyril had told him he had a religious duty to reconnect himself, his family, his farmworkers, the whole farming community, to the ways of the past. Cyril had no liking for modern ways of thinking that were in conflict with his own interpretation of religious doctrine and frequently advocated as such in his sermons, or so he told him, because since he had moved to Marvod he no could no longer attend Cyril's sermons in person, he had to put up with the nonsense coming from the presiding local ecclesiastical representative, Bishop Alexander.

But most satisfactorily for Pike was the contrast to Uncle Coniva, and putting his uncle's misguided attempt at introducing modern practices on the farm.

Pike tapped Bos on the shoulder and said, "O.K., Bostultus. That's enough." Bos knew it was his cue to head back to the farmhouse.

Doroly was absent-mindedly washing the breakfast dishes: Pike had left the table without speaking to her again: she had nothing to say to him anyway. She looked out the kitchen window at the dim morning light and grey skies: it would be winter soon and there would be less for her to do at the farmhouse so she could visit Marvod more often, stay overnight at her beautiful house. For her, winter was the best time of year: she craved her visits to Marvod to see her family and friends; they were a welcome distraction.

Doroly wasn't entirely sure why she was still living with her husband on the farm; the only reasons she could come up with when her friends asked were: loyalty, a sense of duty, the health and wellbeing of their daughters, she wasn't particularly religious, she had never enjoyed the sort of relationship Pike had with his priest, so it wasn't that. Her daughters: even though they were now at college and hardly ever at home, she didn't want them to be poisoned by conflict between the parents so she dutifully kept her feelings to herself, there was no need for them to suffer as well. Loyalty and duty: her friends all understood that and some had similar stories about their own husbands; they were all from a similar social background, and it was an unspoken rule for women of her age that you didn't question your husband and stuck with him through thick and thin, more a hang-over from her parents and harder times, she thought, she certainly didn't tell her daughters to follow her example even if they tempted to, which was very unlikely.

The atmosphere at the farm was tense and cold: Pike was never hostile, he certainly had never threatened her physically, but he was frighteningly unemotional. After Pike had taken over as farm manager, there had been a few months where the feud between Pike and Coniva seemed to have been put aside, and she thought her relationship with Pike could be repaired, but her relationship with Pike had only worsened. Pike had developed a calm but menacing demeanour and she felt scared to even speak to him

sometimes; it was the way he looked at her, or rather through her, she corrected herself. She had gone to a marriage guidance counsellor, a friend of hers in Marvod—without Pike of course, because he would have refused to attend even if she dared to ask—and the counsellor had described it as 'psychopathic serenity'.

The day after Coniva was taken to hospital she had confronted Pike; she was sure her husband was involved somehow, but he had just stared at her blankly and coldly, and said all he had done was call the hospital and have his uncle removed for his safety; he denied any other involvement. While she had the courage she had raised their arrangement, that she would manage the farm after he inherited it from his uncle; so why did he appoint Bos? She said that Bos certainly knew nothing about farm management; after all she was the one with the management qualification and should know. Pike had replied his uncle wasn't dead yet, their arrangement was made a long time ago, things had changed and he owed Bos. Bos had walked in at that point and had smiled at her so condescendingly: she didn't like Bos at all; she knew he was involved in lots of shady businesses in Marvod and didn't like how close he was to her husband; Bos had even moved into the large adjoining house and was now living on the farm. She hadn't argued with Pike further, what was the point? She knew there was no chance her husband would replace Bos when he officially took ownership of the farm, so any thoughts of her managing the farm were now dead as well. That had been her last salvation she thought: at least if she was managing the farm it would have meant Pike would be away from the farm more often; he could spend more time in Marvod with his business associates, maybe even take back his old job as mayor. So why stay at the farmhouse? She put the last of the dishes in the rack and resolved to call her eldest daughter later that morning to arrange a weekend visit to Marvod.

Pike was seated by himself in the back of the car, quietly looking through some papers in his lap. He glanced outside through the window and recognised the narrow streets of the old town; he knew they were not far from their destination in the centre of Marvod.

Marvod was situated on a moderately sized long navigable river that discharged in Lake White far to its southeast. The town was predominantly

located on flat land on both sides of the river; large areas of the town had been built on reclaimed marshland and on several small low hills scattered throughout the town where all the most exclusive housing was located. The town centre was located in the oldest part of the town next to the old river bridge at the foot of one of the hills; the town centre was fairly run-down and parts closest to the river were still recovering from another flood. Pike's house in Marvod was on one of the hills about ten minutes drive from the town centre, but they had already passed it and were headed to the town hall.

This was a familiar route: Bos had driven him to Marvod many times since he had moved to the farm. He used to travel with his family; Doroly would go shopping with the children and meet friends while he attended what he told them were 'discussions' with old friends from the town council. Back then they would often stay together overnight in their house in Marvod and travel back to the farmhouse the next morning, but now his daughters were attending Marvod University and living in student accommodation and he rarely saw them, and he no longer travelled with his wife; he preferred to travel separately. Pike no longer stayed at his house in Marvod, but he made sure it was kept clean and presents were still delivered to the house in case Doroly and the girls wanted to stay overnight.

The car stopped in a narrow dimly lit alleyway opposite a small door, Bos got out of the car and opened the door for him. Pike glanced at Bos as he got out of the car and their eyes met briefly in an emotionless but meaningful exchange that reinforced their master-servant relationship. Bostultus, shortened to Bos by all apart from Pike who always addressed him by his full name, was a long time friend and ally of Pike. They had met at college where they were both law students and soon discovered they shared the same views about law and had a common desire to attain power and accumulate wealth. Bos was born into a family that for generations had been farmworkers, specialising in the most physically demanding work on the farm. Either genetics or the hard physical work had created an ideally suited breed; the whole family was hewn from the same tree, their short but powerful frames supporting impossibly thick necks and small beady eyes embedded in precipitous faces and enormous heads. They lived in the toughest neighbourhood in Marvod, where illegal immigrants squatted

in derelict buildings next to the river and gangs of unemployed and bored youth roamed the streets looking for entertainment. Bos, his brothers and their friends had developed a reputation for brutality at school and were avoided by the other street gangs. While still at school, Bos and his brothers had worked on farms in the holidays to support the family with the expectation they would work full-time after finishing school. However, Bos couldn't see a long term future of farm work for himself and became the first member of his family to graduate from college. He had decided to pursue a career in law and was able to pay the college fees by part-time work as a bouncer during term, farm work in the holidays and some of his father's savings. But in the holiday following his first year of college, Bos's father had been killed on the farm, crushed by a falling hay bale, right in front of his sons. Bos had decided to drop out of college to support the family and convinced his two younger brothers to come and work with him as bouncers in Marvod.

Pike had stayed in contact with Bos throughout college and afterwards during his time as a reporter and town councillor. By the time Pike became mayor, Bos's business had expanded through recruitment of his friends, including several in the police, to include security for several bars, and he was looking to expand further. Bos had been very useful to Pike and after he became mayor, Pike had provided the financial backing and cleared the way for Bos to set up a legitimate security firm and provide his services to clubs, brothels and other similar establishments in Marvod.

Bos waited by the car as Pike climbed the small flight of steps and was ushered straight through the open door by a large security guard, then drove the car to the parking area at the back of the town hall. Pike walked through to the back of the building and unlocked a large metal door, turning on a light as he entered the room. He passed a large ornately carved, dark stained, wooden table with matching chairs and took off his jacket hanging it on a coat rack. He glanced around the room: it was a large lopsided rectangle with full height mirrors on all the walls, a large low-slung chandelier hanging off-centre over the desk; it lit the desk opposite him, but the rest of the room was in relative darkness. Behind each of three mirrors on one side of the room was a hidden door that led to a small bedroom; one of the doors was open and he could see an unmade bed inside. He walked over and closed the door then sat down behind his desk

waiting for Bos to return.

Bos shut the door behind him as he came in and Pike said, "Call the council to my chambers, Bostultus, time to celebrate."

Pike's chambers were in the back room of a pub, called Temny Inn, which Pike's blind trust had bought while he was mayor and was conveniently located immediately to the rear of the town hall and accessible from it clandestinely via an alleyway. Pike had converted an old staff toilet block and adjoining storage rooms, only accessible through the bar, into a discrete entertainment room with adjoining hidden bedrooms where selected guests could stay overnight. The bar staff gave it the nickname 'The Chambers' and that was the name guests used when asking for directions. After Pike resigned as mayor, he had re-fitted it as a business meeting room and added a side entrance, but retained most of the original features. Pike had heard the room's nickname and felt it was a fitting name so stuck with it, for a nominal rent he used it to entertain council members and other guests. Bos ran the pub for him as part of his growing portfolio of insalubrious establishments in Marvod that he operated just above the level of the law, a level kept conveniently and lucratively low through his council colleagues and Bos's contacts.

Pike had been continuing what he called his 'council meetings' ever since he officially resigned as mayor of Marvod; the meetings were held regularly, at least monthly and sometimes weekly whenever there was an important item of town council business. He met in the chambers with the town council to be informed of any recent developments and instruct them on upcoming town council business.

The council members started trickling in over the next ten minutes, smiling at Bos as they passed him in the doorway, then sat down in a vacant chair in front of Pike's table. They passed the time while they waited for the stragglers to arrive with some aimless small talk: what they were doing at the weekend, what their children were studying, the new housing in Marvod. The babble of conversation died down: six seats were occupied and Pike looking along the neat row of councillors seated in front of him saw Councillor Barber, Councillor Alaska, Councillor Korect, Councillor Cryzer, Councillor Tarakan, Mayor Grayson at the end: there was one missing.

"Where's Mutch?" asked Pike looking at Mayor Grayson.

"Councillor Mushe, he was at Forket council ..."

At the mention of Forket Pike's countenance darkened and Mayor Grayson instantly saw his error. All the councillors knew Forket was a thorny subject, and it was best not to even mention the name. Pike had been mayor when Forket council had split from Marvod: a group of Marvod councillors living in Forket, backed by high profile Forket businessmen unhappy with council corruption and blaming him for it, had gone direct to the State High Council and had successfully petitioned for a new independent Forket council. Any mention of Forket council was a reminder to Pike of how he had been humiliatingly outmanoeuvred and he counted any mention of the name as a personal insult.

Mayor Grayson coughed into his hand and continued, "... at a neighbouring council today, for that agricultural alignment conference we discussed, but he'll be here later."

Pike waited for a while to compose himself and announced slowly and quietly with deliberate pauses, "I called you here this afternoon ... to celebrate a new chapter in Marvod's history. Marvod Levels ... my new housing development. The land purchase has been confirmed ... Construction work will commence next week."

The councillors waited until they were sure Pike had finished speaking, expecting a long lecture, then rose almost in relief as one after an extended pause and clapped vigorously.

"I'll see you in the bar," said Pike semi-rising from his chair and shaking their hand one by one. The last of them walked out leaving just Pike and Bos.

"Make sure they only get the cheap vodka. And they pay for their own girls," Pike said to Bos. "And get me the best one. I'll stay here tonight." Bos gave a slight bow then as he was leaving Pike added, "Make sure all the bedrooms are cleaned tomorrow. We've got guests arriving next week."

Bos left Pike to his thoughts: there was other council business that he could have raised, but that could keep until next week; that was enough for now. All those six councillors and the mayor owed him their job; their re-election was a foregone conclusion provided they voted as he told them. He didn't yet control the entire council, but he owned the majority and most importantly the mayor, and while there was still majority rule in the council he had the numbers to make sure he directed the council agenda

and decision making. Bos was still working on the others, and he smiled to himself as he thought it wouldn't be long until he had everyone and with unanimity he could change the council rules as he saw fit, as he had already done on the farm, then he wouldn't need to go through the mindless pretence anymore, the deal making, he could act as he pleased.

Pike locked his chamber door behind him and walked through to the bar, where he was met by a throng of fawning grateful councillors; Pike smiled weakly and greeted them. Mayor Grayson started talking to him about his housing development, but he wasn't paying him much attention, thinking instead about the evening's entertainment that Bos would organise, his gaze drifting unconsciously around the room until his attention was caught by a group of scantily clothed young ladies at the other side of the bar behind the Mayor's shoulder. As he was looking in their direction, the tallest with long blond hair glanced round at him briefly, but long enough for him to see she was beautiful with pale blue eyes and high cheekbones. She turned back to her friends and Pike lingered on her figure from the side view afforded: she was slender, athletically built, probably in her early twenties, dressed in what looked like a leotard with a jacket over her shoulders; she could almost be an athlete. He hadn't seen her here before; the Inn had a reputation for a good reason, there could only be one reason for them to be here. He examined the rest of the group who were of similar age and dress, though none was as striking as the first, and didn't recognise any of the others either, none was a regular, he concluded that Bos must have arranged them for tonight and announced to the mayor that he was going to 'See a man about a cat'. He caught Bos's eye and beckoned him subtly with his head to come with him, then walked across the bar to the group of ladies. The Mayor traced Pike's path across the crowded room and evident intended destination; assuming the girls were part of the evening's entertainment he followed behind Pike accompanied by the rest of the councillors.

Pike came up behind the tall lady who now had her back to him and said suggestively, "I like a woman that looks after her body."

"Then you'll like all of us," said Gemariah turning around with a surprised smile on her face. "We're all gym instructors."

Pike glanced at Bos, expecting him to step in and talk about arrangements for the night, but Bos just looked back at him with a blank

expression. Quickly realising his mistaken assumption he changed approach, "What's your name?" he said politely.

"Gemariah. Yours?"

"Pike."

"Pike. Just Pike?"

"Yes. Everyone knows me by one name in Marvod. This is my bar. And this is my manager, Bostultus." Bos nodded to Gemariah. "Can I get you all a drink: on the house?"

"Thanks. Just a sports drinks," she said, the other girls holding up their glass. "Five, if you can."

Pike motioned Bos over and whispered in his ear, "Get them their drinks. And get rid of the others."

Bos put his arm round Mayor Grayson's shoulders and said, "O.K., show's over. More drinks at the bar," leading the reluctant mayor back to the bar followed in single file by the other councillors.

"Why are you dressed like that?" Pike asked Gemariah after they had departed.

"We work in the gym next door. We just came out for a quick drink after work before we go out clubbing."

Pike followed with some idle chat; he was out of practice talking to women, he thought, and wasn't even sure what he said, he was focussed on the beautiful lady in front of him. After a few minutes a couple of Gemariah's friends started dragging on her arm, saying it was time to leave, "I've got to go now," she said as she was led away. "I'll probably see you here again, yeah?"

"I'm sure of it."

After their first meeting, Pike saw Gemariah every week; he visited his chambers every Friday now, regardless of council business, and made a point of going into the bar in order to find Gemariah. He took her to his favourite restaurant, to his clubs, and wherever they went he made a particular point of taking her in the private entrance. Of course he had to have Bos run a check on her, the usual things: Bos reported back she had a clean record, she lived in a tiny low rent room above the gym, didn't have any boyfriend, little money, no loans, her friends all worked at the gym where she had been working since she left school and came to work in Marvod, her parents lived in a neighbouring village and she had no

siblings.

Several weeks later Pike was seated at the breakfast table waiting for Doroly to deliver his food, but his thoughts were of Gemariah, he was growing fond of her, he thought. She may not be the reason to go to Marvod, but she was certainly a pleasant way to spend the evening; he realised he wasn't even missing his regular girls. He opened the paper and plastered over the front page was a photo of Gemariah with the banner headline 'GYM JUNKIE JAILED'. With growing anger he scanned the article below which said she was being held in Marvod police station for questioning. He calmly put the paper down and walked to his study, telling Bos to join him as he walked past his office. When Bos had entered and closed the door, he said, "Gemariah's being held at the police station. Call Iskaz and get her out. Now! And tell those morons, Iskaz and Vyron, to meet me tonight at my chambers."

That night Bos drove Pike to Marvod. Both Police Chief Iskaz and Vyron, the editor of the Marvod Gazette, were already waiting outside his chambers like schoolboys outside the headmaster's office. He walked straight past them without acknowledging their presence followed by Bos who shut the door behind him.

"Call Vyron in first," said Pike.

Bos opened the door and pointed to Vyron motioning to him to come in. The Gazette Editor entered peering into the dim light where he knew Pike was seated and sat down in front of the desk with Bos standing directly behind him.

"You seem to have forgotten how to treat your friends," said Pike slowly and quietly. "Do I have to remind you what happens to my enemies?"

"No, we did just as you asked, Mr Pike," said Vyron in a puzzled worried voice.

"You were told to take a photo of the owner. I don't expect my friends to the plastered on your front page ... without my permission!"

"Of course not, Mr Pike. I didn't know she was a friend of yours. We made a mistake. We'll print a retraction tomorrow, will that be O.K.?" he asked hopefully.

"Put that reporter on sport from now on. Now get out!" said Pike emphatically.

Pike knew Vyron may have been partly correct, he had been given

instructions to have the gym owner photographed as he came out with the police, and for some reason Gemariah had been caught up in this as well, but he didn't care. He would find out why from Iskaz.

"Get the photos," he said handing Bos a key, "then call Iskaz in."

Bos walked over to one of the mirrors and opened it revealing a locked filing cabinet. He unlocked the cabinet and rifled through until he found an envelope then opened the chamber door and motioned to the police chief to enter.

"Can you not follow simple instructions any more, Iskaz?" said Pike after the police chief had sat down. "Do I have to remind you who you work for?"

"I don't understand, Mr Pike. We got the owner just like you asked. I don't know who that girl was but she had drugs on her as well. We had to search everyone or it would look wrong," he pleaded.

"That *girl's* name, as you called her, is Gemariah. She's a friend of mine. She didn't have any drugs. Only the owner did," said Pike leaning forward, the light catching only the most forward end of his forehead, nose and chin.

Pike nodded to Bos who placed some photos on the desk in front of the police chief.

Iskaz glanced down at the photos and grimaced, "She, I mean Gemariah, didn't have any drugs, only the owner did," the police chief said robotically.

Pike sat back in his chair then motioned to Bos to take the Police Chief out. "Release Gemariah immediately. And apologise in person," said Pike to the Police Chief as Bos lifted him by one arm and led him out.

Alone now, Pike collected the photos and returned them to the envelope in the filing cabinet. Before he closed the drawer he looked with satisfaction at all the other folders, one for each prominent member of Marvod society, each folder containing photos taken from hidden cameras in his chambers as well as several of Bos's clubs and hotels. He closed the drawer and locked it, shutting the mirror door slowly and carefully.

He met Gemariah that evening and over dinner she thanked him for getting her out of the cell. He denied any involvement, but she wouldn't believe him. When Pike dropped her back at her flat later that night she invited him up for the first time.

Chapter 5 - Greenfield

Greenfield unhitched the planter in the last prepared paddock, ready for tomorrow when he would return and finish the corn planting, then drove the tractor along the farm track directly into the setting sun. He had to shield his eyes as he neared the equipment shed in order to find a vacant parking space; it was the end of another beautiful spring day. He parked the tractor in the shed, turned the engine off, engaged the parking brake, and jumped down out of the cab while the engine was dying. He waved to one of the other farmworkers in the washdown area, who was cleaning the sugar beet planter in preparation for its storage until next spring, then walked briskly towards the farmhouse and through the front door: it had been a long tiring day but his only thoughts were on meeting Constance tonight in Forket, so he had to get cleaned up and changed.

"Dinner in ten minutes son," said his mother from the dining room where she was setting the dinner table.

"Not for me Mum. I'm meeting Connie tonight, remember? I'll be back late," said Greenfield as he hurdled the stairs two at a time to his bedroom upstairs.

Greenfield showered and changed into the best evening clothes, such as they were, before racing down the stairs. He stopped in the hall at the entrance to the dining room, opposite a tall mirror, where he saw the dinner table prepared and his mother putting some final adjustments to the cutlery.

"Where's Grandad?" he asked over his shoulder as he brushed his hair in front of the mirror and loosened his belt and shirt to try and hide his developing paunch. Greenfield was a short, burly man in his early twenties with dark closely spaced eyes and sporting a full head of dark hair. He rubbed his chin as he looked at the mirror but knew it would waste time to shave again that day, and his stubble would re-appear as if by magic shortly afterwards anyway. Around the farm he wore long khaki work shorts and a loose t-shirt of the same colour, but on evenings out with Constance he changed to trousers and a shirt. He had never worn a tie: he had never understood the need to wear one and the need, whatever that could be, had not yet arisen; it would have looked somewhat ridiculous around his

broad neck anyway. He smiled back at himself; he wasn't handsome he thought, but at least he could make up for it with a sense of humour.

"He's in his bedroom getting changed."

"Any message for Pecker?" Greenfield shouted up the stairs to his grandfather.

"No boy, but give him my regards," his grandfather called back.

"I do wish you'd stop calling him that, son. Use his first name like everyone else does, it sounds much better," said his mother.

"O.K., Peter Pecker it is then. You're right, he's going to be my father-in-law soon so best I keep up the formalities for now."

His mother came to meet him in the hall and he kissed her proffered cheek. "See you later, Mum, Grandad," said Greenfield as he took his car keys off a rack on the way to the front door.

"Don't eat too many pastries, son," said his mother as he was closing the door. "I know Peter's a baker but you don't really need to sample his products several times a week," she said mock seriously.

"Quality control Mum, someone's got to do it."

"And drive carefully," said his mother in a louder voice from behind the closed door.

"Yes Mum."

It was about a thirty minute drive to Forket, on the way Greenfield thought again about his bride-to-be: they had met in Forket College, he was studying law and had gone to a lecture on urban law as an elective subject at the end of his first week. He was sitting on the largely empty back bench, laughing and joking with a group of fellow law students, his back to the stage; a hush had come over the room as the lecturer walked in and as he turned to look to the front he noticed that some other students had joined them at the back, a group of girls; the nearest smiled at him with beautiful pale blues eyes and he suddenly felt like he was swimming in an azure ocean, his ears started buzzing with pumping blood, he could still recollect his reaction all these years ago. In an instant he had lost interest in law. His mind was so pre-occupied he hardly heard any of the lecture; he stole glances at her whenever he could do so unnoticed: she was beautiful, a similar height to him, short blond hair, dressed in a thin leather jacket and short skirt, with designer shoes. She wasn't skinny, but she wasn't fat either; she seemed to him perfectly proportioned.

When the lecture finished he told his friends he needed to talk to the lecturer then followed the girls to their side of the bench.

"Are you doing law as well?" he asked.

"Urban development," she replied, then started to turn towards her friends, looking as if she may escape.

"Where are you going now?" he said in a slightly panicked voice. "Do you want to get a coffee and a pastry before the next lecture? I know the guy who runs the café in the food hall and I can get the pastries for free," he recovered, realising he had sounded a little creepy.

"O.K.," she said giggling to her friends, then they all followed him to the café. On the way to the café he found out her name was Constance; they were in the same year but mostly had different lectures apart from urban law.

When he arrived at the café he asked the group for their order, then walked up to the counter and greeted the staff member by the name on his name tag as if he knew him.

"Just pretend you know me," he said to the confused young man, surreptitiously pushing a large denomination note across the counter hidden under his hand. "I'm trying to impress those girls."

They met up for lunch every day from then on. Constance was reserved and shy, Greenfield had to do most of the talking; he made jokes which she always seemed to find funny whether they were or not and when she laughed she would look him straight in the eyes and he would be immediately transported back to the ocean; it was intoxicating. By the end of the first month at college they were lovers.

After five years they both graduated with degrees, Constance with a two-one and he just scraping in with a third. They agreed they would get married and both wanted children but would focus first on their careers for a few years and see how things panned out. He started work in a small legal firm in Forket, but realised it was a mistake before the end of his first day on the job. The firm demanded he wore a suit and tie; he had never worn them before and they felt like a straight jacket. It was a struggle getting the tie around his neck and the top button on his shirt was always popping open and even though he wore a loose-fitting jacket it never seemed to fit his upper arms; he felt and looked uncomfortable. But worse, his firm specialised in business corruption defences, work that most other law firms

in Forket wouldn't go near, and they had plenty of business. He was brought to meetings as a junior lawyer and the people he met and what they divulged in confidence to the lawyers gave him shivers; many of them had come from Marvod or had frequent dealings with businesses in Marvod; he had never gone to Marvod but he knew its reputation and now he saw the reality and it was his job to help them! He had always held law as a noble profession, but the unveiling of its true nature had rapidly extinguished his dreams, he was completely unsuited to the realities of being a lawyer and he found himself looking for a parachute.

Constance had started working in the Forket town council planning department and found she loved her job, she liked her team and she felt she was making a difference, helping improve people's lives. So when he had told Constance of his experiences she had told him to try and stick it out. He had been prepared to tolerate the suffering at least for a while for her sake, but fortunately for him a series of unrelated events transpired that enabled him to bail out after less than three months. When he was a teenager living with his parents in Forket, his grandfather had inherited a large farm from a distant relation. His grandfather already had a small farm that had been in the family for generations but the inheritance significantly increased the size of the farm. By bringing in an itinerant workforce to work alongside a handful of permanent workers he had been able to manage the much larger combined farm for about ten years, but in recent years he had been becoming increasingly erratic. When he took over the farm it was producing rape, but he changed to wheat a few years after that; then a few years later back to rape, then back again to wheat. All this vacillation had a negative impact on the farm's and the workers' incomes, the latter being paid mostly a piece rate tied to farm output and even though the workers were mostly just paid hands they still had pride in their work and the disruption was affecting morale particularly among those whose families had worked on the farm for generations. The workers had been having frequent arguments with his grandfather. Finally it became too much for his grandfather and he had a mild stroke brought on by high blood pressure and his advanced age. Greenfield was living at home with his mother at the time, his father having died from a heart attack in the middle of his college years. She had visited her father in hospital and suggested to his grandfather they could move to the farm to help him

manage it. His grandfather had no objections and if Greenfield agreed she would sell her house in Forket and they could move in shortly. Greenfield was more than happy with the arrangement but knew Constance would not.

Although Forket was not far away, the long farm hours had meant he wasn't able to see Constance as often, he was a city boy, had never worked on a farm before and had a lot to learn; most days they would just talk briefly on the phone. On top of that, although his grandfather was slowly recovering from his stroke, after three months his mother was still having to spend time tending to him and physically assisting him, meaning he was having to spend more time than he had anticipated running the farm, often late into the night. He had missed Constance, the long absences, being close to her and she felt the same: he had proposed to her last week and she had agreed to marry him and come and live on the farm.

After about twenty minutes driving Greenfield was approaching the outer suburbs of Forket, a moderately sized town, smaller than its nearest neighbour Marvod, but what it lacked in size in comparison it compensated in beauty. Forket was a picturesque town founded centuries ago at a historically strategic crossing over a large river, the River Bogrich, which downstream ran though Greenfield's farm. The name 'Forket' was believed to be a contraction of 'Fort Khut', which meant fortified town in the local dialect. Apart from a few scattered remnants, most of the original walls of the fortified town had long since been demolished for building materials, but the old town still retained its original street pattern, many of its old buildings and its charm. Over time the town had grown substantially and spread up and over the gently rolling hills that bordered the right bank of the Bogrich River. The left bank was less populated as it lay in a flood plain: scattered hamlets were sparsely scattered across the fertile farmland built on raised ground to protect against frequent flooding. Greenfield drove along the main road bordering the right bank of the Bogrich River headed for a large bakery, called Pain de Forket, owned and run by Constance's father, a baker called Pecker. The lights were still on at the bakery as he pulled into the car park; it was just before late closing and a closed sign was hanging inside the shop door; he knocked and Mr Pecker's wife opened the door for him.

"Hi, Mum," he said, kissing her on the cheek as he entered.

"Not until after the wedding, Mr Greenfield," she said.

"I'll just take a couple of these for testing, Mr Pecker," he said to the baker as he walked through the shop, selecting two pastries from a small basket before they could be removed.

Mr Pecker, who was tidying the counter after just finishing serving the last customer, smiled with a mock frown, "Isn't the flour already tested at the mill?"

"Of course, but it's the customer's opinion that most matters," he said over his shoulder munching on one of the pastries. "Mmm. That one's good. Better check the other one just in case."

Pecker was used to this routine by now: Greenfield had been coming to the bakery to see Constance since he was a student. He always enjoyed Greenfield's visits; he filled the bakery with his energy and his sense of humour. Greenfield sometimes even used to help out for free in the bakery the next morning, 'to learn the ropes in case he decided he didn't want to be a lawyer,' he had said, although he always took a large handful of bread rolls on his way out after breakfast, on the way to the university with Constance, 'They're going to a good cause, poor starving students,' he would say. And since Greenfield had started working on his grandfather's wheat farm, which sent its wheat to the Lake Cordiomar mill from where he sourced all his flour, Greenfield would joke he was working after-hours as a quality controller and needed to take samples of the end product, but he was coming less frequently these days and hardly ever stayed overnight. Pecker was happy they were getting married. He could tell his daughter was infatuated with Greenfield, they were clearly both in love and it was time his daughter moved out of the family home anyway; she deserved better than a room above a bakery.

Greenfield continued through a door at the back of the shop and up the stairs to where Constance and her parents lived above the bakery. He knocked on Constance's bedroom door and walked in without waiting for a reply.

Greenfield was woken by a baby crying; he looked at the alarm clock next to the bed and saw it was only five am. "I'll get her darling," said Greenfield as Constance began to stir, putting his hand gently on her shoulder. "Go back to sleep."

Greenfield got up out of bed. The first rays of summer sunlight were already starting to appear through the gap between the curtains and he could see the dimly lit cot in the corner of the room. He walked over to the cot and found his baby daughter half-awake trying but failing with her small hands to put the nipple of a milk bottle in her mouth; he put it to her mouth and the baby gratefully started sucking and went back to sleep. The bottle was almost empty anyway he thought. He yawned and stretched turning sideways to look in the mirror opposite their bed. He grabbed at his growing paunch to gauge its thickness; Constance had half jokingly called it his pastry bin and he unconsciously nodded in agreement. It was still early summer and the barley and wheat harvest was not likely to start for another week, according to his grandfather, so they could get up a bit later for a few days yet, but as he was already awake he decided to go downstairs and have an early breakfast. He got dressed then tiptoed out the bedroom, shutting the bedroom door quietly behind him so as not to disturb his sleeping wife and daughter.

Alone in the kitchen he prepared himself some tea and toast then sat at the large dining table to eat. He had been living on the farm for coming up to two years now he realised, and he felt he was starting to come to terms with farm life. Constance had been living on the farm for almost as long and she was starting to enjoy it here too; since she had got pregnant she had even stopped talking about wanting to go back to her old career in Forket; he doubted this was a permanent transformation though and expected that once their daughter was at school she would want to go back to work, but that was still many years away; who knew what could happen to his grandfather by then. His grandfather, if only he was not so erratic, life on the farm would pass more smoothly. The medicine for his stroke had certainly worked and he was physically much stronger, but mentally his recovery had been slower and he was still forgetful.

After finishing breakfast, he went into the lounge and turned on the television to watch the morning news. As he turned the volume up he heard a reporter taking about an oil deal between Mr Pike and some businessman called 'The Cowboy'. He had never heard of the Cowboy, but he knew Pike, their neighbour to the east with a very large rape farm. The reporter was standing in front of the local oil processing facility then signed off before he got the gist of the story, must have been some rapeseed oil

deal Pike had made, he thought to himself, but as they were no longer producing rape on their farm he didn't pay it much attention. That was followed by the sport, some apparently unmissable so-called news story 'coming up' that turned out, after several minutes of advertising for products he had no intention of buying, to be about a cuddly farm animal, then finally the weather, the same boring news format that every channel now followed without variety. He watched it robotically without really listening, as the television stations probably intended, waiting for the others to get up until he couldn't take it any more and turned it off, reading a farming magazine instead.

At about six am he heard creaking floorboards from his grandfather's bedroom directly above his head, then the same from his mother's bedroom, followed shortly afterwards by the sound of a door opening in the general direction of his bedroom. Constance appeared, walking down the stairs in slippers and pyjamas and as she emerged from behind a wall he could see their daughter strapped to her chest in a baby carrier.

"Say hello to daddy," Constance said waving their daughter's hand to him.

"Hello, Olivia," Greenfield said waving at his daughter. "The kettle's cold Connie, I'll put in on."

"I'm having coffee."

"O.K. let me do it," and he got up and walked over to the percolator.

Greenfield and Constance prepared breakfast together for all of them and sat down at the table. Constance put Olivia in a high chair and starting feeding her while they waited for the others; Greenfield gazed contentedly at his wife as she raised a spoon to their daughter's mouth: Olivia was already almost six months old now; it was hard to believe how time had flown by.

A few minutes later Greenfield heard a muted argument going on in the corridor upstairs then his grandfather and his mother, both fully dressed, appeared on the stairs, still muttering to each other as they walked down, his grandfather's cane tapping on his each step as he descended.

"Dad wants to talk about rape again. You talk to him, he won't listen to me," his mother said to Greenfield rolling her eyes and shaking her head, and sat down primly at the table. Greenfield's mother was a plain woman in her mid forties, her medium length greying hair held up with a hair clip at

the back of her head, plump enough that she rocked slightly from side to side as she walked favouring the planted foot. She was by nature compassionate but had developed a stern demeanour after years of remotely managing a small but successful pharmacy in Forket from home while she looked after her husband following his first stroke until his death. Without her business acumen, the farm may well have gone bankrupt while his grandfather recovered and Greenfield learnt about farm management: she had been a steady hand at the wheel, in contrast to her father, much to the relief of the farmworkers.

His grandfather, a short balding man in his early sixties, walked to his usual chair at the head of the table and sat down slowly and deliberately with the aid of his cane.

"Why are we not harvesting the rape yet? We always do that this time of year," said his grandfather to no-one in particular.

Greenfield had grown used to this type of conversation over the last two years and calmly said, "We're about to harvest the wheat and the barley, Grandad. We didn't plant any rape last year. Remember? Let's talk about it after the harvest, O.K?"

His grandfather peered at him seeming not to know him, then put on his glasses and seeming to recognise him said, "Wheat and barley. When did I agree to that?"

"Last year Grandad. The farm management plan we all signed is on the wall," Greenfield said pointing at a large sheet of paper stuck to the wall, next to a folder hanging on a hook, put there as a reminder after the same conversation had recurred several times.

His grandfather followed Greenfield's finger to where it was directed then got up carefully and walked over to the wall. "Let's see ... summer ... harvest wheat and barley ... then autumn, harvest the sugar beet, the sunflower and the corn, and sow next season's barley ... next spring sow more sugar beet, sunflower and corn," he said reading slowly from the chart as an expression of recollection gradually spread across his face.

"Exactly," said Greenfield.

"O.K. if that's what I asked for then carry on," he said and sat back down in his chair.

His grandfather was almost fully recovered: on his last visit their doctor had said privately to Greenfield and his mother that he didn't believe he

needed to use a cane any more: he had not had a severe stroke and should have fully recovered physically by now, so it could just be in his mind or for effect. Prior to his stroke his grandfather had been physically fit and active, and he was still strongly built in spite of his illness, so either possibility seemed likely, but they had decided not to raise it with him. Mental recovery was a different matter the Doctor had said: his memory should return over time, but it was hard to predict, and he had always been a bit erratic anyway according to feedback from the farmworkers.

His grandfather having seemingly recovered his faculties they discussed over breakfast what they would do that day: would Constance help him with some book-keeping after she put the baby to bed for her morning nap, his grandfather asked; I will go to Forket for today's Alliance meeting, she preferred to attend by herself in person, said his mother; 'can you organise with Nadia and Rev to continue the equipment inspection, particularly the harvesters, silos, and augers', his mother asked Greenfield; 'harvesters were finished yesterday, I'll get them started on the augers', said Greenfield; tasks having been agreed, each headed off purposefully.

The farm had three permanent workers; Nadia, the farm manager, Revedir—shortened by everyone to Rev—and Mitson. Both Mitson and Rev had been on the farm for about ten years, his grandfather had employed them to help manage the larger farm after his inheritance, and Nadia had been on the farm with his grandfather for a long time now, over twenty years. It was rumoured she was the reason why his grandmother had divorced and left the farm many years back—his grandfather had a reputation for playing the field, being particularly distracted by those ladies who could euphemistically be described as well-appointed—but Nadia, unlike most of the local women, was rather flat-chested and both had denied any intimacy; there was certainly nothing in the interactions he had seen between them that suggested anything other than a working relationship. Nonetheless, Nadia had been the only female who had lasted on the farm longer than a few years. None of them lived on the farm: Nadia with her husband on a small house at the southern end of Forket a short drive from the farmhouse, and the other two near the centre of Forket. All three were reliable hard workers, and their opinion was valued by his mother at the farm meetings she now ran, previously chaired by his grandfather. Most of the other workers were employed on short-term

contract at times of peak workload, which occurred in particular during planting and harvest, to operate the farm's plant and equipment; the remaining few were brought in as required to run specialist equipment, such as pesticide and herbicide sprayers.

Greenfield crossed the farmyard to the large equipment shed where he found Nadia and Rev in conversation, Mitson having taken a short holiday before harvest and was due back next week. It was just passed seven am and they had been waiting for a few minutes for his mother. He told them what had been discussed over breakfast with his grandfather, then Nadia and Rev headed over to the storage shed to retrieve the augers: most of the day would be spent stripping them down, greasing and oiling then reassembling after a thorough inspection.

It was late summer and the farm was taking a short break of a few days before autumn harvest and the start of field preparations for sowing winter wheat and barley. His grandfather, having fully recovered by now, had, during breakfast, asked him to go and inspect the boundary fences. This would take most of the day, so Constance prepared him some lunch. Greenfield picked up a notebook, a can of spray paint and a camera, collected his lunch from his wife, kissing her on the lips and acknowledging her plea to ride safely and walked over to the shed to find one of the motorbikes. The southern boundary of the farm abutted Lake Cordiomar so he rode to the south-west corner next to their neighbour Pommer's wheat farm and drove slowly northwards, following the fence line. The farm was generally flat in this area and the track was in good condition so he was able to cover the ground relatively quickly; the fence was in good condition and standing upright. He continued north past Bartel's wheat property, the fence here also sound, until he came to Anomia's wheat farm; Anomia had planted a line of trees immediately on his side of the fence for the length of the boundary, and as the trees grew they were tipping the fence over towards their side, the fence being otherwise intact at least for the moment. Greenfield knew Anomia was frequently at odds with his grandfather, as well as all the other wheat farmers in the area, Anomia had a reputation for stubbornness and doing his own thing, so a crooked fence wasn't surprising. He stopped and took some photos then continued northwards until he came to Feldland's wheat farm; this section was fine, he

could see some sections where Feldland had made recent repairs at his own expense.

About two hours had gone by when he reached the northwest corner of the farm where Feldland's property met Greenfield's and Pyklit's and headed east. Pyklit had a large rape farm that ran along the entire northern border of the farm. Pyklit refused to share any costs for a boundary fence and had built another fence just on his own side of the property, but the boundary fence was generally in good condition anyway; he sprayed the timbers that needed repair or replacement, made notes and took photos, and observed with amusement that Pyklit's own poorly constructed fence had rotted and fallen over a large part of its length. As he continued, the track, that formerly had run relatively straight on flat ground or on low rolling hills, now wound its way across high steep undulations, the fence line generally following ridges: he knew he was approaching Bogrich River that ran through the farm all the way to Lake Cordiomar. He rode to the top of another small hill and from the crest he saw a short way off the narrow pedestrian suspension bridge his grandfather had built across the river. The boundary track continued to the west bank of the river and he had to double back and re-join the main track to the bridge. It was a relatively short distance from the bridge to the northeast corner of the farm, from where the whole of the eastern farm boundary adjoined Pike's farm, but this portion of the farm, between the river and Pike's farm, was run by tenant farmers and they were responsible, by a longstanding agreement, for maintaining the access track along the fence line. Greenfield knew from previous inspections that it would be slow going until he reached Lake Cordiomar and having been riding for a few hours by now and a little saddle sore, he stopped on the river bank and had an early lunch.

After a brief lunch, he rode carefully across the narrow bridge to the far bank and re-joined the boundary track, its condition immediately deteriorating: in sections heavily rutted from dried mud, where he had to slow to a crawl, and in others overgrown with tall weeds, and frequently blocked by fallen trees, which he had to either ride around, or stop and pull off the track if small enough. It took about thirty minutes to ride the short section to the small wood at the northeast corner of the farm where it adjoined Pike's property and from here he turned south.

As he travelled south he skirted the edge of a recently ploughed field in which a group of tenant farmers were bent over sowing seeds by hand, women distinguished by their straw hats with a man in traditional fur hat watching over them. When he passed close by he stopped, waved and called out to them but the women turned and walked in the opposite direction, the man waving him away aggressively, so he resumed his inspection rather than cause a disturbance. After another hour of torturous struggle he reached the crest of a hill with panoramic views all round and stopped to admire the view: ahead and below him he could see the track continuing southwards down the hill parallel to the fence towards a glistening line on the horizon that he knew was Lake Cordiomar, Bogrich River occasionally appearing from behind hillocks as it wound its serpentine way to it, and just visible the road bridge across the river; to his right and below him were small green plots where he could see several brightly coloured figures in straw hats bobbing up and down putting weeds into baskets on their backs; to his right and to the horizon was a patchwork quilt of green and light brown of his grandfather's farm, the green of crops mid-growth for autumn harvest and the brown of fields prepared for sowing or lying fallow; behind him were the steep hills he had come over and nestled between them at the end of a dusty track, partially obscured by the hills, was a small group of cottages, dilapidated houses where the tenant farmers lived; in the far distance behind him were puffs of smoke rising from the direction of Pyklit's farm; he twisted round on his seat and scanned the view of Pike's farm to the east back round to the lake, a sea of brown as far as the eye could see, although the view was obscured by a mist of grey smoke rising from a multitude of locations in the fields, where rape stubble was being burnt. Greenfield shook his head at the sight: his grandfather and the other wheat farmers had raised a motion objecting about the practice to Pike at the last Alliance meeting his mother attended a month ago in Marvod, but Pike had told them this was an essential part of rape cultivation, and in any case, Pike had said, not long ago they all did this, which was true. Pike had been supported by Pyklit, who was also a rape farmer, and Anomia, for reasons that no-one was able to ascertain from him, and the wheat farmers' motion had been rejected.

It took another three hours to get to the southeast corner of the farm, at the start of the wide expanse of marshland next to the lake. Apart from the

first few fence posts, which he could see were sitting on a small mound of earth to try and elevate them as much as possible above the waterline, he could only see the top of the fence above the cattails, rushes and reeds as the fence continued in a straight line into the lake. He could go no further without a canoe; it was late afternoon anyway, so he made some final notes then headed back to the farmhouse to prepare a report for his grandfather.

A few days later the next Alliance meeting was to be held. The Alliance, the 'Wheat Farmers' Alliance' to give it its full title, was an association of wheat farmers that had broad and ambitious aims for its members that included: agreeing a common set of standards for farmworkers' contracts; modernisation of farming methods including minimising tillage, elimination of stubble burning, minimisation of the use of fertilisers, use of new technology equipment; coordination of shared farm equipment; harmonising environmental standards; a joint declaration on improving the water quality of Lake Cordiomar and the various rivers and streams that ran into it; and elimination of pesticides and herbicides. Many of these lofty aims went unfulfilled, largely due to the large number of members and their widely different viewpoints; however, there was no doubt that the Alliance had made a positive impact for its members and the environment. Greenfield's grandfather had not yet obtained full membership, there were many entry conditions with which he couldn't yet comply, but over time he was gradually making the necessary changes for compliance and felt eventual membership was assured. However, the farm still only had limited on-farm storage and transportation equipment and relied on shared grain trailers to take the grain harvest to the storage elevator and bunkers at Forket South train station. Greenfield's mother was attending this particular Alliance meeting with Greenfield, on his grandfather's behalf, primarily to negotiate terms for this year's grain delivery to market.

Greenfield and his mother arrived at the top of the front steps leading to Forket town hall entrance at nine am, passed through the security check at the front desk, their names being checked off a list, then made their way inside. The meeting hall had been set up with a long desk on the stage, behind which the Alliance committee were already seated a microphone at the centre, and rows of chairs on the floor to which the members were slowly making their way. Greenfield and his mother headed towards the

middle of the room, through the loud hum from numerous conversations, greeting other farmers on the way to some vacant chairs they had spied. Just before they reached their destination, the chairman banged his gavel on the block, "Order please!" he said, the audience began sitting down and the loud chatter gradually died down to a quiet whimper.

"It's nine fifteen am," said the chairman looking up at the large clock above him as if to emphasise it. "We're already a little late, so let's get under way please. The first of order of business is ..."

The meeting ran for about an hour, stopped for morning tea, commenced again for two hours, had a long lunch break, carried on for about an hour during which several members snuck in the back late looking a little unsteady on their feet, then afternoon tea, then another hour; over the course of the day numerous motions were put, votes held, motions carried and rejected, all dutifully recorded by the secretary seated alongside the chairman.

"The next order of business, item seventeen I believe," he said into the microphone, scanning a piece of paper he raised in his hands and reading from it, "is applications for full membership by associate members, Messrs Pike and Greenfield. I thank both Mr Pike and Mr Greenfield," he said searching the audience and nodding at Pike, then Greenfield's mother raised her hand and the chairman nodded in her direction, "Correction, Madam Greenfield, for their detailed and comprehensive submissions, which the committee has reviewed at length. Now Mrs Greenfield," he said addressing her directly, "we can see several areas where substantial improvement has been made, but there are still a few items to be addressed," he said glancing at the Deputy Chairwoman to his left, who nodded. "Madam Deputy has prepared a detailed report, which she will hand over to you at the conclusion of the meeting," he said pointing to a thin folder that the Deputy Chair displayed in her hand and placed on the table in front of her. We look forward to your re-submission once the highlighted areas have been addressed.

"Mr Pike," he said facing Pike, "Although you have made an impressive case with exhaustive supporting documentation, the committee has declined your request. The Deputy Chair, thank you Madam Deputy, has prepared a detailed report, which she will hand over to you at the conclusion of the meeting," he said putting a thick folder on the table in

front of him. "We look forward to your re-submission once the highlighted areas have been addressed. However, I must also note in passing that your next application should preferably be deferred until the issue of the admittance of rape farmers has been addressed."

Putting his hand over the microphone, the Chairman spoke briefly to the Secretary who then got up and ferried a pile of folders from a table at the back of the stage to the table in front of the secretary.

"And now we come to the final order of business, Mr Pike's motion to have rape farmers admitted to the Alliance," said the chairman to the microphone, at which a buzz of anticipation and scattered laughter ran around the hall.

"Order please," he said. "This is a somewhat unusual motion; unusual for the procedural change as much as anything," he said with a smile, turning to the committee members behind him for acknowledgement, they in turn smiling and nodding.

"As you will recall, at a meeting on—What was the date again, Madam Secretary?" Some fumbling of papers. "Quickly please ... thank you—the fifteenth of May, Mr Pike, as is his right as an associate member, raised a motion to deviate from our normal rules of proceedings. In lieu of a debate he requested the membership review documentation, which he duly submitted for all our consideration," he said holding up a folder to the audience from the top of a large pile next to him on the table, "and vote on it three months hence, the documentation relating to a motion to have rape farmers admitted to the Alliance. The motion to vote three months hence was carried; the requisite three month period having been completed I hereby propose to submit the motion for vote. Mr Pike, do you still wish to proceed in this manner?"

"Yes, Mr Chairman," said a man directly in front of Greenfield, standing up. "I move the motion. To have rape farmers admitted to the Alliance," then sat down.

"I second the motion," said another man seated a few rows in front, standing briefly until acknowledged by the Chairman then resuming his seat.

"It is moved and seconded that the Alliance will admit rape farmers," said the Chairman. "As we have already agreed there will be no debate; the question is on the motion to admit rape farmers to the Alliance. Those in

favour of the motion raise your hands." The chairman, seeing three hands raised, mouthed 'one' to the Secretary. "Those against," to which a swathe of hands was raised. After counting each with his outstretched gavel the Chairman said, "One full member for and twenty six against. The motion is rejected. And that concludes the meeting; next meeting in Marvod in one month's time. Thank you everyone."

The meeting broke up, most forming small groups a few heading straight to the exit; Greenfield went to the front stage with his mother to see the Deputy Chairwoman, arriving just behind a short squat man, the man who had raised the motion, alongside another taller heavily built man who wordlessly took a thick folder from the open-mouthed Deputy, who was clearly expecting at least a request for clarification, and handed it to the other. His mother followed and took a thin folder and while she was talking to the Deputy about their application Greenfield addressed the man, "It's Pike, isn't it?" asked Greenfield holding out his hand, "We haven't met before."

Pike nodded and shook Greenfield's hand, "I know who you are," he said to Greenfield.

"And this is?"

"Bos," said Bos holding out his hand.

"Hard luck about the membership application; I guess we're both still in the queue for a bit longer."

"Maybe. Maybe not," said Pike opaquely.

"Do you think they're ever going to admit rape farmers though?" asked Greenfield with a puzzled expression. "I mean isn't being a wheat farmer the whole point of the Alliance?"

"Clearly not to Anomia, Pyklit and me. But I expect the rest of you will be forced to your senses one day," said Pike. "You all used to farm rape too. Until quite recently," he ended snidely.

"Yeah, I know, but we're happy with what we're producing now."

"As are we. Now, I have another meeting with the rape farmers. Good afternoon, Greenfield."

"Good afternoon, Mr Pike,"

Pike left, trailed by Bos, leaving Greenfield pondering what Pike had said, or rather what he hadn't.

Chapter 6 - Pike's Workers

It was late afternoon, the middle of autumn, and Bos was driving Pike round the farm in his new farm utility vehicle to check progress; sowing of their winter rape should have been completed by now, they were weeks behind schedule and Bos could tell Pike wasn't happy. They came alongside a tractor pulling a seeder; Pike told Bos to stop the car and go and ask the tractor driver to show him that the seeder had been set at the right depth this time. He watched as Bos walked over to the tractor and waved at the driver to stop. Bos shouted something at the driver over the engine noise; the driver got down from the cab and walked over and pointed at the drill; Bos examined the drill then bent down and pointing at the soil furiously berated the driver who responded with sheepish nods. While the driver was adjusting the drill, Bos took a notepad out of his top shirt pocket, jotted something down, then came back and sat down in the driver's seat.

"You were right, Boss. He said it was all set correctly, but he lied. When I checked, most of the seed was just lying on top of the soil ... again!"

"Did you get his name?" Bos showed Pike his notebook. "And you told him what the consequence was?"

"Yes, Boss. I told him to re-seed the whole field today. And not to come back until he'd finished"

"We need another education session, Bostultus. Arrange it for tonight. Straight after work in the barn," said Pike.

"Yes, Boss."

On the ride back to the farmhouse, Pike thought about what other lessons he could give to the workers. They already knew that re-seeding a field came directly out of their pay. Offenders' photos were posted on the wall of shame: Bos would remind the farmworkers of this anyway. What else? Perhaps he would have to get instructors to ride in the cabs at the worker's expense? Did he have to remind them about their work permits, that they only remained in the country thanks to him? He decided for now he would get Bos to give an additional personal reminder to his lead farmhand, Ivor, and told Bos accordingly as they were walking.

Just before they arrived at the farmhouse, the vehicle hiccupped then came to a sudden halt, throwing Bos and Pike forward in their seat.

"Fuel?" asked Pike.

"No, Boss," said Bos after checking, "it's half full. These Crocks are well named, Boss."

"Tell Ivor to have it towed to the shed immediately. And give the manufacturer a call tomorrow. I want them all replaced with upgrades, at a discount to cover our inconvenience. And remind him of our agreement, make sure he understands: we'll have to re-negotiate terms if he keeps supplying us with shoddy vehicles."

"Yes Boss," said Bos getting out of the vehicle and opening Pike's door.

"I'll walk back from here," said Pike getting out of the vehicle.

Bos closed the door then made a call on his radio as he walked to the farmhouse; Pike followed slowly behind in silent contemplation. He had become aware some time ago, through his contacts in Marvod, of a farm vehicle manufacturer making dubiously legal copies of brand vehicles that they sold under imaginative new names at considerably lower cost. The manufacturer was headquartered in a country far to the east where regulations and their enforcement were lax, but was prevented from manufacturing or selling those vehicles in Marvod by state regulation. Pike had bypassed this by getting the Marvod council to pass a local law permitting sale or hire of the vehicles under nominally strict local conditions through approved dealers only. He had Bos set up a farm equipment company and established a storage yard on some vacant wasteland next to the river on the outskirts of Marvod, then arranged an exclusive sale agreement with the manufacturer and the sole licence was granted to Pike's firm by the town council under closed tender. Farm equipment was made available for hire under such generous terms that many local farmers had opted to hire all their farm equipment from Pike's firm; in a short time the business had become highly profitable for Pike and the manufacturer, several competitors had been forced to close down. Pike was not particularly concerned about the quality of the hire vehicles used by the other farmers, but what he wouldn't accept was being personally supplied faulty equipment, even if they were only a free facilitation gift.

Pike leisurely walked the short distance to the farmhouse, continued past it to the barn where he could see a large group of farmworkers forming and joined Bos standing waiting for him at the front of the group.

He nodded at Bos, who stepped up onto an upturned crate he had placed on the floor and proceeded to give a loud animated speech to the workers, liberally interspersed with expletives, pausing at several points to allow his words to be translated by unofficial translators within the group. During the speech, Pike scanned the scattered group in front of him: he could see a large huddle of North African workers to one side, who would occasionally look inquisitively at a figure in their centre, who would speak to them in an unknown dialect, before most of them would mumble and nod, a few looking at each other with puzzled expressions, then they would all look back at Bos; there were other smaller huddles of Middle Eastern and Central Asian workers operating in a similar fashion; and a scattering of individuals who looked directly at Bos, one of whom he recognised as Ivor, now sporting a rapidly blackening eye.

Pike's views on managing farmworkers had been principally formed during college, although they could probably be traced further back to his early years at school when both his parents and many of his family had been killed by foreign occupying powers during the most recent war that had swept like a plague through the land. At college he had developed an interest in European history and an admiration for the governments established by visionaries such as Napoleon, Peter the Great and even as far back as the Roman emperors, although he found he was more taken by the way they consolidated power and accumulated wealth and territory rather than any specific policy they implemented. However, when he had argued with his college friends for reinstating such systems he was ridiculed; Pike recalled this with distaste, it was an early lesson for him in people management, he drew the lesson that even though he knew he was in the right, others less wise and roundly educated as him would never be able to understand his complex and nuanced views; rather than introduce his views for public debate and uneducated dissension, much better to have private one-on-one discussions first where he would be able to ensure his views, and consequences of not agreeing with them, were properly understood, then should he later make any public statements, he was assured either of quiet acquiescence or at worst stifled disagreement that could be dealt with later: proper preparation was the key.

He had finished college with a degree in law, but had found over his years of study that he had no desire to pursue a career in the legal

profession: his desired path to personal wealth and power lay elsewhere; nevertheless his studies had taught him the power of having the law behind him, the importance of ensuring the passage of laws that reflected his views, and that being a convincing liar was more often than not far more important than honesty. Initially, he hadn't been sure where the shortest path to a glorious future lay, but after consulting his priest he got a job as a roving reporter for the Marvod Gazette, through which he could develop a wide array of useful contacts and bide his time while he mapped out his future. As a reporter he had visited many of the local farms and towns, including most frequently the closest and largest towns of them, Marvod and Forket. He had seen first hand a wide range of business practices and worker conditions, and the power of collective worker action: it had reinforced his view that to maximise wealth it was critical to use collective action amongst business owners to minimise options available to workers and restrict their rights to the maximum extent possible, a view that was espoused by his priest, Cyril.

His job as roving reporter had proved to be a providential choice; the contacts he assiduously harvested enabled him to get a job on the town council and from there Marvod mayor; and now he was to boot almost miraculously the owner of the largest farm in the area; not quite yet owner he thought, but Uncle Coniva was unlikely to be around for much longer having been recently transferred to the geriatric wing of Marvod hospital, and he already had full control anyway.

In late winter, a few weeks after he had taken over the farm, Pike had posted advertisements in the Marvod Gazette, Forket Chronicle and elsewhere; apart from Bos, all farmworkers were required to re-apply for their jobs. Interviews were held on the farm; at the interview Bos handed over the new contract, re-written to match Pike's views with the assistance of Pike's lawyer, Maslyan, an acquaintance of Pike's from college but a good friend of Bos's. At Pike's insistence, Bos read out a few of the new conditions for added emphasis:

- ♠ *Union membership and formation of farm committees will not be tolerated, and subject to instant dismissal.*
- ♠ *All farm decisions will be made by the farm manager Bostultus after confirmation by the owner, which in the ongoing absence of Mr Coniva is delegated to Mr Pike.*
- ♠ *Salaries will be determined each year based on salaries pertinent to local*

rape farms.

- ♠ *Salaries will be part-paid in rapeseed oil, at a rate to be advised by the farm manager.*
- ♠ *Farmworkers are required to live in new housing provided by the farm at rents determined by the farm manager.*
- ♠ *Worker errors that result in a loss to the farm will result in commensurate salary deductions at the sole discretion of the farm manager.*

With the exception of Ivor and Barton, Ivor's closest friend, who both remained stoutly loyal to the farm because of their close relationship to Coniva and long employment by him, and were yet hopeful of his eventual return to health, all of the other farmworkers had rejected the new contracts and said they would seek employment elsewhere. However, Pike was sure that some would eventually be forced to accept his terms, knowing as he did that all the rape farms in the area had adopted similar contracts, the result of an agreement reached at an as-yet unofficial grouping of rape farmers formed by Pike. In any case, Pike was not reliant on local workers; there were a large number of illegal immigrants he knew to be squatting in Marvod who would be grateful for any work at any conditions. Small groups of the migrants were driven to the farm in a minibus by one of Bos's brothers, and interviews were held with an unofficial interpreter selected by Pike, who explained the contracts to them in their native tongue; as expected they had little choice but to accept, the alternatives available in Marvod being far less palatable. Pike knew full well the new farm contracts would not be compliant with Alliance requirements, as Maslyan had warned him, but that was of secondary importance to getting rape farms back to their rightful place, on equal terms with wheat, which he was convinced the Alliance would have to eventually recognise. Once that was done, he and his fellow rape farmers and other farmers over whom he would gradually gain control, would be able to pressure the Alliance to relax the rules.

Bos finished his diatribe, stepped down from the upturned crate and walked across to the wall of shame, where he pinned up two photos announcing in a loud voice the names and fines, then called the meeting to an end. Those workers who were staying overnight on the farm walked through the barn to their shared rooms hidden behind the barn from the farmhouse, converted shipping containers with bunk beds for four in each

and all sharing a single toilet, while the remainder got in a large minibus waiting in the farm drive, from where they would be driven to Marvod.

Bos sat down at the table in the farmhouse kitchen, opposite Pike who was reading a newspaper, and waited for Doroly to bring them both their breakfast. Doroly placed cups of coffee in front of Pike and Bos, went back to the kitchen bench and brought back two heaped steaming plates that she placed in front of them, got her own breakfast and walked over to a small table in the corner of the kitchen where she sat down by herself, without a word spoken between them. Bos's breakfast was the usual two bacon rashers, four fried sausages, a fried tomato, three fried eggs, two slices of fried bread, washed down with large mug of coffee: there was little wonder he was not in the same shape as he used to be, he thought.

It was a mid-winter's day, around four years since Bos had moved to the farm. When living in Marvod Bos had been a fearsome sight, heavily muscled after years of physical work honed by street fighting; nowadays he had to make regular use of Pike's gym just to keep in shape. Where previously he would have personally taken the lead in persuading a recalcitrant, and enjoyed the challenge, these days his reputation was generally sufficiently compelling in itself, and on the infrequent occasions when not, he could employ an array of negotiating skills at his disposal; from the simplest, suggesting sending his brothers round to discuss it in person, through to techniques he had developed under Pike's tutelage, such as offering to send incriminating photos or disclosing confidential information to the Marvod Gazette. But he still occasionally felt the need, the urge, for a more personal touch, as Ivor and other workers could attest.

The years working for Pike had been fruitful for him and his family: Pike provided the financial brawn through his trust fund and offshore accounts, underpinned by the farm as security; Bos, his brothers and friends provided the management muscle; Pike's contacts in the business world complemented Bos's contacts in the underworld; together they made a formidable team, times were good and they were making a lot of money. There were still plenty of opportunities in Marvod, and even further afield if things continued to go as well as they were. He didn't mind for now still being Pike's driver, security, farm manager, whatever else Pike wanted, but if anything new opened up, he would have to have a word with Pike; with

all the enemies Pike was making he certainly needed a large personal security team and he knew where the skeletons were hidden; Pike would be forced to listen.

Bos had been living at his family home in Marvod with his brothers, but when he was appointed farm manager Pike had insisted he come and live on the farm. He didn't know much about farm management, but he had farm work experience and he knew how to manage people, anyway, Ivor and Barton were still there and Ivor had sufficient knowledge to run things on his behalf provided he was kept in line, and most importantly, he owed Pike, so he complied. He still ran the various Marvod enterprises from the farm, but his brothers stayed in Marvod, he trusted them with day-to-day administration and could travel to Marvod if and when required. During the day he worked from the farmhouse in the office adjoining Pike's study. He had meals with Pike and Doroly, then in the evening went to his own separate house at the rear of the farmhouse, connected to it by a single door on the ground floor.

Bos picked up his knife and fork and started cutting one of the large sausages. Seated opposite him at the breakfast table, Pike turned a page in the Marvod Gazette, "Bostultus. Have you seen this?"

Bos took the paper offered by Pike, placed it on the table next to him and read the headline '**WORKERS MOVE INTO NEW MARVOD HOUSING**' above a photo of a sullen group of men standing in the snow under a dull grey sky in front of a large block of matching grey-coloured four storey flats.

"It's not a good shot of you, Boss," said Bos.

"Not that one. The one below it."

Bos moved his gaze to another article lower on the page, shook his head and read out, "**ILLEGAL WORKERS DETAINED AT FARM**". That's Pyklist's farm, Boss. I warned him if he didn't pay on time he would get caught. You think he's got the message now?"

Pike nodded, "Speak to Iskaz: Pyklist just gets a fine. But Pyklist's fee has increased by twenty per cent to cover the additional risk he's caused."

Bos glanced at the photo again, a group standing in front of the new worker flats: Pike front and centre, the works manager on Pike's left sporting a hard hat emblazoned with the moniker Fixa Group, in an arc behind them a small group of selected farmworkers, his brothers and some

friends—he had made sure that all the illegal migrants had been kept in the flats out of sight—he was on Pike's right; all were facing the camera apart from him, his gaze directed to the right. The photo brought back to him the view he had of his old flat, where he and his brothers used to live until a few years ago when, with Pike's assistance, they had moved into a high end villa on one of the neighbouring hills to that where Pike's house was located. The other residents of Bos's old area, after waiting almost ten years, had been re-located to a new housing area on the southern outskirts of Marvod. The flats were due to be demolished and had been abandoned; they were covered in graffiti and he recognised some of the artists' work from his street gang days.

This neighbourhood of Marvod, like several other areas of Marvod, was built on reclaimed marshland next to the river. In fact, although there was no common agreement on the origin of Marvod's name, it was likely to have been derived from the local dialect for 'Land of Water' or 'Flood Land' as most of the town lay in a flood plain. Marvod had been blighted throughout its history by flooding exacerbated by poor town planning decisions; in earlier times, cheap housing had been built on land without any consideration to the impacts of inundation and more recently, public land had been sold to housing developers at scandalously low prices on the condition that the ground level was raised and drainage channels constructed, however, few of these building licence requirements were ever implemented by the developers and they were never prosecuted for flouting them. Over a long period, under pressure from the townsfolk, the town council had constructed a variety of simple flood prevention measures to protect the low lying residential and industrial areas, principally levees, river channel improvements and retarding basins. Nevertheless, seasonal rains and snow-melt continued to cause flooding every few years, recently with greater frequency and intensity, which had been put down to the impact of climate change. Those living in the areas of highest flood risk had been promised re-location many years ago, however, continual delays had meant that groundwork in the areas where the replacement housing would be constructed had mostly yet to commence. Publicly the town council blamed the developers, and the developers blamed a combination of town planning environmental red tape, and material and labour shortages.

Each of the hills within Marvod was surrounded at its base by tall reinforced concrete walls, declared by the town council to be part of flood mitigation measures, but that didn't explain the need for the security barriers and guards manning the roads at the entrances to the hill, and the barbed wire topping the walls. The inhabitants of these urban islands, members of the town council, developers and selected friends, felt it was a suitable precaution in case knowledge of the cut-price house packages they had obtained from the developers in exchange for cheap land became known. One of the directors of a housing development company, who was until recently a town councillor, was quoted as saying that it was imperative and to the benefit of the entire town, to ensure the security of the minority who are responsible for generating the income of the majority.

In contrast to the flood-prone areas, construction of luxury houses continued unaffected; a representative for the principal developer, Fixa Group, had argued, when interviewed by the Gazette for an exposé, that building skills and materials were different for top-of-the-range houses. However, workers had told the same reporters, under condition of anonymity and in spite of threats by the developers, that they were paid over twice as much to work on deluxe housing. The reporters also uncovered that the developers made considerably more profit at lower risk at the high end of the market; a smooth and uneventful approval process ensured by higher facilitation payments to the council. The Gazette's editor decided in the end not to publish the article, considering it not to be in the best interest of the paper's owners and friends.

When Ivor, who had been awaiting re-location for many years, had heard about Bos's luck, Ivor had sarcastically commented to Bos, as he was handed his last pay packet before Christmas, how Santa must have come early for Bos's family. Bos had told Ivor that it was a simple case of supply and demand: he had demanded priority treatment and the developer had supplied it.

The conditions of sale on the land where Pike's new housing was to be built required elevated foundations and extensive drainage, but Pike had successfully argued that drainage was public works and the responsibility of the town council. In spite of the non-compliance, approval for the new housing was granted, no doubt helped by the fact that Pike had ensured he was the only conforming bidder through appropriate contributions to the

bid committee members' private school tuition funds; Pike called this performing a public service: not only was it making houses available for those less fortunate in a timely manner by circumventing unnecessary red tape, but it ensured the next generation of town council members was well-educated. And in further providential signs for Pike, the shortages and delays that had been plaguing the housing construction industry miraculously eased just after approval for Pike's flats was received and Fixa Group was able to re-assign workers for a period just long enough to complete Pike's flats; the flats were built in record time.

Bos took a final swig of his coffee and determined to go to the gym after breakfast.

Chapter 7 - The Funeral

The hearse, leading a long funeral cortège, stopped at the main entrance to Marvod Church; several burly individuals in poorly fitting tight black suits struggled out of two vehicles into an unseasonal late summer light rain under low scudding mottled grey clouds, like moths emerging from chrysalises; they did their best to smooth down their suits and adjust their ties, but could do nothing about the bunched folds in their trousers that cascaded over their shoes. Two of them walked toward the lead vehicle and opened the rear doors from which Pike and Doroly emerged, then his daughters, all dressed in funereal attire.

Pike and his family joined the priest at the foot of the steps while the pallbearers, the remainder of the black-suited participants, removed an ornately carved polished wooden casket from the rear of the hearse, lifted it unison onto their shoulders and expertly navigated the short flight.

The priest took position directly behind the casket as it made its way through the throng, Pike and Doroly behind him, then their children. As the pallbearers drew level with Greenfield, he whispered to Constance, "That's Bos and his brothers."

"Who else would it be?" replied Constance rhetorically.

"I thought Pike would have been one of the pallbearers," Greenfield said.

Pike came by eyes fixed dead ahead alongside Doroly looking down glumly at her feet. Greenfield waited for a gap in the funeral guests, then

seeing one grabbed Constance by the hand and led her up the steps, she in turn pulling on Olivia's hand, Olivia taking this as a sign to start gaily skipping backwards and forwards up the steps humming happily to herself until she was told to stop by her mother, Greenfield's mother and grandfather behind.

"We better sit near the aisle in case, you know who, has to go out for a break," Greenfield said to Constance, trying not to encourage Olivia's attention.

The procession entered the church with a soft shuffling of numerous slowly walking feet and was greeted by sombre music and a chanted song from the church officials. Greenfield followed the others until he found an empty pew on his left near the middle of the church and walked to its farthest end. Glancing down to check his seat he saw a small funeral booklet on his seat and picked it up to read as he sat down next to Constance.

"This order of service is a little unusual," he whispered to Constance.

"Apparently Pike had it amended to meet his special requirements," said Constance.

"Bishop Alexander will lead the funeral service ... Eulogy will be delivered by Mr Pike'. Eulogy by Pike! That should be interesting. I heard Pike is not a big fan of Bishop Alexander, so perhaps he wanted to—"

A gentleman in the pew in front of Greenfield half turned around and putting his finger to his mouth glared at him of the corner of one eye; Greenfield recognised his neighbour Feldland and stopped mid-sentence, nodded at him in acknowledgement and puckered his lips in apology.

The bishop was still chanting at a lectern in the centre of the nave roughly level with the first row of pews, alongside several church officials on both sides of the casket and facing it. He was facing away from him toward the altar and before him was the now open casket supported on coffin stands. He could just make out a white cloth covering the head of the deceased and one hand protruding from a white robe. The chanting continued while he surveyed the guests: Constance, his three year old daughter Olivia, mother and grandfather were seated on his right; directly in front of him was Feldland, his wife and two teenage children; opposite Feldland on the right hand side of the church was Mr Pyklit and his elderly parents, his wife and children did not seem to be in attendance; on the far

right of Pyklit's pew he saw an overly garish hat, more suited to a horse racing carnival than a funeral, supported precariously on the head of tall slender lady he did not recognise, dressed in a grey off-shoulder dress; seated in front of the lady was Bos and his brothers, squashing Mr Anomia against the far left end of the pew, and having to twist slightly and lean over at an angle to accommodate Bos's enormous trunk and appurtenances; Mrs Anomia on the left hand pew directly opposite her husband, next to Mr Raine and his large family; in front of Mr Raine it was hard to make out as his view was partially obscured, but it appeared to be Mr Eastman, and most likely his wife; in the front row ahead of Bos and his brothers he could see Pike, Doroly and their two daughters; at this point Constance grabbed his leg and motioned towards Olivia who was bouncing up and down in her seat and mouthed the word 'toilet' to him.

Greenfield stood up and taking Olivia's hand led her back along the left aisle, passing several guests still making their way to a pew, to the toilet outside the church. He waited outside the cubicle door for several minutes until, 'We don't have one like this at home, Daddy,' entered to show her how to pull the chain; reminded her to wash her hands, but after she held her tiny hands barely above the level of the basin, had to do it for her after lifting her with one arm, gave her some paper hand towel then after failed attempts by her dried her hands, checked all her clothes were on the right way round and returned to the church. On re-entering he found his way impeded by a large group of people standing at the rear; he picked his way through dragging his daughter gently behind him, 'Excuse me!' ... 'Thank you.' ... 'Coming through!' 'Ow! Daddy, you're pulling too hard!' 'Sssh Olivia,' putting his finger to his mouth, until he reached the start of the pews. He stopped to search for his family; the pews were all full, there were many people he didn't recognise, groups of people in what looked like traditional central Asian and Middle Eastern clothing, likely Pike's distant relations from far to the east, then he spotted Constance's parents, his mother-in-law looking around at him and smiling, and Constance directly in front of her. Gently pushing Olivia in front, he made his way along the aisle to Constance and sat down alongside her.

The chanting abruptly finished and over the next two hours there followed readings from the bible by the priest and other church officials, interspersed with hymns, interrupted by several trips to the toilet,

alternating with Constance; to sit in the grass with Olivia's dolls, she seemingly oblivious to the scattered light drizzle; many questions delivered in a sometimes serious and deliberate voice and others in an excited breathless way: 'Why is that man talking in that silly voice?' 'Why has he got such a pretty hat? Can I have one too Daddy? Oh please Daddy?' 'Why is everyone so quiet?' 'Can I sit on your knee, I can't see properly?' 'Why is everyone wearing black, is it a special uniform?' 'I don't like those sad songs, can I sing a happy one?' 'Does the rain come from heaven daddy?' 'I'm bored. Can I play with my friends?'

Bishop Alexander concluded the final hymn then there was a short delay while he walked to the front of the church, just in front of the altar, accompanied by one of the church officials who carried the lectern and turned it to face the audience; the Bishop took some notes from his pocket, scanned the pews in front of him, then after a long deliberate pause began, "The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke Chapter twelve Verses sixteen to twenty one:

"And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul ..."

Bishop Alexander delivered an upbeat and optimistic sermon on the remembrance of death, how we try and avoid it in spite of constant reminders around us: the death of loved ones, our health, the changing of the seasons, the occasional failure of crops, the death of our livestock and pets; further quotes followed from James Chapter four, Luke Chapter sixteen; references were made to the practice of The Eucharist; he implored his audience to treat each loss, however small, as if it were a small death and resurrection, to embrace life and death; and ended with, 'All things must pass, but death is always followed by resurrection. That is our faith. As the Lord tells us repeatedly, let go of things you can't control.'

At the completion of his sermon, Bishop Alexander gathered his notes and moved a couple of steps to the right of and behind the lectern. Looking round the guests Greenfield could see a lift in the mood, at least on his side of the church; there were many quiet conversations between people sitting alongside each other, nodding of heads and small but

respectful smiles. The mood on Pike's side of the church was somewhat more sombre, not a sound came from that direction.

Pike rose and walked to the lectern, placed a single sheet of paper on it then without looking up once read unemotionally and at a somewhat faster pace than was customary, as if from a carefully rehearsed speech:

"Uncle Coniva has passed away. A person who began a new era on our farm has passed away. Under his leadership a new farm was born, a free, open and peaceful farm, a farm where power truly does belong to the workers. His leadership of the farm has inscribed him forever in our shared history.

"Uncle Coniva's strength was in the support, the ideas and aspirations of those who worked for him. Thanks to the will and direct initiative of Uncle Coniva a new farm contract was adopted, one which declared farmworkers' rights a supreme value. It gave workers the opportunity to freely express their thoughts, to freely choose how the farm would be managed, to realise their creative and entrepreneurial ambitions. This contract permitted us to begin building a truly effective farm.

"We knew Uncle Coniva as brave and warm-hearted, a spiritual person. He was an upstanding and courageous man and he was always very honest and frank while defending his position. Uncle Coniva assumed full responsibility for everything he called for, for everything he aspired to, for everything he tried to do. Everything he did was for the farm and for his farmworkers. He took upon himself, he let into his heart, all the trials and tribulations of his family, yes, of his workers, even his neighbours.

"We will do everything to respect the memory of Uncle Coniva. His noble thoughts, his words, 'Take care of the farm', will always act as our moral catchcry. I declare this day an annual farm holiday in his eternal memory."

To a deathly silence and open-mouthed expressions from one side of the church, Pike calmly removed his notes from the lectern with his right hand and marched back to his seat, swinging his left arm demonstrably. Bishop Alexander, who had been standing impassively to one side until Pike finished his eulogy, waited until Pike sat back down in his seat, then resumed his place at the lectern, to a rising buzz of chatter from the guests.

"What the hell was that?" whispered Greenfield to Constance in staccato through gritted teeth.

Constance flashed at Greenfield with her eyes, "Not here!" she said in a reprimanding whisper.

The bishop waited a few moments for the buzz to die down, said a prayer, invited everyone to come forward and view the deceased for the final time and to place flowers in the coffin if they so chose.

Several minutes later, after all were re-seated and the coffin closed, the bishop motioned to Bos, who came forward with the other pallbearers; they lifted the casket onto their shoulders and walked at a steady quarter pace down the central aisle followed by Bishop Alexander, the church officials, Pike, Doroly, his daughters and the rest of the guests accompanied by the tolling of the church bells.

Immediately after they emerged into the muted outside light Greenfield looked at Constance, "Well?" he asked quietly.

"I've got no idea," replied Constance. "All that disjointed, disconnected stuff about the farm, his workers, contracts; who cares? I mean, it was supposed to be about his uncle, the man, for God's sake, not some sort of, political speech. And everything he praised about his uncle he's gone and done the complete opposite since he took over. I mean the poor workers on his farm. That beast of a farm manager. From what I hear it's horrific over there. Was he trying to justify what he's doing on the farm or is it something else?"

"I don't know," said Greenfield. "I guess we'll never know, we have such little contact with Pike; we only ever see him on rare occasions and you can never get a straight answer from him anyway; a straight answer from him that makes sense I mean, because he's certainly direct if nothing else."

"To me that sounded like a eulogy for his farm not his uncle," said Constance after a short pause.

"What about you, Mum, Grandad?" she said to Greenfield's mother and grandfather who had joined them; Greenfield's grandfather shook his head and pursed his lips. "I give up with Pike," said his mother holding up both hands in mock surrender.

Together they walked on slowly for several paces, Greenfield looking down at his feet as he walked, Olivia draped asleep across his shoulders.

"I liked Coniva. He deserved a better send off than that," said Greenfield.

"I know," said Constance. "It's his family I'm thinking about. Coniva was

such a nice man, even though he liked to drink a bit too much for his own good. Let's try and speak to Doroly and the girls by themselves, if we can, deliver our own eulogy of sorts."

"Whereabouts?" said Greenfield. "Didn't you see in Pike's funeral booklet, he requested condolences from mourners at the graveside? There's not going to be a wake at his home."

The procession ponderously wound its way on, Greenfield and Constance deep in thought over an appropriate form of words. When Greenfield arrived at the burial site he stood with his family behind other mourners who had already gathered on both sides of the casket placed on wooden bars above the grave. Bishop Alexander waited until all had arrived and found a spot then delivered a short burial service, after which Bos and his brothers stepped forward and taking hold of the webbing while two cemetery staff removed the bars lowered the casket into the grave; Pike, his family, Bos and the other pallbearers, all the other mourners came forward to throw a handful of dirt into the grave.

Pike formed the head of a short line leading away from the grave, Doroly and his two daughters sandwiched between himself and Bos and his brothers; the mourners passed them single file, 'My condolences', occasionally, 'Please accept my most sincere condolences', Pike bobbing his head robotically in response his eyes fixed on a point on the horizon ahead of him; the cemetery staff watched on in the background leaning nonchalantly on their shovel waiting their turn.

Constance reached Pike first, 'My sincerest condolences, Mr Pike', another robotic nod, and sidled forward to Doroly grabbing her hands with both of her own, "My dearest Doroly, girls, I am so sorry for your loss. Uncle Coniva was a wonderful—"

Pike, roused from his automatonous torpescence, raised his fist to his mouth and coughed into it loudly, his and Bos's head swivelling synchronously towards Constance; Doroly withdrew her hands peering morosely with tears in her eyes straight at Constance, almost beseechingly Constance thought; Greenfield bumped into Constance who moved on to the girls who were sobbing quietly; passed the pallbearers without a word and walked down the path to wait for the others.

It was quiet in the car on the way back to the farm; Olivia was asleep in the back between her grandmother and great grandfather; Greenfield was

driving and Constance was seated alongside him.

"What are we going to do?" Constance finally asked.

"Why should we do anything Connie? We don't actually know anything, it's just rumours. Doroly can look after herself well enough; I don't see any signs that Pike abuses her—"

"Not physically, but it looks worse than that to me," interrupted Constance.

"She's not a prisoner, she can leave if she wants to," Greenfield continued. "And the two girls, they're not even girls anymore they're young women, and they live in Marvod now anyway," said Greenfield.

"I don't know," said Constance, "She's our neighbour after all. Don't we have some kind of responsibility? I just feel something bad is going to happen there."

Chapter 8 - Lake Cordiomar

Greenfield suddenly woke; he was lying naked spreadeagled and sweating on the bed, alongside Constance who was wearing a thin cotton nightie. The bedroom window was wide open but the curtain hang limply; they had gone to sleep last night relieved from the baking hot day by a cooling evening breeze, but it had died overnight and now even though it was barely dawn it was already hot. It was late summer, almost autumn, they had finished the harvest weeks ago and there was not much to do on the farm until sowing the wheat in autumn, and the long range weather forecast predicted no rain so that may be delayed anyway.

"Connie," he said shaking Constance's arm.

"I'm already awake. What is it?" Constance said turning her head toward him.

"Let's go for a swim in the lake. It's supposed to be even hotter today than yesterday."

"Nothing to do today? What about the herbicide?"

"I've already arranged that with Revhead; he's doing it, so I've got the day free."

"I wish you'd stop calling him that. You'll only encourage him to race even faster around the farm on his bike. O.K. Why not? But make sure

you invite Rev, he can come down later, and Mitson. I'll speak to Nadia."

"Right. I'll start getting the picnic stuff ready, then I'll call Pommer, Feldland, all the others; I'm sure they'd appreciate a break from the heat, but they can bring the drinks this time. We'd better get down there before it gets too hot," said Greenfield springing out of bed, getting half dressed and starting for the door.

"You can't go out like that," said Constance throwing him a tee-shirt, Greenfield slipped it over his head then opened the bedroom door and walked down the corridor to the kitchen.

"I'll get Olivia ready and let Mum and Grandad know. Thanks for asking," Constance said sarcastically to his disappearing back, Greenfield raising his hand in acknowledgement as he walked.

An hour later, after a rushed breakfast, the car was bumping along the dirt farm road. Everyone in the car was chatting merrily; there would be a good crowd today and all would have friends of their own age with whom they could socialise. They came out of a small wood, turned a corner that took them to the top of a low rocky ridge and Lake Cordiomar suddenly came into full view, a favourite viewpoint, so Greenfield stopped the car and they all gazed at the pale azure expanse that extended beyond the horizon before them and far to their left and right, small ripples on its surface from a light shore breeze that had already begun.

"Look at the big lake, Olivia," said Constance pointing out the window.

Olivia momentarily left off playing with her doll, "What have we stopped for, Daddy? Come on, let's go!" she said bouncing up and down in her seat.

Greenfield drove down the short steep winding track to the lakeshore and came to a halt at its end in a shady grove, just in front of a ramshackle shack that resembled a playhouse built on uneven ground by kindergarten children using playing cards, Lego and wooden blocks and whatever else could be put to use. The only common feature of the shack was its corrugated iron roof, but the walls had clearly been built over several unplanned spasmodic phases, each characterised by the availability of different quantities of building materials so that the external wall of one portion was fabricated from corrugated iron, adjacent to another predominantly weatherboard, alongside one of fibre cement, and presumably due to a shortage of long timbers, the walls were of different height causing the the roof to slope at different angles, with gaps between

roof sections patched with a variety of materials. Directly facing them was a veranda with a roof that struggled manfully to maintain a uniform height in spite of its uneven supports.

"We're going to have to do some some repairs, Grandad," said Greenfield to his grandfather in the rear view mirror, "the veranda roof's got even more of a lean now, can you see?"

"Nonsense, Boy. It looks perfectly level to me," he said tilting his head to one side. "Anyway, it's in much better shape than the fishing shack over on Bull Island. You're going to have to give me a hand with that one day. But do your main job now and get the generator running will you. I'm getting thirsty already," he said walking off in the direction of the shack.

Greenfield got a large full jerry can from the boot, took it to a small shed where he unlocked the door, went inside and could be seen for several minutes, crouched over and back turned, to the sounds of irregular soft putt putting, bangs, muffled swearwords, accompanied by occasional puffs of smoke. Meanwhile, Constance led Olivia to a small table and chairs on the veranda, brushing off the leaves, 'Stay here while I unpack, Livia. I'll bring Holly her milk.' 'O.K. Mummy,' said Olivia sitting her doll on the seat next to her, Constance then joining her mother-in-law shuttling items from the boot to the kitchen. Another car pulled up and Nadia, her husband and Mitson got out; 'Need a hand with that Mr Greenfield?' he shouted. 'No thanks. Almost got it,' as the generator finally kicked into a steady hum. 'I'll help clear up the kitchen Mrs G,' said Nadia to Constance. Another car appeared in the makeshift car park; Mr Bartel waved out the window and was joined by Greenfield wiping oil off his hands with a rag.

"She's a thing of beauty, isn't she," said Bartel proudly to Greenfield and Constance who had now joined him.

Trying to establish what Bartel was referring to, Greenfield peeked inside the car, where Bartel's wife rolled her eyes and shook her head at him, then noticed Bartel's gaze directed at the shack and one particular section in particular that was composed entirely of corrugated iron that he had helped construct.

"Well, they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder," said Greenfield looking back at Bartel's wife and winking at her to laughter from Constance and Bartel's wife.

A background sound of car engines that had been growing slowly louder

now transformed to muffled shouts, the squealing of brakes, the banging of car doors as a small convoy appeared. Greetings all round followed and a gradual split into groups: the children gathering on the veranda table around Olivia, women in the kitchen, the men at the boot of Feldland's car from where cartons of beer were being taken inside, the teenage children disappearing straight up a steep rocky slope that ended in an overhang above the lake from where splashes and playful shrieks could already be heard.

The individual groups swelled and shrunk, migrated to other areas, merged briefly, re-formed, split into smaller groups; all the while the sun rising higher in the sky along with the temperature until by late morning it was too hot to sit directly in the sun. By then the group of men had gravitated to the shack's front deck supported on piles over the lake, under the shade of a tight lattice roof, seated around a table with plates, glasses and beer cans in various stages of consumption scattered haphazardly across it.

"Not a bad spot this," said Pommer to Greenfield's grandfather seated alongside him. "I always said you Greenfields were lucky."

Greenfield seated opposite his grandfather and most of the others with his back to the lake smiled; he knew the view without having to turn, it was certainly better than anything Pommer had due to the marshes along the entire length of his lakeshore, and apart from Greenfield and Pommer none of the other farmers had direct access to the lake from their own farm. They could have driven down a long circuitous unsealed road to the public swimming area and boat ramp far to the south-west, but the public area would be crowded with people coming from Forket, they would have had to share the area with a small flotilla of jet skis and small fishing boats, and it was quicker to go directly across their farm. His Grandfather allowed the other farmers to use the track in exchange for helping build and maintain the shack.

Feldland rose as if on cue and came back with another carton of beer to a cheer from the group. "With luck, should be cold by now," he said winking at Greenfield, breaking open the carton and lobbing a can to each of the men in turn.

Bartel caught his fresh delivery just above the table, but in doing so scattered a small collection of empties around the table and onto the floor,

a couple of the farmers standing up precipitously to avoid the spillage knocking over their plastic chairs in the process.

"Hey, Bartel. Steady on son, you've had two for my one all morning; it's an endurance race not a sprint you know," said Feldland laughing.

Bartel shook the can, pulled the tab, took a large gulp, made a loud pronounced 'ahhh', held up the still dripping beer receptacle in acknowledgement and sat back in his chair.

"What's going on, boys? A bit early, isn't it?" said Constance from the open glass patio doors separating the kitchen from the deck having come to see what the commotion was.

"It's only early if it's tomorrow, but if it's yesterday then it's too late," announced Greenfield solemnly to combined groans from the others, one burping loudly.

"Quite right, son," said his grandfather nodding appreciatively, this being one of his grandfather's library of family expressions.

"Come on ladies," said Constance to the farmers' wives gathered around the kitchen table inside, "Let's leave these inebriates to themselves and go and have a swim before lunch," and went back inside to a chorus of friendly boos and laughter, 'there's no-one called Brett here, any Bretts, anyone?', emerging a few minutes later in a bikini on the small sandy beach next to the shack accompanied by the others. They gathered the children and changed them into bathing costumes, smothered them with suntan cream and led them by the hand down to the lake edge where a shallow bathing pool had been created by a ring of large rocks, which at this time of day was shaded by a large willow tree, sat down on the rocks dangling their feet in the pool and watched the children playing in the water.

"Where's Pyklit?" asked Bartel to the group, "Did you invite him Greenfield?"

"I did, but he said he was too busy with his stubble burn."

"I can't believe he still does that," said Eastman.

"I assume it's because of that rape farmer group that Pike's set up. They all seem to follow Pike's lead now," said Pommer.

"I bet I don't need to ask about Pike," said Raine with an expectant grin.

"No. I did try to call him actually," said Greenfield to muted whistles and exaggerated indrawing of breath, "but Bos answered and said Pike had already made arrangements for today. I didn't expect him to want to come

though," he said to knowing sniggers from several, "because ... well, he's got a huge lakefront so he has plenty of places to choose from of his own," he concluded diplomatically.

The group talk separated into several one-on-one conversations, noisy slurping of beers all round, empty beers being left on the table and fresh replacements brought out: 'How's what's his name?' 'Did you end up buying that seeder?', 'Have you seen that new check-out girl at Foodbazaar, eh?' to cupping motions with his hands at the chest, 'I hope you brought enough cans, Feldland?' 'Don't worry, I've got a special reserve in my car,' to cheers. Half an hour later it was approaching lunch; the women were returning from the paddling pool and a dripping group of teenagers was headed towards the shack picking their way gingerly over the hot rocks and sand.

"Who is that over there?" said Bartel, "You see ... past Bull Island," he said pointing in the distance. "No ... there, not there ... past the jetties ... on the lakeshore beyond that."

"Let me get the binoculars," said Raine and came back pointing them in the direction indicated, "That looks like Pike," he said. "What the hell is he doing? He's walking out of the water ... then turning around and walking back in ... then walking out again. It looks like he's rehearsing that James Bond scene," he said laughing letting the binoculars hang from their strap round his neck.

"Here. Let me take those," said Pommer grabbing the binoculars from Raine, "Yeahhh ... I think you're right. Hey, there's someone on the beach filming him. You see," he said handing them on to Greenfield, "It doesn't look like Doroly; do you recognise her, Greenfield?" said Pommer.

Greenfield shook his head and passed the binoculars to Eastman.

"Hey, guys. Do you remember his eulogy at Coniva's funeral?" said Bartel.

"More like party political speech for the monster raving loony party, you mean," said Greenfield.

"No," said Bartel standing his face directed down to his two hands holding an imaginary sheet of paper and imitating Pike's speech with a slight drunken slur, "I meant the way he spoke. It's that slow, drear monotone. The long pauses. It's damn creepy."

"He's always talked that way," said Feldland, "as far as I can recall

anyway."

"Rubbish. He does it on purpose, just to make people ill at ease. You never know when you're talking with him when one sentence ends and another starts. It gives him an advantage," said Pommer.

"Hey. Enough about his oratory style, what about what he says," said Feldland.

"Yeah, that's right. Even weirder! He's just weird in general. Sociopath, I'd say," said Bartel.

"I wish you guys would get off Mr Pike's back," said Anomia calmly and deliberately, the group all turning to him. "Mr Pike's not so bad when you get to know him. And he's got some interesting ideas."

"Interesting ideas!" blurted Raine, spitting out a mouthful of beer in shock, 'Nice guy? Ha!' said Bartel to Eastman loudly, the rest shaking their heads and regarding each other in disbelief.

"All right guys, calm down," interjected Greenfield quickly. "Let's not start this again. Remember, none of you guys has him as a neighbour. I do, so I've got no choice but to deal with him. And Anomia is entitled to his views; it's still a free country, isn't it?"

"That's true," said Feldland slowly and quietly, "but some of us have Pykli as a neighbour and these days that's almost as bad."

The group nodded and resumed their seats in silence as the wives and children filed into the kitchen, led again by Constance, who walked through to the deck.

"Come on guys, cheer up," said Greenfield. "It's a lovely day. We've got a cold beer in our hand. To family and friends," said Greenfield standing up and holding up his can of beer, the rest of the group rising and responding in kind; Greenfield drained his can in a few gulps; crushed it against his forehead, some rivulets of beer dripping off his left eyebrow; lobbed it exaggeratedly over his left shoulder in the direction of a bin in the corner of the deck mouthing the word 'ka-ching'; the can ricocheting off the post above the bin, bouncing off the floorboards and plopping into the lake, to which Greenfield held up his hands in mock supposition, 'Awww ... so close.'

"I hope you're going to get that," said Constance loudly standing in the open doorway hands on hips shaking her head.

In acknowledgement Greenfield moved his chair to one side, took a

sprinter's crouch, counted down from three and ran along the deck, took a running jump into the shallow water over the low rail landing with a belly flop and huge splash where the can had fallen, his hand emerging from the water holding the offending item. A couple of the other men joined him in the lake to loud splashes, several of the wives appearing at the kitchen window to see what the noise was all about to general prim tut tutting: 'So childish!', 'He hasn't brought a change of clothes!', 'What if the children were watching?'

"Lunch in thirty minutes," shouted Constance, "for everyone but those juveniles in the water," she said addressing Greenfield directly, to which Greenfield responded by trying to splash her with water.

The next thirty minutes was alive with noisy preparation: all those who were still wet got changed; Eastman, his son and Raine went outside to barbecue the meat they had brought; the tables in the kitchen, veranda and deck were cleared, cleaned and laid with a table cloth, fresh plates, glasses and cutlery; the wives got the food from the fridge and laid it out; the children were seated at the back table, wives and husbands seated opposite each other at the other two.

Constance sat down next to Greenfield as the sausages were brought to their table, "What was all that about earlier?" she said.

"You mean when I was told to go jump in the lake?" replied Greenfield loudly to the whole group with a grin.

"No," whispered Constance. "Why did you have to cheer them all up?"

"Pike," replied Greenfield quietly after a few moments.

"What about Pike?"

"He got mentioned that's all. Then Anomia tried to defend him again and I didn't want another argument between Anomia and everyone else."

Constance shook her head and sighed.

Chapter 9 - Council Business

Pike had gone to Marvod earlier than usual; he had a meeting in his chambers that afternoon, but Bos needed to go to the workers' flats early in the morning. It was mid-autumn and yesterday they'd finished sowing the genetically modified non-culinary rape variety Pike preferred; Bos had

informed the farmworkers who were not required until next summer as well as the few that would be required to return earlier in spring for spraying, which meant there was now a large group of farmworkers who instantly reverted to unemployed illegal migrants available for Bos's various enterprises in Marvod; Bos would be at the flats all morning organising work for those he needed until he returned for the meeting, leaving Ivor to run the farm for the day and Pike free for the morning in his chambers; he took the opportunity to finish writing his speech for the Federation meeting next month, the last meeting before Christmas.

After the rejection of his Alliance membership application, the refusal to accept rape farmers into the Alliance, and annoying endless complaints from some of neighbours about his farm practices, he had decided to write regular articles for the paper in support of rape farming and denouncing the negative impacts of wheat farming; he had sent these articles to the Forket Chronicle and several others, but none apart from the Marvod Gazette had published them so he had decided to compile the articles into a speech he would give to the Federation to ensure a wider audience.

The National Allied Farmers Federation—to give its full title, but generally just shortened to The Federation—was a separate organisation to the Alliance, open to all farm owners regardless of size, crop, farm practices; no discriminatory entry conditions, a more democratic institution than the elitist and haughty Alliance, he thought as he read on. Although a national organisation, and nominally more powerful, in practice the Alliance was more influential and beneficial for its members; as a consequence, Alliance membership was highly sought after, in spite of its hefty membership fees, sweetened somewhat by grants provided to new members assisting them in expeditiously bringing their farm practices up to the required entrance standards. The Federation offered no such grants to new members, but what it did offer instead was free membership and an arena in which to air grievances; most important to him, proceedings of the Federation were always widely reported, probably due to the fact that they provided such a reliable endless stream of cheap, low nutrition fodder for lazy and unimaginative journalists to feed the news cycle.

Federation meetings, being open to such a large number of farmers, were dominated by endless bickering, presentations by countless committees, sub-committees, tribunals, and the like; nothing ever got done

unless at a snail's pace, but that didn't matter to him, he would only attend to give his speech then leave. He didn't agree with many of the other farmers anyway; he couldn't care less about any of them unless they supported his views, like Pyklit, some obscure farmers from areas far to the south and east who appeared at least by their speeches to have similar views to him, and recently, surprisingly, Anomia as well. In fact, although as a member he could attend all Federation meetings, he had rarely attended in person until now.

He scanned through some key passages of his speech one last time starting part way down:

'I note that membership of the Alliance has resulted in increased farm profits to members. But the Alliance focusses on ensuring the workers receive what it calls a fair share of that farm profit. There is insufficient recognition and acknowledgement of the risks taken by the farmer. Who takes the risks? If there is poor crop yield do the workers pay for it? If workers perform incompetently do they pay for it? Should we then reward them with a share of the profits? No, self-evidently not! In a democratic system, risks must be shared equally. To ensure this, part payment in crops must be re-introduced. Workers must accept full responsibility for their mistakes ...' and continued further on:

'How can we ensure full employment if we lay off workers when they aren't required outside seeding and harvest? Are we not responsible for the livelihoods and living conditions of those who toil on our farms? As farm owners, we must aim to provide housing and year-round work for our farmworkers' ... 'The exalted Alliance will not accept rape farmers into their hallowed institution. Did not many of these same hypocrites until very recently also farm rape? Is rapeseed not eaten by those animals that feed the Alliance members, or are they all now vegetarians? Is rapeseed oil also not required to power that same farm machinery that produces the wheat crop? The Lord says, "May God give you of heaven's dew," and "The farmer knows just what to do, for God has given him understanding." Is rapeseed oil not heaven's dew? And who can say that rape farmers are not knowledgeable? If the Alliance chooses not to accept rape farmers as equals, we rape farmers, in the eyes of the Lord, will form our own equally powerful alliance' ... 'The blemish free Alliance professes to be a champion of the environment and demands a wide range of measures be taken to

ensure its preservation. With feigned indignant moral rectitude they impose tariffs on my rapeseed oil. Yet the members of this same Alliance are happy to accept oil from companies responsible for massive offshore oil spills, where beaches are still saturated with hydrocarbons, to use products from companies that leave rainbow coloured slicks meandering gently downstream after they have abandoned an exploration site, or dig enormous holes in the ground, thoughtfully leaving them to collect water after they have moved on—Perhaps the Alliance is in support of these as tourist attractions?—to turn a blind eye to mining companies responsible for poorly constructed dams that flood the countryside after they collapse—Perhaps the Alliance supports this as a cheap form of irrigation for grateful farmers below the dams?—Why then should farmers treat the environment differently?’

He skipped through the rest of his long speech, which also covered stubble burning, non-invasive tillage, pesticides, herbicides, fertiliser, water quality, air quality, etc.; the full gamut of farming issues. It was ready for the Federation meeting; he sent it to Vyon with strict instructions to not publish it until the day after his speech and leant back in his large leather chair and crossed his fingers in his lap.

He was in a relaxed mood: he had come to the realisation this morning that he enjoyed being a farm owner, he felt it suited him, it gave him a particular sense of satisfaction that he was lord and master over such a large area and the lives of the people within it, much more satisfaction than all his businesses in Marvod, even than being mayor, he still had to deal with those idiots on the council; but he wasn't in a good mood: his treatment at the Alliance, his uncle's lack of loyalty, other humiliating examples they brought to mind from his early days on the farm, he put those thoughts to one side they were unproductive and an unhelpful distraction for the moment, they would be useful later, he had to discipline himself to focus on his goals.

His mind was filled with plans for the farm; thanks to Bos, his many lucrative businesses around Marvod needed less and less of his time these days and he was staying at the farm more often than he had originally intended when his uncle had come to him with his proposal all those years ago in Marvod. The only slight irritant on the farm was his wife; he had wanted to divorce her after the children left home, but both he and Doroly

were of a generation that had an engrained belief that God was the means they came together so it was only He who could divorce them. He had discussed this at length with Cyril who had told him although it was His fervent desire that couples should remain united for life, it was not His intention for the faithful to endure an unhappy marriage; divorce was permitted under several circumstances of fault by a partner: adultery, sexual immorality, unbelief, even just 'no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her,' as Deuteronomy 24 clearly states. Cyril had told him not to be concerned, talk to Bishop Alexander, he was sure examples could be found of such behaviour.

He recalled with a flash of anger the conversation with Bishop Alexander after the weekly service just this last Sunday; he had expected the bishop to give his blessing to divorcing Doroly, but the bishop had insisted they could not, in spite of him repeating what Cyril had said, it was a sin against God, it would never be permitted in his church. *His* church! After all he had done for Marvod church! This was intolerable, yet another display of incompetence; Alexander had to go, something he would have to arrange if he failed to convince him, he may even have to ask Bos for assistance, anyway, there were more pressing matters that needed his attention.

Recently, while Doroly was staying in Marvod for a few days, he had shown Gemariah round the farm in the guise of a farm consultant to avoid unnecessary tittle tattle. He felt a momentary pang of guilt as he recalled his earlier happy life together with Doroly in Marvod, but immediately pushed it to a growing storage area at the back of this mind, filed irretrievably alongside all positive thoughts about his neighbours, his workers, his relations. To his surprise Gemariah had loved it; she had spoken effusively in bed that night at the farm about what she would do to the farmhouse, Bos's house, the disused farmworkers' rooms, a livery for the farm machinery, and many other ideas to make the farm more pretty. He had thought Gemariah would want to live in Marvod, but now, once he had convinced the Bishop to allow his divorce, Gemariah could move onto the farm. Things were falling into place nicely. He would be meeting Gemariah after work tonight, a nice end to a productive day.

Bos returned at lunchtime and drove Pike to his usual restaurant, where he updated Pike on that morning's progress. After a small lunch they

returned to the chambers.

"Hey, Boss. Why *did* you need to come to Marvod today? Can't you just call the mayor and tell him what you want?"

Bos was referring to last week's council vote; after Bos had persuaded the last hold-out on the council, he had Mayor Grayson push through a procedural rule change requiring unanimous approval, that all future council decisions would be made by the mayor alone, there would be no more votes, the council would act only as an advisory body to the mayor. The councillors, by now fully aware of their role, unhesitatingly approved it, so here we were; he didn't even need his regular meetings with the council anymore, he could, as Bos had stated, just call Mayor Grayson and tell him how to proceed.

"Quite so, Bostultus. But it has been a dull week so I decided to have some entertainment. And you're invited. This will be the first meeting with my new table. Anyway, you had business in town and so do I. You didn't forget I'm meeting Gemariah at her flat tonight?"

"Course not, Boss," lied Bos and smiled quizzically. "What entertainment, Boss?"

"Call the council, Bostultus," said Pike ignoring the question. "Tell them council meeting in five minutes."

"About?"

"They don't need to know."

Five minutes later, the last of the council members came rushing out-of-breath through the door, timidly nodding at Bos as they passed him, then after a quick glance at Pike to try and determine his mood, a puzzled expression after seeing the newly installed long wooden table and unusual arrangement of chairs at its end, slumped eyes down, chest heaving, in a vacant chair. At an unworded instruction from Pike, Bos shut the door and stood in the dim light arms folded in front of the door.

The councillors were all sitting quietly and obediently on the front edge of their seat, as pupils who have been called to see the headmaster and expect punishment. Pike slowly studied the councillors seated in an arc in front of him: Councillor Barber, Councillor Alaska, Councillor Korect, Councillor Cryzer, Councillor Tarakan, some others whose names he couldn't be bothered to find out, and Mayor Grayson at the end. The light from the chandelier glinted off the polished surface of the refectory table

he had taken from Marvod orphanage after he had purchased it, a heavy mahogany table made of recycled timber from an old barge stained dark after decades plying its trade along the polluted Marvod River, the orphans getting in exchange cheap plastic that he felt better suited their station.

"I've called you all here to get your opinion on an important item of council business," said Pike, the councillors all looking up at him in surprise.

"As you are of course aware, since the change in council procedure you could have been done this with the Mayor over at the town hall. But I wanted to hear each of your views directly, in person; not analysis. I want feelings from the *heart*," he said melodramatically clasping both hands to his chest, Bos grinning, a whimper of suppressed laughter escaping.

After an extended pause, during which he looked at the back wall, the councillors squirming uncomfortably but wisely subduing the almost overwhelming urge to ask what the important matter was, Pike continued, "You are all to take a folder—yes, there. Right in front of your nose, you fool," Pike striking like an adder at Councillor Alaska, whose hand withdrew involuntarily before it crept forward tentatively and took a folder off the pile then retreated nervously.

After all had taken a folder, opened it and resumed their seat, Pike allowed a generous pause of at most five seconds, "Councillor Much, please stand," said Pike. "What are your views?"

Councillor Mushe stood up with the folder in her hand and stepped forward nervously half a pace towards the table.

"Come on Much, I don't bite. Come forward," said Pike, to which Mushe crept forward a fraction, trembling, until she was almost touching the table.

"Well?"

"It's a fabulous proposal, sir," she said expansively and hopefully.

"But you didn't even read it!" said Pike dismissively.

"I didn't need to, Your Lordship ... I mean, Mr Pike. I just know in my heart it *must* be fantastic."

"You mean fabulous, don't you? You said a few moments ago it was fabulous and now you say fantastic. Which one is it?"

"Oh please, Mr Pike. It's fabulous *and* it's fantastic," pleaded Councillor Mushe, whimpering slightly.

Pike slowly turned over some pages in the folder in front of him while Councillor Mushe nervously turned for assistance to each councillor seated behind her in turn, unconsciously wringing her hands, the downturned heads ignoring her silent pleas.

"You may sit down, Much. Councillor Korect, step forward."

"Oh thank you, thank you, Mr Pike," said Councillor Mushe and fled back to her seat where she crumpled into a ball as if hoping a passing primordial black hole would swallow her.

"Well, Korect?"

Councillor Korect was standing hurriedly flicking through the folder, but dropped some pages on the floor.

"Councillor Barber, help Korect," snapped Pike. "Come on! We haven't got all day, Korect," he said as Barber handed Korect some sheets upside down and back to front, which Korect put in his folder randomly.

Korect cleared his throat, beads of sweat forming on his forehead, "Well it certainly appears to be in order, Mr Pike, after a very brief perusal I mean. Of course, I'll need to examine it carefully before I can render any firm and succinct opinion."

"What can you possibly need to examine *carefully*? It's ... a ... housing ... proposal," said Pike saying the last few words slowly and deliberately. "Do I really need to explain what the words mean?"

"No, of course not, Mr Pike."

"Then what *possibly* can be your difficulty? Are you unwell?" Pike said to rapid small vigorous shakes of Korect's head, Korect mouthing the word 'no' but no sound escaping. "Then give me your opinion from the heart, Korect, as you have been *clearly* asked to do."

"Well on further consideration of the facts, and considering the risks and benefits of the proposal ... errr ... the pros and cons for the community of Marvod, which I am blessed to serve—"

"Yes. Yes. Get to the point."

"Yes, all right. Then I conclude ... umm ... conclusively ... that it is a fabulously fantastic proposal," he said with attempted but unconvincing conviction, taking his glasses off for added emphasis and wiping the sweat from his forehead with his forearm.

Pike sat examining his folder, flicking through a few pages, while the energy slowly drained from Korect, who appeared to be developing

advanced ankylosing spondylitis and grey hair in the time he was standing there.

"Thank you, Korect, you may step down," said Pike after less than thirty seconds, which appeared to cure Korect miraculously and he slumped into his seat with a loud sigh and straight back having only appeared to have aged five years from the experience.

The example having been set, the other councillors added a few new adjectives to demonstrate their independence of thought to the group; some thought it 'marvellous', others 'outstanding', some 'marvellously fabulous', Councillor Cryzer even bravely tried 'brilliant', but when Pike stared back at him with a blank unblinking expression changed it to 'a brilliant shining example for other town councils,' which seemed to appease Pike, who resumed examination of his folder.

All the councillors had now come forward to speak except Mayor Grayson; Mayor Grayson tentatively started to rise from his seat, when Pike said, "Good, that's settled," shutting his folder with a loud slap. "Grayson, have the unanimous approval minuted and signed. Now leave."

They all filed out in quickstep, Bos showing them out then stepped forward laughing, "That was hilarious, Boss."

"I found it ... satisfactory," said Pike after brief consideration with no hint of enjoyment in his voice.

"Exactly what was approved, by the way?" asked Bos.

"Marvod Levels Stage Two," said Pike with furrowed brow.

"Stage Two ... Marvod Levels ... Oh yeah, the new housing project. I'd forgotten about that. Been so busy at the flats," Bos said appealingly, by way of explanation.

"Get your act together, Bostultus," snapped Pike irritably, "I want construction to start next week. Call Fixa first thing tomorrow."

"Right, Boss," said Bos hesitatingly then walked out of the room. On his way through to the bar, he thought to himself that this was the first time since he had met Pike that he could recall Pike speaking to him in the same manner as he did everyone else.

Chapter 10 - Insurrection

The main body of Pike's farmhouse consisted of a large two storied

building; located upstairs were four large bedrooms and two bathrooms split symmetrically on both sides of a hall leading to the staircase; downstairs were Pike's study opposite Bos's office, the kitchen, laundry and bathroom opposite a lounge and a dining room that by unspoken agreement doubled as Doroly's study, Bos and Pike eating either in the kitchen or their offices, two large rooms used as store rooms on opposite sides of the downstairs hall and a room that Pike had converted into a gym. Four large chimneys were spaced along the building such that most main rooms had access to a fireplace, typically back-to-back with the adjacent room. The downstairs hall terminated at the rear of the house at an access door that led to the single storied attached house where Bos lived alongside now disused workers' rooms. Since Uncle Coniva had been moved out and the children had gone to live in Marvod their previous upstairs bedrooms were unoccupied; the only permanent occupants in the main body of the house were now Pike, Doroly and three cats Doroly had bought as company since her estrangement from Pike years before.

During the day, Doroly circulated between her bedroom, her bathroom, the kitchen, the dining room, occasionally the laundry. When Pike was at home he had a similarly small territorial range that barely overlapped with Doroly's, spending most of his time in his study; likewise Bos. Thus no-one ventured into several of the rooms in the house, and they sat closed off and unvisited, unused furniture covered by white sheets, storage boxes gathering a thick coating of dust. If she ventured to get up at night, walking around the house was unnerving for Doroly; the old wooden floorboards would creak loudly as if to spite her attempts at discretion. She knew Pike was a light sleeper and she certainly had no desire to wake him nor the resulting brief intercourse, as little as he did no doubt, so she avoided getting out of bed at night as much as possible. Such was the house used by its occupants; such was Doroly's world, except for the blissful relief of trips to Marvod to see her daughters and friends, and occasionally her relations.

In the middle of the night Doroly woke from a restless sleep; she sat up in bed and was thinking of risking a trip to the bathroom when she heard what she thought sounded like faint scratching and gnawing sounds from next door; she put it out of her mind thinking it was probably just her cats. 'How could it be mice with her pets prowling the house at night?' she pondered, and went back to sleep. In the morning on the way to the

kitchen she slowly and carefully opened the door into the unoccupied bedroom next to hers from where the noises seemed to have come and turned on the light; the dusty floor was criss-crossed with parallel and intersecting narrow tracks, mouse tracks, giving the dusty floor the appearance of a toy train marshalling yard. It was hard to tell if the tracks were recent; she hadn't been in this room for months, she couldn't move the furniture to check the skirting boards, it was all too heavy, so she shut the door and walked down the hall to the kitchen.

Arriving downstairs her three cats were already waiting next to the sink and greeted her by wrapping themselves around her legs, tails erect. Doroly got some saucers from one of the kitchen cabinets and scattered them on the floor between the milling cats, opened a carton of milk from the fridge and poured it into three of them, opened the door under the sink, took out the cat food and spooned it into the remaining three, 'Here you are Tomtom', 'Hey, Thor! Get out of there. That's for Fang,' pushing Thor's head over to his own food.

Doroly watched the cats wolfing down their food and lapping greedily at the milk, they didn't seem to have lost their appetite overnight; she hadn't got them as mice catchers, but she assumed if there were mice around the house the cats would have got them. She decided she wouldn't mention it to Pike and Bos; Pike mainly spoke to her in grunts nowadays and she was terrified of Bos; she would mention it to Ivor when he arrived, apart from Barton, he was the only one on the farm she could talk to these days; most of the other farmworkers didn't even speak the same language.

After breakfast, when Ivor arrived to start work, she walked over to meet him in the yard; he was easy to spot, a tall muscular man, taller than Bos even with piercing blue but friendly eyes, he stood out in a crowd. After greeting him warmly as he struggled to exit his small car she mentioned surreptitiously what she had found that morning. Ivor thanked her for letting him know and offered her reassurance that a few mice weren't a problem, he'd look into it of course, but that was one of the good things about the burning stubble they did, it kept the mice numbers down. Ivor started out slowly in the direction of the farm shed, then returned briskly, planting himself between Doroly and the farmhouse.

"Doroly," he said with quiet apprehension, his back to the farmhouse, "Please don't mention anything of this to Bos or Pike."

"Of course not, Ivor," Doroly said with a wan smile, grabbing his forearm and holding it for a few seconds.

Doroly had noticed the attitude and morale of the farmworkers had deteriorated since Pike had taken over the farm from Uncle Coniva; the workers would mope sullenly around the farm and she had witnessed Ivor taking them to task for leaving work incomplete and untidy around the farm buildings. It was no coincidence to her this followed the introduction of the new farm contracts and the replacement of most of the workers with migrants with limited to no farm experience. They must have seen mice she thought, but likely had no interest in reporting it. Bos and Pike seemed unconcerned and she was too afraid to speak to either of them about it; and Ivor was very reluctant to discuss anything about the farm with her, but whenever she raised something she could tell by his body language what he thought. She felt sorry for Ivor; Barton as well; she couldn't understand why they still stayed on the farm: even though Bos was the farm manager, if anything went wrong that incompetent brute would blame Ivor and Pike would back Bos. She knew they couldn't sack Ivor; apart from Barton he was the only one on the farm who really knew what he was doing, and Barton was too young and loyal to Ivor anyway. Although Bos and Pike would never admit it, they needed him. Who else would work here? Certainly no-one of any value. What kept Ivor here? What did Pike or Bos know that prevented him from leaving? But who was she to criticise, she thought, she was still at the farm herself and probably wanted to be here as little as he did.

Ivor left Doroly in the yard and went directly to the barn where he located a pack of chew cards that he placed to soak in a tray of canola oil for a couple of minutes, selected a farm bike from the equipment shed, collected some talcum powder, a notebook and a large handful of wire pegs, which he placed in his pannier. He went back for the chew cards then rode to the nearest field to inspect for mice. Ivor had reason to be fearful; it was the middle of spring, still several weeks until the rape harvest, but vermin in the fields now would be very difficult to control and could devastate their yield, at the very least they could significantly devalue it, as had happened a few years back—He recalled with dread how he and the other workers had paid the penalty with a massive cut to their wages, his wife having to work two shifts for several months just so they could afford

their rent and food—but worse, if the damage was severe the crop could even be rejected by the processing facility; he didn't even want to think about the consequences of that.

He dismounted at the edge of the field, gathered his equipment and walked in counting out thirty paces, then walked at right angles counting the number of burrows as he walked; after he'd walked about twenty paces he had already counted three and the guidance that came with the cards said three per one hundred paces was an indication of infestation. After reaching one hundred paces, he turned and walked back to his bike pegging a chew card into the ground with his hand every ten paces and sprinkling talcum powder around any burrows he came across, taking notes as he went. He repeated the process in each field adjacent to the farmhouse, but he noticed that the number of burrows dropped off rapidly the further he got from the farmhouse and after he'd done a circuit there seemed to be a focal point somewhere near the new grain silos.

Having finished in the fields he visited the silos. He found them full with next season's seed; as expected, there was a little spillage around them, not much, being eaten by a few scattered mice. He stooped at each silo and inspected its chute; all seemed secure, then as he was finishing his inspection of the last one he noticed what looked like a long narrow earthen barrow shimmering at the far corner of the yard under the shade of a line of trees along a fence line, which was puzzling because an empty drainage ditch should have been there. He walked over to investigate; as he approached he could see a long black plastic sheet, its surface writhing, dozens of mice running from under it to and from the nearby rape field. He lifted one corner uncovering a writhing mass of thousands of mice that scattered in all directions, including up his arms, his trouser legs, any potential hiding place available. He lowered the sheet, brushed off the mice then stepped back and took a photo; the thought came to his mind that one of the workers must have dumped some of next year's grain; no-one had told him there was any excess so they must have just decided to get rid of it, it didn't seem plausible it could have been left over from last year's harvest. A cloud passed overhead causing a dark shadow to race across the yard towards him, but glancing up nervously he saw with relief it was unlikely to rain. How would he report this to Bos and Pike? He had no choice but to tell them so he decided to keep it simple; he steeled

himself with a heavy exhalation and called Bos on his radio.

Doroly was in the kitchen preparing lunch when she heard a muffled expletive from the direction of Bos's office and a thump, loud footsteps, Bos's door opening, Bos walking across to Pike's study, Pike's study door opening and closing. She walked into the hall and sidled toward Pike's door, the better to hear what was going on.

"How bad?" said Pike followed by a muffled response from Bos.

"Who discovered this?" said Pike loudly after thirty seconds or so. After a brief undecipherable response from Bos, Pike thundered, "Doroly. For Christ's sake. She's just a bloody farmwife!"

A long pause, Bos presumably giving some explanation, "You're the farm manager Bostultus, not Ivor. You deal with it!"

Pike's study door opened and Bos went straight into his office without seeing Doroly and shut his door. Doroly retreated to the kitchen; several minutes later Bos walked out the front door and headed towards the barn.

Ivor waited in the barn along with the other farmworkers for the last few stragglers to arrive as Bos stood impatiently in front of them, tapping his foot in silent fury.

"Who is responsible for this?" said Bos angrily before the last had appeared, thrusting his phone at them.

After translating had finished, the farmworkers all came forward in small groups, peered at the photo Ivor had sent Bos, shrugged at each other and shook their heads, before mutely retreating to their original position several respectful paces from Bos.

"So no-one did this? The grain just flew there by itself? A miracle?" Bos said looking up to the barn roof and holding his hands in front of his face in mock supplication.

One of the workers said something unintelligible and there was a muffled snigger from several standing alongside him.

"What was that?" snapped Bos.

One of unofficial translators replied, "He said, 'It must have been a field—I can't translate the word ... it's like a gremlin I think—It's a belief they have in his country when something goes wrong on a farm and it's nobody's fault."

The translator said something to the worker who had spoken, he and several of the others nodded their head vigorously and smiled broadly.

"Right. You're gone," Bos thundered at the worker who had initially spoken. Anyone else?" he said scanning the assembled group. "No-one else admits to it? Right, you too," he said selecting another worker at random, "You're gone as well," motioning forcefully with his thumb over his shoulder.

There was much loud chatter and commotion and some in the group pushed forward towards Bos who made a show of adopting a crouching position and moving his hand behind his back to where everyone knew he carried a pistol. The group stopped in its tracks and retreated carefully.

"Bye bye," said Bos slowly returning to a standing position waving at the two men. "Enjoy your flight back to Africa. All right, the rest of you get back to your work, whatever that was."

The workers started drifting disconsolately out of the barn past Ivor, who instead approached Bos.

"What is it Ivor?" said Bos contemptuously.

"Those two probably had nothing to do with it, Bos. It was most likely one of the other guys that I had to get rid of a few weeks back," said Ivor calmly. Ivor was not afraid to confront Bos when necessary, but was wary of him; although in physical strength Bos's equal, he was at the opposite end of Hare's psychopathy scale; he knew first hand Bos's approach to discipline, and his and his brothers' reputations from the streets of Marvod.

"I don't care. They're all the same to me. The most important thing is an example must be made. Get Barton to drive those two back to Marvod straight away. I don't want them hanging around for the rest of the day. I'll arrange replacements. And Barton has to make up time for the trip as well."

At that moment the phone rang and Bos listened attentively for a several seconds before saying 'Yes, Boss'. "Pike wants to see us both in his study straightaway."

Ivor followed Bos into Pike's office and they stood side-by-side in front of Pike's desk waiting for Pike, who was leaning forward with his elbows on the desk, his lips pressed to his clasped hands, staring at a point at the far end of his office. After an uncomfortably long silence, Bos turned to Ivor and said authoritatively, "Get that dumped grain removed immediately

Ivor."

"I've already got that started," replied Ivor.

"We need to aerial bait the whole lot, Boss," said Bos turning to Pike. "Kill the vermin now. Stone dead," he said thumping a fist into his open palm for emphasis at the end of each sentence.

"Anything to say, Ivor?" said Pike withdrawing his lips from his fists.

"We could bait the whole farm, but I wouldn't recommend it. It will be very expensive and it's unlikely to be effective this far into the season: the mice will have plenty of grain in the fields to eat without having to eat the poison."

"What do you suggest then?" said Pike.

"Well, I've already done an initial inspection in the fields and that suggests it's just a local problem around the dumped grain. I supervised the stubble burn before seeding, so I'm sure we didn't have a mouse problem then. I recommend we wait until tomorrow morning, after I've had a chance to check the chew cards and the talcum powder to—"

"Talcum powder!" said Bos derisively, "Ha! Next you'll be telling us you want to wipe their little arses for them!"

"To check for indications of active burrows," finished Ivor turning to face Bos, "Then in those fields with a vermin problem," said Ivor turning back to Pike, "If it's a small enough area, which I think it is, I suggest we put in a simple temporary fence to isolate the affected area, dig up all the active burrows and just beat dead as many as we can, call in some extras for a couple of days if we need to, putting down baits as we go for added protection. There will be some stragglers hiding out in the farm buildings, so I better go and have a look around. Or," he said with a long emphasis on the last letter and waited for a few seconds, "It's not long until harvest, we could just ride it out and accept the losses."

"Accept the losses? No way, Boss! Don't give in to them!" said Bos emphatically, "We need to kill them all now," thumping his palm again with his fist.

Pike looked at them both thoughtfully for a long time while he considered his response, "O.K., Bostultus, call that pilot you know. Get him ready to go. But we wait until Ivor's inspection tomorrow before we decide how much bait to use. We'll do your fence thing, Ivor. Tell Bostultus how many workers you need," he said then sat back in his seat

and put his palms face down on the table, a signal this was the end of the meeting.

Ivor's inspection at dawn the following day confirmed his suspicions; based on the mouse activity he found he marked out the perimeter of the temporary fence with spray paint and reported to Bos and Pike, the latter cancelling the aerial baiting, to Bos's visible annoyance, when the relatively small extent of the infestation was determined. Ivor told them he should be able to install the fence by the end of the day with Barton and the workers available on the farm, but he would need an additional ten workers for a few days after that; Pike directed Bos to select the biggest and fittest of the migrants from the flats and tell them they'd be paid a bounty based on the number of mice they kill. Once the plan had been finalised, Pike told them both that he would leave for Marvod immediately and spend the next few days in Marvod; he would not return until all the mice had been eliminated.

Ivor set about installing the fence: a narrow shallow trench was dug along the line he had earlier marked, short wooden posts were driven into the ground at regular intervals, mouse mesh was stapled to the posts and folded into the trench before the trench was backfilled with soil; finally, a gate was installed on the main road into the farm. After completing the fence late in the day they laid a large number of baits in the fields round the outside of the fence.

The next morning a dilapidated minibus driven by one of Bos's brothers arrived at the gate, Barton letting it through. The new workers, the majority of whom were of African appearance, and Bos's brothers got off the bus and stood in the farmyard awaiting directions. Bos arrived shortly after, greeted his brothers and came over to meet Ivor who was standing away from the group to discuss details: Ivor said he recommended they work in small areas, form a small circle with the men, dig up the burrows within it, club the mice as they tried to escape, then move to an adjacent area and repeat; while this was happening the farm buildings within the fenced area should be cleared, each room closed off and purged in turn. Bos told Ivor he and his brothers would take command of the field work; Ivor was to take Barton and one of the workers and do the buildings, but first bring out all the hand weapons. Ivor and Barton went to the equipment shed and dumped in a pile on the ground spades, shovels, iron rakes, hatchets,

wooden handles, short wooden planks, anything that could be used as a club, Bos telling the men to arm themselves, then closely watched over by him and his brothers led them to the fields.

Ivor and his team headed back to the equipment shed where they closed all the doors and windows, checked inside the vehicle cabins and engine bays, inside tool boxes, everywhere they thought a mouse could hide, clubbing any mice they found, baiting as they went. Having finished the equipment shed, they moved to the next building.

At lunchtime Ivor went to report progress to Bos and found him sitting on a chair next to a large mound of small rodent corpses in the middle of the farmyard, his brother sitting in the minivan smoking with the door open. A strikingly tall and muscular man of North African appearance approached Bos holding a clutch of dead mice by their tails in one huge hand, "Name?" said Bos.

"Ahmed," said the man in a deep voice.

"Arm ... it," Bos said as he checked in his pad, "O.K., yes, Armit, another ..."

"Fifteen," said Armit.

Bos counted them out then nodded; Armit threw the mice onto the pile, but one half-stunned mouse jolted back into consciousness by the impact made a break for freedom, Armit giving chase.

"Uh-oh," said Bos, "that one's got away: fourteen," he said striking out the previous number.

Armit caught up with it, stood on its tail, squeezed its head between his massive thumb and first finger, the mouse letting out a short high pitched squeak as its head popped and splashed its contents over this hand, threw the small limp body on the pile and wiped his hand on his overalls.

"Nice work, Armit," said Bos nodding appreciatively as if noticing the enormous man for the first time, "Fifteen it is," and made a supplemental note in his book after re-correcting his tally.

Ivor let out a disgusted grunt in delayed shock at the sight, Bos looked up at him enquiringly, "What is it now, Ivor?"

"All the sheds done," said Ivor after composing himself, "We'll carry on after lunch," Bos nodded and said to the next man approaching him with a bundle of death, "Name?"

Having had a quick meal, Ivor's trio headed for the farmhouse where

they found Doroly in the dining room sitting on a couch knitting, her feet on a table to keep them away from the floor, her cats asleep on her lap and beside her. Ivor asked her to show them to the room where she had first discovered the mice; Doroly rose, Fang falling to the floor and took them upstairs, Fang following tail erect. Ivor opened the door, on which Fang ran in followed by her two brothers; the door was shut behind them and after sniffing around the room the cats ended next to a dusty wardrobe, tails wagging. The men lifted and moved it away from the wall, which immediately disturbed a few mice hiding underneath, much to the excitement of the waiting Fang, who pounced then started playing feline catch and release with one, joined by her brothers with others. The men then moved all the furniture to the centre of the room, helped their three feline accomplices complete catch and kill, and moved to the next room.

As the sun was setting at the end of a long day's work, Ivor went to the equipment shed, fitted the tractor with a front end loader attachment with Barton's assistance, and drove into the yard where a group of workers had gathered round Bos. He scooped up the mound containing thousands of bodies and dumped them in a skip, parked the tractor then returned to the group and waited while Bos finished reading out the workers' names, their tally and handed over a small wad of cash to each, Bos directing them to the waiting minibus.

"How much did you get done?" said Ivor.

"Half. You?"

"Just the outbuildings to go. We'll need them all back tomorrow; at least until the body count is much smaller."

The next morning Doroly told Ivor she had been woken again several times during the night by the sound of her cats scurrying around the house banging into walls. On hearing this, Bos decided to re-deploy Armit as a specialist mouse catcher to the farmhouse. Under Ivor's direction, he and Armit moved through each room in the farmhouse again: checked near the skirting boards and architraves for discarded food, droppings and mouse holes, liberally distributed baits and dusted the floor with talcum powder at Ivor's insistence, until all the rooms were completed. Meanwhile Barton and another worker dealt with the barn, all four moving together through the storage silos, the workshop, garage, water treatment area. By the end of the day all building areas were at least superficially rodent free, the fields

had been completed and the mound of bodies beside Bos had shrunk to half that of yesterday, Bos agreeing the number of workers could be reduced for tomorrow.

The next day Doroly reported she had managed to sleep through the night undisturbed for the first time in several days; Ivor decided to inspect each room in the house anyway. He started upstairs, finding nothing until he reached the downstairs storeroom next to Pike's study; on opening the door he saw multitudinous tracks, untouched baits and droppings scattered throughout, the same in the storeroom opposite next to Bos's office. Ivor searched for entry points, but was unable to find any: a small rearguard appeared to be stubbornly holding out with a secret food source and entrance. He inspected the chew cards in the fields again and found them barely nibbled, met with Bos and advised him he believed the mice had been largely eradicated apart from a couple of rooms in the farmhouse. They continued for the rest of the day, re-checking areas already cleared, until by evening the pile of dead mice over which Bos held vigil had dwindled to about two dozen. Bos agreed the additional workers were no longer required, but even though no mice were found in the farmhouse all day, Ivor warned it was unlikely they had been eradicated there yet. To deal with the dogged remnant, Ivor recommended that two people should sleep in the store rooms overnight, volunteering himself and Armit. So after dinner, a mattress and cat bed were placed in both store rooms; Armit and Thor in one room and Ivor with Fang in the other.

Ivor woke from an uninterrupted sleep the next morning and checked with Armit, who was the same. After breakfast, they removed the temporary fence, restored the outbuildings to their original condition and re-arranged the furniture in the farmhouse. Bos rang Pike and told him the farmhouse was ready for him to return.

The following day, Pike and Bos were seated at the breakfast table waiting for their breakfast, Pike was reading his newspaper, Bos was speaking on his phone, the cats had been fed, life had returned to its former routine. Doroly brought Pike his breakfast and a cup of coffee then returned to the kitchen bench to collect Bos's. She turned with his plate in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other and started walking towards the kitchen table when something caught her attention in the doorway, she saw a mouse standing on its hind legs sniffing the air. She shrieked and

dropped the plate and mug, the mouse falling to all fours and scampering away down the hall. Pike closed his newspaper, his eyes following Doroly's, just catching sight of the mouse as it disappeared from view, turned to Bos who returned his stare with an astonished expression then slowly got up and told Bos to meet him in his study.

Doroly knelt on the floor and started picking up the scattered bits of broken crockery with one hand, placing them in her cupped other, starting to sob gently. She carried on sobbing as she cleaned up the food and spilt coffee with a cloth, Pike emerging from his study a short time later and standing above her, "I need the cats. Where are they?" he said.

"Outside," she said quietly between sobs. Pike motioned to Bos who went outside to find them.

About half an hour later Doroly was staring disconsolately out the kitchen window when she heard a car pull up and saw Bos go and meet Armit, then after a brief conversation they walked together to the barn.

Doroly went about her chores for the rest of the day, but come evening when the cats would normally materialise for their food they were nowhere to be seen, nor the next morning before breakfast. She was clearing up the breakfast when she heard a faint sound of cats moaning. She walked outside and traced the sound to the barn, where, on entering, she saw her three cats in cages, yowling mournfully, with Armit teasingly holding a squirming mouse by the tail in front of their cages.

"What are you doing, Ahmed?" she said angrily.

"Mr Pike need hungry Meesus. She catch good eef hungry. Don't worry, Meesus. They get food soon," Armit replied in broken sentences.

Doroly turned and walked away; she was beyond caring now. If Pike wanted the cats he could look after them.

Later that morning Doroly was sitting in the dining room repairing one of her dresses, when she heard several muffled noises and sounds of cats growling. She walked down the hall and opened the door to one of the store rooms and was shocked to see a huddle of mice eating something in the centre of the room, no-one in sight. She hurriedly shut the door with the intention of informing Ivor but heard muffled voices from the store room opposite. Opening the opposite store room door she saw Ahmed kneeling in the middle of the room stapling something to a large rectangular sheet of plywood attached to a post, two cats milling around

him noisily growling and hissing, Bos on the far side of the room next to the fireplace trying to extract a mouse from the mouth of the other cat, a mouse running past him out of the fireplace as he did so; both were so engrossed in their tasks they didn't notice Doroly enter. She approached Ahmed to see what he was doing to find him stapling a mouse's tail to the board while brushing away the cats, alongside a neat line of about ten other pre-pinned mice, some half eaten others still wriggling, below the words 'KEEP OUT' in large capital letters.

"I can't take this torture any more!" Doroly screamed.

Armit froze, then Pike, who had gone unnoticed by Doroly till then said in a calm measured tone from behind her near the door, "This is not torture. We're sending a message. Shut the door on your way out."

Bos walked up to Armit and handed him a still-wriggling mouse. Doroly gaped for a few seconds straight at Bos; Bos shrugged in response to which Doroly turned, walked out the door staring at Pike leaving it open behind her, went upstairs, packed two suitcases with her possessions, walked down the stairs, took her car keys from the rack and carried on out the front door.

PART 2

Chapter 1 - Gemariah's Marriage

Constance was sitting at their favourite spot in the café; she had arrived punctually at the usual time, ten o'clock in the morning, but wasn't expecting Gemariah to arrive for another ten minutes or so and had ordered tea for herself, sipping it while she thought about what she had learnt from Gemariah when they met yesterday. Although several months had passed since they had first met here it had been necessary to return home for a large part of the intervening period to attend to some pressing issues, mostly related to Greenfield, leaving Gemariah to her seaside Adriatic bolthole. Still, she had managed to piece together enough of Gemariah's life by now and she felt she knew her well enough, luckily she didn't seem to bear any ill will, even after what had happened between their husbands. She had found it didn't serve much purpose to try and plan in detail what to talk about, Gemariah was wont to drift mercilessly off topic, but she did have to frequently give some direction or they would otherwise end up talking all morning about her local shops, how much better they were than Marvod, how all her favourite labels were readily available, how expensive everything was here and other such inanities. She didn't want to give Gemariah the impression she was being interrogated, risk alienating her by pushing too hard and too fast, but she did need to try and get as much useful information as she could while visiting her, she did have a strict timeline to follow after all, so she sometimes needed to tread slowly and carefully.

Gemariah made her entrance with the customary ceremonial pomp, ostentatiously handing her hat and coat to the front desk, loudly ordering 'her usual coffee' and asking where her friend was sitting, making a pretence of not being able to see her. Having established Constance's general whereabouts she insisted on being accompanied part of the way by one of the staff, until she feigned late recognition of Constance with a small wave from one hand and dismissed the waiter with a flick of her fingers from the other.

Gemariah arrived opposite Constance to a slow steady staccato from her

bright blue high heels, put her matching designer handbag on the table, label carefully facing Constance, sat down in the chair, removed her black over-sized oval designer sunglasses and touched up her lipstick. Constance glanced at the handbag and could see from the name it would have cost thousands even though outwardly it looked like a common uniformly coloured classic style that her mother might have owned at her age. She looked over today's outfit, coordinated light green hot pants and tight lace crop-top; outside it was a hot summer's day, which partly explained why Gemariah was even more scantily dressed than normal, but inside was air conditioned.

"You'll need your jacket later, Gem," said Constance with arched brows.

"Oh, because of this, you mean," Gemariah said looking down at her top. "I thought I'd try it on today to see if it still fitted. I haven't worn it for years ..."

While Gemariah went on about her outfit, where she bought it, who she was with, what her friends were doing now, Constance nodded occasionally at appropriate points waiting for an opportune moment to intervene unobtrusively. Gemariah's coffee arrived with a small plate of pastries and she took the opportunity afforded by the distraction, deciding to re-direct to safe ground:

"Gem. You've never told tell me anything about your wedding dress," said Constance brightly.

"That's because there's not much to say about it," said Gemariah with slight disappointment in her voice as she re-arranged the petits fours on the plate.

"How do you mean?" said Constance with surprise.

"You remember I told you we got married in Marvod Registry Office?" said Gemariah, Constance nodded.

"Do you know how small it is?" said Gemariah, Constance shook her head.

"It's tiny. You can only fit a dozen or so in there."

"So why didn't you get married somewhere else? Like Forket?"

"Forket. Impossible!" said Gemariah starting. "Pike had big issues with Forket. He'd hardly set foot in the place for years before that. Anyway," said Gemariah piquedly and re-composing herself, "Pike said if we couldn't get married in Marvod Church then it could only be somewhere simple,

and what could be more simple than a registry office. But he gave me such a big ring," said Gemariah proudly holding up her left hand in front of Constance, "and he said he would pay for whatever wedding dress I wanted." Gemariah paused before continuing downcast, "But what was the point? There were only a few of us there: just me, Pike, the registrar, Bos and one of his brothers, the girls. A fancy dress would have been wasted on such a small audience, so I just wore a simple frock."

"When you say 'the girls', are you talking about May and Kate?"

"Yes," said Gemariah inquisitively, with a drawn out 's' as if to ask 'Who else could I have meant?'

"Just clarifying," injected Constance quickly. "I thought Doroly's daughters may not have wanted to come, out of loyalty to their mother."

"Pike said they were fine with it," Gemariah replied. "They were already in their late twenties by then."

They both sipped on their drinks, staring out the window: Constance, like everyone else, had heard rumours about Gemariah having children with Pike before they were married, but she decided not to press Gemariah further on the point. She had realised how fickle Gemariah was not long after she first met her; she was quick to anger but equally as quick to giddy almost child-like behaviour, if she overstepped the mark she had always been able to get away with it so far by quickly distracting Gemariah on one of her pet subjects.

"Gem, the bishop that wouldn't let you get married in Marvod, that was Bishop Cyril, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Bishop Alexander had died several years before that. You know Cyril, don't you Connie?"

"Yes, of course I do. I didn't think it could have been Bishop Alexander; I'm sure he would have been happy to marry you in Marvod Church, Gem."

"Maybe, yes, but Cyril was a school friend of Pike's."

"I didn't know that," said Constance surprised.

"Yes, he said they were at school together in the small town where he grew up. They stayed friends after he moved to Marvod; he was always talking to him even while Alexander was bishop in Marvod. Pike didn't like Bishop Alexander, so he was very happy when Cyril was appointed bishop after Alexander's tragic accident," said Gemariah with a small giggle.

"Yes. That was strange, wasn't it," said Constance putting her cup down on the table thoughtfully.

"I know," said Gemariah leaning forward with a smile and whispering half covering her mouth with her hand, "I mean, who would have thought a priest would die from a heart attack while ... you know ... they're supposed to be celibate ... And with a boy ..." said Gemariah looking up at Constance for reaction. Seeing none, she went on, "I was as surprised as you. But remember the photos? Pike said his sources had told him it had been going on for years."

"I still can't believe it," said Constance shaking her head, "He was such a nice man. But I heard he had a lot of enemies in the church; they didn't like how close he was getting to the other churches, Forket and others, perhaps—"

"You're not suggesting Cyril had anything to do with it?" interrupted Gemariah a little angrily.

"No. No. Of course not," Constance said calmly, "but I've heard it's like the mafia in some parts of the church; I'm surprised they didn't find a horse's head in his bed."

Gemariah leant back laughing loudly, "You've got such an imagination Connie."

"But if they were such good friends, Gem, why wouldn't Bishop Cyril let you get married in his church?" said Constance after Gemariah's laughter had dwindled.

"I know. I don't really get it either," said Gemariah with a frown, carefully selecting a pastry with the tips of her thumb and first finger, both embellished with bright red nail varnish. "Pike always got what he wanted, especially from his friends. I've wondered sometimes, you know, whether he secretly didn't want a wedding in the church anyway, so he made it up as an excuse," said Gemariah distractedly nibbling at the pastry then withdrawing it to speak. "I mean normally a refusal would have been enough for him to end a friendship, but they seemed to get on fine afterwards."

"Did you ask Pike?"

"Not after the first time," said Gemariah listlessly, "when he told me what his priest had said, but he'd never lied to me before so why would he lie then?" said Gemariah brightening suddenly and putting the pastry in her

mouth.

Constance took a pastry for herself and examined Gemariah as she browsed; it was hard for her to believe that Gemariah had such faith in Pike after all the things that had happened since then; either Pike must have kept them from her or she must have been complicit, but how could the girlish woman in front of her have been involved? Based on all the evidence and her own experience she concluded for now that Gemariah was the innocent, if not almighty self-deluded, beneficiary of Pike's actions.

"You and Greenfield didn't like Cyril much did you, Connie?" said Gemariah, wiping some crumbs off her bottom lip delicately with her finger.

"Is that a surprise?" shot back Constance a little abruptly. "The way he talked in his sermons about all the wheat farmers; how rape farmers can do no wrong. It was a real shame when Bishop Alexander died; he didn't have prejudices like Bishop Cyril."

"What do you mean prejudices?" said Gemariah, "I never heard him saying anything racist or sexist. O.K. he did have some quite extreme views about homosexuals, but he always quoted the bible in support, Romance, Letivikors—"

"I'm not talking about that," said Constance over Gemariah.

"He and Pike shared a lot of views," said Gemariah proudly, insensitive to her friend's rising passion.

"I can see that", said Constance sharply, "but what about the article Pike wrote about our farm. You know THE ONE," said Constance emphasising the last two words. "What a pestilent, shit-ridden, distorted, land-grabbing, self-serving, selective, deranged, rambling, unadulterated steaming turd of a load of bollocks that was!" A little dribble of spittle gently dripped off Constance's chin onto the table; realising the café had suddenly gone deathly quiet, she self-consciously bowed her head and smoothed her skirt repeatedly. "Sorry about that," she said contritely after seeing Gemariah was still staring open-mouthed at her, wiped her chin and the table with a tissue. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's O.K., Connie," said Gemariah soothingly. "I understand. You're under a lot of pressure at the moment. What with Greenfield's problems and everything."

"Still, that's no excuse for speaking to you like that. It won't happen again. It was just talking about Bishop Cyril I think. You're right, we don't like him; I think he's the cause of so many of our problems, that pernicious poison he promulgated."

Constance, still a little unsettled by her uncharacteristic display and the thought she may have damaged her relationship with Gemariah in spite of her professed forgiveness, thought she had better have a break to recompose herself, entreated Gemariah for permission to leave early, she needed to phone Greenfield, she said; she knew they had agreed to have lunch, but she'd make it up to her, smiled wanly at Gemariah's assent and left with the promise to return same time tomorrow.

The next day started much as the previous: Constance was on time, Gemariah was fashionably late, but dressed this time in a skin tight leggings and top set, light jacket and large hat, both of which were removed at the front desk, a different pair of sunglasses, high heel shoes and handbag, greeted Constance with a warm smile and sat down, but unusually, Gemariah spoke first, "Have you seen the price of food in the shops here now Connie? It's outrageous!"

Constance's initial reaction was relief, Gemariah appeared totally unaffected by yesterday's events, then surprise: she knew that Gemariah would normally never have noticed food prices herself, she hardly ever cooked—Gemariah had told Constance previously that cooking was the thing she disliked most about living on the farm, and it hadn't taken long until she got a maid—then wonder: so it would have to have been Gemariah's maid that told her; Gemariah must have picked up a bit of the local dialect by now.

"Cooking oil in the local supermarket has gone up by almost 20%" continued Gemariah.

"It's the same at home now, Gem. The summer specials have finished and now the prices are much higher than before! I've noticed the trend myself, where some companies become so big that they effectively monopolise a particular market, drop their retail prices forcing all the competition out, squeeze the suppliers like us, then sneakily raise their prices while trying to tell the consumer they've dropped them by hiding behind specials! It's just a way to ratchet up their profits with less chance of

being caught. They'll make some excuse about inflation affecting their own costs but who can believe that if there's no real competition to demonstrate it! And even if there's a duopoly, can we really trust there's no collusion? After all there are many forms of collusion; there doesn't need to be an item-by-item agreement on price."

"I didn't follow all of that Connie, but it sounds about right," said Gemariah brightly.

"It's always the farmer that suffers, especially the small farms."

"Talking about small farms, Con, I've been meaning to ask you about the tenant farmers. I used to see them sometimes, when Pike took me on tours round the farm or on the road on the way to market, all dressed up in their strange colourful clothes; they had such small little fields compared to our huge ones. Pike used to go on about them, but I never understood why they were there in the first place. It is a bit odd, isn't it? I mean no-one else seems to have tenant farmers."

"There are others around the place: Bartel's got some as well, did you know that?" Gemariah shook her head. "It's a long story and it goes back a long time, but simply put they're refugees from an old war who were driven out of their home and the government agreed to temporarily re-settle them at various places. At the time our farm was part of a much larger farm and the previous owner was forced to agree to it, and for various reasons they've just ended up staying there. It was still our land but we agreed to let them run it how they wanted and we got a share of their profits. But what did you mean when you said Pike went on about them?"

"He said you mistreated them and that's why you had so many problems with them. And the abuse they reported in Forket ..." said Gemariah her voice trailing off.

"Pike was wrong; it just suited him to say that. We offered to help them modernise, you know, but they refused calling us cultural imperialists; they seemed to prefer a semi-mediaeval way of living just like their ancestors, almost subsistence farming. Whenever I saw them in Forket, when they used to go there that is, they would keep themselves apart, they didn't mix or talk to anyone outside their group unless they had to. They wouldn't even send their kids to school in Forket, did you know that? They preferred home schooling. Did you ever speak to them? No? If you did, first thing you'd notice is their accent and their dialect; it's quite different to

Forket, a bit like Marvod. As for the so-called abuse, I don't know anyone who would abuse them and I never saw any myself, everyone I know was happy to just let them alone to do their own thing, like they preferred. But if it did happen I'm sure it was exaggerated by Pike for effect.

"Anyway, what about your migrant workers, Gem? Pike's happy to criticise us for our supposed mistreatment of the tenant farmers, but the migrants Pike employed on your farm were essentially slave labour weren't they? And everyone knew they were illegals so they would hardly be likely to complain!"

"They all seemed perfectly happy to me at the time, Connie. I'm sure they were very grateful to Pike for finding them a job *and* somewhere to live. As for being illegal, Immigration visited the farm a few times and Pike said they went to the flats as well, and they always left happy, no-one was ever taken away."

"Well that's because Pike ran Marvod like his own personal fiefdom; Immigration wouldn't have dared!" said Constance bluntly.

"Con, if you want to know any more about the farmworkers, you'll need to speak to Ivor, he had much more to do with them than me," said Gemariah insipidly.

Constance paused, Gemariah was undoubtedly correct: Pike would never have involved Gemariah in any farm management decisions, she could have overhead something, but it didn't seem like she had anything more to say on the subject, or at least not for the moment; she would need to speak to Ivor next time she saw him.

Constance nodded in acknowledgement, "Did you ever visit Pike's flats?" she said cheerily. "I've only seen photos in the Chronicle, but I heard it was a big development."

"You mean Marvod Levels?" Constance nodded. "Bos took me on a detour once on the way to my apartment to show me where he used to live. It'd been bulldozed, but he described how it looked before: it sounded almost like a slum; it must have been horrible to grow up there. I feel sorry for Bos, he—"

"The flats, Gem?"

"Oh yes, the flats; some of them were built on top of Bos's old place I was going to say. They're O.K., I mean they're nothing like my place in Korumpa Towers of course, they were built for those poor people and if

you've got nowhere to live anywhere's a palace, right? And it's handy for the town centre; you can have a lovely walk along the river bank ..."

"When it's not flooded you mean. I saw some photos showing water completely surrounding the flats, almost like an island. Does it still flood there?"

"Most years," sighed Gemariah. "Pike told me he had the land elevated, but he couldn't control the water; I'm not Moses!" he said," Gemariah chuckled.

"Such humility," said Constance under her breath.

"Anyway, Pike said it's the fault of the local authority in the hills to the North. He'd tried to convince them they needed to build a dam but they refused. He said he was working on ways to convince them with Bos, whatever that meant, but I guess they never got round to it."

"It was Fixa Group who built the flats, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, they built all the flats, Marvod Levels and that development—I forget the name ... down south somewhere—and Pike's and Bos's houses, even my apartment block I think; Pike seemed to use them for all the construction work he had. Bernd, the owner, came to our house a few times with his wife. Most of the time Bos and Pike would speak to him alone in his study while I chatted to his wife, but one time Pike showed Berndt and his wife around the farm with me."

"Oh really? Where did you go?" asked Constance intrigued.

"We started at the the farmyard, Pike had some plans for the workers' accommodation and Bos's house, then we went to that viewpoint in the hills on the boundary of your farm then right down to Bull Island and around there, as far as I remember."

"Did they talk about the tenant farmers or Bull Island?"

"Pike pointed at something over on your farm when we were up there, but I didn't hear what they were talking about. When we got down to the Lake we went into that little shack at the end of the walkway; I'd done it up inside to look pretty, but Pike said to Berndt he wanted to knock it down and build some cottages there and on Bull Island."

"Bull Island; you're sure he said that?"

"Yes, something about holiday accommodation. I remember noticing Berndt looked very uncomfortable when Pike talked about it. He was always a sweaty little man, but he seemed to be more leaky than usual that

day," said Gemariah sniggering.

Constance excused herself and went to the toilet; once there she went into a cubicle and locked the door, got out a notebook, found a page headed 'Ivor' where she wrote 'illegal migrants' on an existing list, and 'Berndt Fixa' and 'Bull Island' below, underlining Berndt's name several times as she pondered; she already intended to meet Ivor soon but she hadn't been aware Fixa was involved—perhaps he was involved elsewhere as well?—Something fresh to discuss with Greenfield when she got home.

Constance returned to the table and sitting down said, "Shall we have lunch now?"

"Yes, let's," Gemariah waved her hand and motioned to one of the staff to come over.

Chapter 2 - Nectar from Heaven

Greenfield was standing at the back of the nave listening to the Sunday service, watching each breath cause a little vapour cloud to expand slowly in front of his face, overtaking and merging with its predecessor. He wore a thick woollen jersey, woollen scarf, gloves on hands that were tucked deep into the pockets of his trousers. His mother, Constance and Olivia were standing next to him similarly cloaked in wool, woollen hats as well. It was a couple of weeks after Christmas, and a biting cold day outside; even though the doors were all shut and the heating was on, it was still cold inside the church.

He heard the door behind him softly open and close, then Pike, followed closely by Gemariah, picked their way past him and through the rest of the scattered standing worshippers to the single pew at the head of the church where they sat down in their usual places; the bishop and church official carried on reading the liturgical text uninterrupted, ignoring the late arrivals.

The service swung backwards and forwards in its customary way from the bishop, to the church official, back to the bishop, passed on occasionally to a reader, back to the bishop and so on; at various points hymns were sung. After about an hour, the bishop, dressed in a full length white ceremonial robe and mitre, who until this point had been standing with his back to the faithful, turned and walked to a lectern placed for him by one of the aides. The bishop, a soft featured man in his late sixties of average height, puffy red cheeks, long wispy grey moustache and beard, teddy bear-like face with beady but kindly blue eyes squinting through small round glasses from below his formal headdress, placed his notes on the lectern and slowly scanned the worshippers gathered in the nave until his eyes lighted on Gemariah's large hat at the far end of the pew, at which he paused deliberately for several seconds with a stern stare; Pike seeing the direction of the bishop's gaze nudged Gemariah and whispered something to her at which Gemariah removed her hat and placed it under the pew; the bishop returned his gaze to his notes, adjusted the microphone, cleared his throat, then began his sermon:

"What is the bible? Is it a self-help book? Is it a recipe book?" he almost sang in a deep rhythmical voice, rising and falling in the habitual style of a

preacher, "Exodus 30:

"Take the following fine spices: five hundred shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much (that is, two hundred and fifty shekels) of fragrant cinnamon, two hundred and fifty shekels of fragrant calamus, five hundred shekels of cassia—all according to the sanctuary shekel—and a hin of olive oil. It will be the sacred anointing oil.'

"Is that not a recipe?" said the Bishop slowly with mock incredulity, peering goggle-eyed at the audience over his glasses. "Written something like you would find in any recipe book in your own pantry?" He paused and examined the faces before him before going on more rapidly, "If you want to be told what to eat, what to drink, how to hold a golf club, how to tie up your shoe laces, or many many other such equally prosaic things besides, there are plenty of books about that; you may even have bought some of these self-help books yourself."

The bishop paused before continuing in a slow clear voice, "The bible is no such text. The bible is the one true guide on how to conduct a spiritual life to honour His name; let no-one misunderstand that it has any other purpose.

"And is the bible to be read literally, as some hyperlexic commentators would have us believe? When the Lord says through Matthew, 'Man shall not live by bread alone,' is he suggesting Matthew was talking to a people who only eat bread? Some sort of mythical human-weevil hybrid species, let's call them weevil-men?" He paused, waiting for muffled tittering to die down. "Of course not! I am sure everyone present here today understands this. But the Bible is the word of God I hear you say and you are right to say that! So how can these two seemingly contradictory positions both be correct? And why do I ask such questions you may be thinking to yourself?" He considered his quiet captive audience nodding gently, "Proverbs 4:20-2:

"My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart."

The bishop lifted a page of his notes with affected slowness and placed it to one side, "The ancient Greeks believed the physical environment was entirely composed of four components: fire, water, earth and air; but these substances did not inhabit the spiritual environment. For them their spiritual environment was inhabited by a pantheon of gods, goddesses, and

other supernatural beings of various types who had the ability to imbue their spirit into things as a way of communicating their will and influencing things. There was a hierarchy amongst them, but their leader was decided by drawing lots between brothers. Imagine that; like having a game of cards with your family to determine the fate of the universe! It was not until hundreds of years later, at a time chosen by God, that His physical presence in the form of His son descended to earth and communicated through Him to us His words. Through the records of His son's disciples we are able to discover for ourselves the true wonder of a spiritual environment ruled by the one omnipotent omniscient creator. "John 4:24:

"God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.'

"Why did I choose this passage you ask? Because this is the key to our link to the spirit world; to God," he said before carefully and deliberately taking a long slow sip from a glass of water placed for him at the side of the lectern. "So John has told us God dwells in the spirit realm, an area beyond the perception of our physical senses; He is not limited by the physical laws and dimensions that govern our world. So does that mean just because we cannot perceive Him, He is not present in our everyday physical world? No. He is present in everything we see, we hold, we touch, we eat; He is all around us, in us, all the time.

"God well knows we live in the physical world; that is after all why He communicated directly to us in physical form, but John tells us to worship in the spirit, so how do we do that? I say to you my children, not only by our thoughts and our prayers, but by our deeds. 1 John 3:18:

'Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.'

"Do not actions speak louder than words? Now we are most of us farmers are we not? I can see most of those present in this hallowed place today are anyway. So does the bible tell farmers how to act? Can we use fire, water, earth and air to create something that honours His name? I say yes it does and yes we can! The bible tells us not only how to sustain ourselves spiritually, but how to honour and worship God through our actions.

"Matthew asks us, '*Is not life more than food ...?*'

Olivia, standing alongside Greenfield, grabbed his hand and jerked it

several times. Greenfield glanced down at Olivia, who made a show of yawning with her other hand, to which Greenfield smiled back.

"Connie," whispered Greenfield to Constance standing on his other side, "I'm going outside with Livvie for a break. She's getting tired standing all this time."

"... and John tells us 'Do not work for the food that perishes'..."

Constance nodded and Greenfield motioned to Olivia with his head to follow him.

"Daddy. Why does he have to talk for so long?" said Olivia when she got outside, a few snowflakes drifting and nestling lightly on her hat.

"Good question, Livvie. I don't know," said Greenfield stooping and dusting the flakes off her. "I don't even understand what he's saying sometimes anyway."

"Do we have to go back inside? It's so hard standing up for hours and hours and hours," said Olivia petulantly.

"Don't exaggerate, Livvie. It's only for about an hour," said Greenfield comfortingly.

"Why did they have to take all the chairs out?" said Olivia bending down and picking up some snow then throwing it in the air with both hands. "I want to sit down. I'm tired."

"The bishop said he wanted to return the church to its old traditional style so all the pews had to be taken out."

"Not all of them, Daddy. There's still one left."

"That's Mr Pike's pew."

"Why does he get one? Is he special?"

"No, but he thinks he is. Actually, I think he probably paid a lot of money for it."

The conversation carried on in the usual question and answer format with a precocious young child. After about twenty minutes, at which point Greenfield judged they should have safely missed the remainder of the sermon, he told Olivia they had to go back into the church and led his sulking daughter inside, where the Bishop was still standing at the lectern. He passed Feldland and his wife, both standing open-mouthed with puzzled expressions on their face before taking his previous place alongside Constance.

"... and again: Psalm 45:7:

"God has anointed you with the oil of gladness'.

"Note well: 'The oil of gladness'. If God is glad, how can we not also be glad ..."

"Is he still going on?" whispered Greenfield to Constance.

"Clearly," she whispered back. "But I think he's wrapping up now."

"... and here again: Proverbs 21:20:

"Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it.'

"Precious oil' ... 'foolish man devours'," he repeated enunciating each word slowly. "By now it should be abundantly clear: well may we call precious rapeseed oil the 'oil of gladness' for it is truly a holy crop delivered to us from heaven. My children, growing rape is a form of worship; by producing this precious oil, this oil of gladness, this dew of heaven, you are demonstrating that you have understood the word of our Lord, you have taken it into your very soul, and your actions as farmers honour His name every day.

"To the wheat farmers amongst us, I say to you, did you all not produce rape not so long ago? But you have now turned away from the true and righteous path of our Lord; you have listened to that pretender god mammon and other messengers of Satan. And to the rape farmers I say, are there not even those of you who sully their fields with other crops, who practise the devilment of crop rotation? To them I say, Leviticus 19:19:

'You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed.'

"Do not knowingly sin against God; do not sully heaven's dew with the abomination of other crops. Purity is the path to righteousness. And to all, hear these words: God will forgive a sinner who repents, but God will not save those who persist in wilful unrepentant sin even if they confess Christ. Before it is too late, repent, worship in the Spirit, re-join our family of Christ as embodied here on earth by the faithful purity of rape. Amen."

The Bishop picked up his notes and walked to the front of the church, resuming his original position with his back to the congregation. The remainder of the service then followed its customary format finishing shortly after with administrative matters, at the conclusion of which the faithful filed out slowly in stunned silence greeted by dim winter daylight, grey clouds discharging their burden in a steady smothering nivean stream. Greenfield, holding Olivia's hand, joined the throng, and immediately on

walking out the door turned to Constance:

"What was all that about? Did I miss something important? Is Cyril actually just a rep for the rape marketing board in disguise or is he just demented?" to which Constance pinched his arm and shushed him, leading him away from the others.

"I've got no idea," she said under her breath, checking if anyone was headed towards them. "I couldn't make any sense of it. He's certainly nothing like Bishop Alexander, is he? He was much easier to follow. One minute he's saying not to read the bible literally, to treat any reference to food or drink as a metaphor for spiritual sustenance, then the next minute he's drawing inferences based on a literal interpretation of the text, using some kind of shopping list drawn up from bible passages! Who does he think he is; a farm management consultant? What difference does it make what we grow, and why pick rapeseed oil ahead of other oils? What's it got to do with him anyway? Why should he care?" said Constance growing increasingly flustered.

Greenfield watched the worshippers as they flowed out of the church and congregated in small isolated groups in the ankle-deep snow, a multitude of quiet conversations slowly growing to a hum, then noticed Olivia's upturned face examining him with a quizzical expression.

"Weevil man is coming to get you," said Greenfield suddenly after a few seconds in a robotic voice, pulling a face, putting his hands on either side of his head and wiggling his index fingers like insect antennae, to which Olivia screeched in delight and ran off.

"Be serious, Greenfield," scolded Constance, Greenfield stopping just as he started to chase Olivia then stepped back alongside her. "He needs to do his job and focus on the spiritual health of his flock not their nutrition," said Constance after she had re-gathered herself.

"Blessed are the oil-makers?" replied Greenfield with raised eyebrows. "Cyril's either following a fine tradition of bible re-interpreters or he's auditioning as a scriptwriter for Monty Python."

"At least you can't criticise him for lack of originality," said Constance flatly. "I think I'm at little risk of rebuke in saying that no-one has interpreted the bible quite in that way before."

The group containing Feldland and his wife, Pommer and some of the other wheat farmers merged with Greenfield's and they re-combined as a

small circle. There was an embarrassed pause while they looked at each other, each waiting for the other to speak first, several rubbing their hands together and some stamping their feet.

"What are we going to do?" said Raine finally. "He's clearly off his rocker," his wife grabbed him by the arm and shushed him.

"Nothing," said Constance. "Maybe he's just trying to make an impression. You know, new job and all that? I'm sure it won't be the same every week."

"You weren't here last week," said Raine's wife. "It was much the same."

"The devil can cite scripture for his purpose," interposed Greenfield's mother after joining the group with her father.

"Oh no, he's no lover of Jews my girl," said Greenfield's grandfather, "of that I'm certain. Bah! At least it warms the ears on cold days such as this."

"I think we should stop coming here," said Pommer. "I know it's tradition, but why don't we just go to Forket instead?"

"Like you said, it's tradition," said Greenfield's grandfather. "Our families have been coming here for generations, long before the church in Forket was built. I don't have much to do with Marvod these days, not since Pike moved here anyway. I feel like this is our last link and I don't want to abandon the town just because of a passing phase. Let's just wait and see if it all blows over." Several shrugged and nodded, others pursed their lips and tilted their heads to one side as if gauging the odds, but no-one said anything, so all understood it to be mutually agreed by common acceptance.

"Who's that standing next to Bos?" said Greenfield after a long pause, staring towards the church all following his gaze to a tall woman with her back to them stood dressed in what looked like a cross between a skiing outfit and formal evening wear, a thick multi-coloured ski hat with a long string of pom-poms hanging from both ear flaps. "Is that Gemariah?"

"Must be," said Feldland. "It's the first time I've seen her: tall, athletic and thirty years younger than Pike, that's what I heard anyway, so who else could it be? Where is Pikey by the way?"

"I think I saw him going out the side door to Cyril's private room," said Eastman.

"Those two are a right gruesome twosome," said Greenfield. "I heard Pike talks to him often for hours at a time on the phone; Bishop Cyril must

be poisoning Pike's mind."

"I don't think so," said Constance, "I think it was already poisoned a long time ago."

Pike waited in his pew, seated alongside Gemariah, while the Bishop conducted hushed conversations with a small mob of church officials. The church officials bowed to Cyril, then Cyril walked slowly towards Pike's pew where he had arranged beforehand to meet with him after the service, Pike rising to his feet on seeing him approach.

"Your Grace," said Pike when Cyril reached him bowing his head, "I'd like to introduce you to Gemariah." Gemariah retrieved her hat from under the pew and holding it in her left hand stood up and held out her right hand as if to shake Cyril's, gave a small bow, lowered her head and said, 'Father'.

Cyril smiled, took Gemariah's hand, turned it palm upwards and placing his hand on hers drew them both towards Gemariah's lips, Gemariah after a confused few seconds kissing Cyril's hand.

"My child, that's certainly a lovely hat you're holding, and would be delightful when worn outside the church, but not inside the church please," said Bishop Cyril in his soothing sonorous voice seemingly belying the invective with which he earlier spoke.

Pike's eyes flashed a warning, and Cyril seeing this coughed into his hand then continued, "Did you find the pew comfortable, my child?"

"A little hard, Youreverence. But I may bring a cushion next time," said Gemariah politely with a low curtsy.

"No need," said Bishop Cyril with a raised eyebrow, "we can provide those." Turning to address Pike, "As you know, I found intolerable the so-called modern practices Alexander had introduced. Removing the pews has recovered some of the church's traditional values, but there is still so much more to do. I must thank you for your generous donation, Mr Pike."

"No need to thank me, Father. It's my honour."

"You will have noticed the plaque on your pew, I hope," said Cyril pointing to it. "Of course I am sure you share my concern for the elderly in our congregation that find it hard to sit through the service. Perhaps next time you will let them use the pew as well?"

"Can we talk in private, Father?" asked Pike ignoring Cyril's question.

"Yes, of course. Come through to my chambers."

"I'll see you outside, Gemariah," said Pike, "Bos will accompany you," he said directing his gaze to Bos who was standing next to the exit.

Pike followed Cyril through the side door of the church to a small room attached to the front of the church on the opposite side to the vestry, where Cyril sat down behind a small plain wooden table, motioning with his outstretched hand for Pike to be seated in front of him.

"It's a delicate matter, Cyril," said Pike as he sat down, addressing the bishop in the way reserved for their private conversations, "You may not be aware that Doroly has left me. She has asked for a divorce."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that, Pike."

"Yes. We have been living separate lives for many years now, as you know. But I am a traditionalist and I believed Doroly was also. I had determined to maintain the status quo. So then you can appreciate my shock when she just suddenly walked out and left me, without giving any reason, just a few weeks ago. And then not long after, just last week, I got a letter from her solicitor."

"I see," said Bishop Cyril sagely.

"You met Gemariah today," Pike went on after a short delay.

"Yes, a delightful young lady, if not yet fully familiar with our faith's etiquette."

"She and I have been friends for many years now. When I got Doroly's letter I naturally showed it to Gemariah and she threw herself on me. She said she'd been in love with me secretly for years and now we could finally be together. Forever," said Pike to raised eyebrows from Cyril. "Well I was surprised, as I can see you are, Cyril. I never suspected her true feelings, but I realised after we'd spoken about it and I thought it over, that I was very fond of her myself. Anyway, I've told Gemariah as soon as my divorce is finalised I want to marry her and she has agreed. So you can see all this was out of my control, none of it was my doing. I know you're not partial to divorce, Cyril, but does the bible not recognise our weaknesses and, although reluctantly, permit divorce; like in Matthew 5:31-32:

'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce ...'

Cyril held up an intervening hand, then sat forward and placed his elbows on the table and cupped his hands together in front of his lips. "We have known each other a long time, have we not, Pike?" said Cyril to an

almost imperceptible nod from Pike, "And in that time have you ever known me to be anything other than a firm believer in traditional values? Have I been swayed in any way by modern views?"

"Of course not, Cyril. That is why we have remained friends. We are both traditionalists. We believe in the old ways."

"Quite correct, Pike, as is your quotation. However, if you had carried on with the verse you would have said, '*But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery,*' and I am sure you are not accusing Doroly of immorality. But I fear you are missing the most important point: Luke 16:18: '*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery,*' and Mark 10:11-12: '*And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her"*' and 1 Corinthians 7:39: '*A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.*'

"You agreed to a lifetime commitment in your marriage vows as well. Whilst you may not have been the initiator, as soon as you agree to divorce you are committing adultery. As a traditionalist I cannot agree to personally sanctioning anything that would be construed as adultery." Cyril sat back then said in a quiet and soothing voice, "I say this to you as your priest, Pike. As your friend, I suggest you consider talking to Bishop Sovremon over in Forket; perhaps he could be more accommodating."

"I am disappointed, *Bishop Cyril*," said Pike waspishly, "but not surprised. I was hoping my assistance in getting you this post would not have gone unrecognised."

"I am grateful, of course, for your assistance, Pike," said Cyril loftily, "but I cannot do this. It would mean abandoning all my principles, it would be breathtakingly hypocritical. I must follow the straight and pure path; you must see that, Pike, especially after my sermon today. Come let's not discuss this any further now; reflect on what I have said. Let us rather talk about my sermon, and I have some news that will be of interest to you."

"Yes, your sermon. I thought it was very thought provoking. I had no idea the bible supported my views on farming. I must thank you for demonstrating the primacy, the intellectual and spiritual superiority, no less, of rape farming. Will this become official church doctrine now? "

"Pike, you know full well the people are uneducated and ignorant, but unfortunately the church hierarchy is no better. You must help me show

them all the way. Together we must strive to lead the people back to the righteous life. *You* are a leader, Pike, a shining light, a beacon of righteousness no less, an example for all the rape farmers and a warning to all the others. The path of purity is straight and narrow and the temptations are sinuous and wide. Do not give in to temptation, but deliver them from their evil. Together we can be unstoppable," said Cyril gradually getting more and more agitated, his hands waving dangerously in multiple directions, face reddened, eyes bulging as if in sexual paroxysm.

Pike had never seen Cyril like this before; he wasn't sure what had got Cyril this aroused, although his passion certainly suited his own purposes, and he looked at him a little perplexed, concerned for his health and safety. Seeing Pike's expression, Bishop Cyril steadied himself, took a deep breath and smiled before continuing, "As to the news that I mentioned: I have been tidying up all Alexander's old church records—they were in a shocking mess, not dissimilar to his world views I might add—and I have found these documents," he said opening a drawer and removing several sheets of paper bound in ribbon that he handed to Pike across the table. "You will see here the extent of your great-uncle's farm; these documents show he owned all the nearby properties as well."

Pike opened the ribbon, put the papers on the table in front of him and began to read while Cyril continued, "The way that article in the Forket Chronicle dismissed your views, including, I might add, some disrespectful slurs clearly meant for me, and most of your neighbours seemingly agreeing, I thought you might be interested to know your neighbours are living on your land. It may be worth your while, and would certainly be in both our interests, for you to investigate further."

The papers were in fact letters between his great-uncle and Bishop Alexander, and a few to Alexander's predecessor, various disagreements about tithes based on land area, a hand drawn map with a few sketches of all the buildings on his land, and several others about church building costs. Although there was noting concrete, it certainly appeared that his great-uncle's farm was originally much larger than he had understood from Uncle Coniva.

"It won't be long to Easter and the costs for the parade keep going up each year. Perhaps another donation?" suggested Cyril hopefully.

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll arrange something," said Pike inattentively. He

told Cyril he still wanted to talk further about his wedding then thanked him and left the room to re-join Bos and Gemariah.

"Did he agree?" said Gemariah.

"Ahhh. What? Oh, not yet. But I'm sure he will," said Pike, at which Gemariah clapped her hands and kissed him on the cheek then put her arm through his as they walked to the car.

On the way back to the farm, Gemariah babbled ceaselessly about her plans for their wedding, but Pike's mind was elsewhere; he decided to task his lawyer with finding out everything he could about his great-uncle's farm.

"Good news, Boss?" said Bos glancing at the rear view mirror and seeing Pike in deep thought.

"Maybe, Bostultus. Maybe."

Chapter 3 - All Is Not Well Down on the Farm

"Hi, Mum. Is Grandad upstairs?" Greenfield said hurriedly to his mother seated at the breakfast table as he rushed through the front door.

"Oh. Hello, son. You're back early. I think so? Why, what's up?"

Greenfield ran up the stairs and knocked on his grandfather's door, then went in to check for him when there was no answer. He came out and checked in the bathroom and the other bedrooms then came running downstairs.

"Has he been down ... for breakfast already?" said Greenfield between deep breaths.

"No not yet. What's he done?"

"Look at this," he said out of breath, "Nadia just handed it to me ... when we got home ... stapled to the barn door ... she's threatening to quit," handing a crumpled note to his mother, which she started to read.

"Hi, Mum," said Constance as she and Olivia passed Greenfield's mother and carried on up the stairs to their rooms with their suitcases.

"Is it true? Is Grandad selling all the beet equipment: scalper, cultivator, planter, digger? And buying rapeseed? I've only been away for a few days holiday and *this* happens again!" he said throwing his hands in the air. "Has he had another stroke or has he finally gone senile?" said Greenfield exasperated waiting for mother to finish reading the note.

"No. He seemed fine. Well, I mean, we had a big argument last night

about crops again. He wanted to convert the whole farm back to rape; wouldn't tell me why. Maybe he's taken Bishop Cyril's poison to heart. I don't know; I thought I'd changed his mind."

"Where is he now? I can't find him anywhere."

"He stormed out muttering something about Marvod under his breath and drove off. I didn't hear him come back, I just assumed he'd snuck back in later. He must have left that note for Nadia before he left."

Greenfield and his mother stood staring at each other for a few seconds before she broke the silence, "Call Grandad. I'll go and speak to Nadia and tell her to ignore the note."

"What are you going to say to her?"

"I'll just say ... he's had another mild stroke," said Greenfield's mother then left to find Nadia.

Greenfield called his grandfather's phone but there was no reply; he left a message asking him to call back then returned to his usual farm jobs, but by the end of the day there was still no response so he agreed with his mother to call the Forket Police and report him missing.

At lunchtime the next day, sitting at the table with Greenfield, Constance and Olivia, Greenfield's mother received a call, a mostly one-sided call, to which she merely offered occasional mono-syllabic responses: 'yes' ... 'I see' ... 'I will' ... 'Thank you', then hung up.

"That was the Forket Police, they said they've had a report from their colleagues in Marvod of an elderly gentleman matching Grandad's description; they've sent a photo apparently. Yes, here it is, I've sent it on to you," said Greenfield's mother studying her phone. "O.K., his head's turned to one side but that definitely looks like him. I don't recognise that young lady that seems to be with him though, do you?"

Greenfield examined the photo and recognised his grandfather walking alongside a tall young woman in bright orange hotpants, long fake eyelashes enhanced by exuberantly applied mascara, tight fitting mustard yellow tee shirt struggling to constrain enormous breasts. "That's him all right. I can't see her face, but she certainly looks like his type by the rest of her, um, figure," said Greenfield to an admonishing look from Constance after showing her.

"I'll drive to Marvod by myself and bring him back," said his mother to Greenfield. "You stay here, let everyone know we've found him."

Greenfield's mother drove to the Marvod police station and with the help of two police officers found her father in a dark and dingy hotel not far from the town hall near where the photo was taken, opposite a Foodbazaar supermarket. He was persuaded to check out of the hotel then the officers left them together on the footpath outside.

"Where's your car, Dad?"

"Follow me."

"Grandad," said Constance after a few minutes of walking in silence, "You can't keep doing this. I thought we agreed—"

"Doing what? I'm allowed to enjoy myself, aren't I?"

"I'm talking about the note you left on the barn door."

"Oh that. It's my farm. I can run it how I like!" he said haughtily.

"No-one disputes it your farm," said Greenfield's mother, "but it won't be yours forever. There are many people that depend on your farm, on you: Nadia, Rev, your great granddaughter, your grandson, me. One day, and maybe that day will come sooner than we all want if you have another stroke, you'll hand the farm on to your family. All this chopping and changing, it's not good. It's no good financially and it causes stress for everybody, including you. We need to make these decisions jointly."

They walked on again wordlessly until they arrived at his car where they both got in; she directed him to her car, then on arriving got out and they drove back in convoy to the farm.

It was approaching dinner time in the farm house; Constance was laying out the table, Greenfield had just come back from the first day of the sunflower harvest where he had been supervising the offloading of seed into one of the Alliance's shared grain transporters.

"How did it go?" asked Constance as Greenfield walked into the kitchen.

"Not bad. Started a bit slow, but we picked up speed and by the end of the day we had done almost two truckloads of seed," he said proudly. "I asked the truck driver if he was going to have the truck consecrated with heaven's dew before he used it for rape, but he thought I was accusing him of assaulting women in his cab; must be one of the devil's workers eh?"

Constance smiled broadly, "You know, people don't always know when you're joking, darling."

"Perhaps I should walk around with a neon sign on my head with 'JOKE'

and 'LAUGH' in bright flashing letters, then, like in American sitcoms?" he said, Constance shaking her head. "Any message for the processing facility? I'm just going to call to remind them to decontaminate the whole facility after our delivery. We wouldn't want 'our semi-precious oil, our oil of mild happiness," he said imitating Cyril's slow deep voice, "to contaminate the rapeseed oil now would we?"

Constance had no time to respond as at that point two cars pulled into the farmyard, Greenfield's mother and grandfather getting out. Greenfield's grandfather walked through the front door and stopped, peering in. Seeing Greenfield standing next to Constance, he continued inside and sat down at the kitchen table, motioning for his daughter following behind him to sit opposite. He searched the faces of his hushed family around the table then after a deep sigh said, "Maybe I was a bit hasty, everyone. And I'm sorry for losing my temper, my girl," he said to his daughter. "I promise to be on my best behaviour from now on. No more rash decisions. Consultation. Consultation," seeming to direct to the last two words to himself. "Now, I'm very tired so I'm going to bed early. Can you bring me up a glass of milk dear?" he said to his daughter and stood up.

At this the group rose as one and congregated around him, his daughter kissed his cheek, Greenfield shook his hand. As he turned and started up the stairs, Greenfield asked, "By the way, Grandad, who was that girl you were with?" Constance digging her elbow hard into his ribs causing him to puff involuntarily.

"What girl?" Greenfield warily showed him the photo on his phone his mother had sent him. "No idea," he said dismissively. "She must have been passing when the photo was taken," and with that he said goodnight and went to his room.

"Hang on, Livvie, coming about," said Greenfield as he prepared to turn the tractor wheel. Autumn was Olivia's favourite time on the farm; the weather was usually the best and the farm was at its busiest, they would be harvesting or sowing wheat, barley, sugar beet, sunflower or corn somewhere on the farm daily for week after week—spring was her second favourite, but they only ever sowed crops in spring so she didn't get to ride on all the farm equipment—all the equipment would be used one day or the other. As soon as she was dropped off in the afternoon by the school

bus at the end of their drive, she would pick up her bike where she had left it hidden in the long grass, ride out to find her father and jump into the cab of whatever he was driving. Yesterday he was in the harvester, tomorrow he could be in the tractor towing a scalper or a seeder, but today was her favourite, the beet digger.

Olivia, kneeling facing backwards on the small passenger seat, gripped harder on the seat back and was bounced up and down as they turned, laughing giddily, until Greenfield was lined up for another round. Olivia watched out the back of the cab as Greenfield lowered the spinning wheels into the ground and they moved slowly forwards again, little yellowish white balls starting to pop out of the ground, bounced up and down as they were carried along by some other whirring blades and wheels into a lifter and across a conveyor arm before being spewed onto a truck driving alongside.

"Remember," said Greenfield, "you're in charge. I can't see out the back of my head so you have to tell me where to go," he said suddenly jerking slightly to his left."

"No! The other way, Dad," at which Greenfield deliberately overcompensated the other way.

"No! Daddy! You're so silly," she said giggling. "Too much. Left a bit. Yes, like that, now keep going straight ahead."

Olivia waved to Rev who was driving the beet cart, collecting a stream of beet spewing from the loading arm, and he waved back. They carried on harvesting the beet, empty trucks arriving to replace the full, until the light began to fade and Greenfield took the radio handpiece and told the driver of the half-full truck alongside him that was enough for the day, got out of the tractor, unhitched the digger and drove back in the direction of the farm buildings.

When they pulled into the equipment shed the farmworkers were already there, Nadia, Mitson, Rev, all the itinerant workers, gathered around a small table. Constance was placing on the table two large jugs containing a traditional naturally fermented drink Greenfield's mother prepared each year during beet harvest for the workers using her father's family recipe. Constance poured into waiting empty glasses, ice cubes gently clinking; the workers thanked her, raised their glass and drank greedily.

"Can I have some too, Dad, *please*," said Olivia as Greenfield lifted

Olivia out of the cabin.

"You know you can't, Livvie. That's for the grown-ups. Mum's made you your own special drink."

Olivia pouted briefly then ran over to her mother. Greenfield slapped Mitson on the back as he reached the group, took a full glass that Mitson offered him, drank it in one go, and wiped his sleeve over his lips.

"Sorry guys, can't hang around. I'm already late for a farm meeting. Don't drink too much, you know you don't want to," he said to laughter and raised glasses and joined Constance and Olivia as they walked to the farmhouse.

On arriving at the farmhouse, Olivia asked for her drink, her mother telling her not until after she'd put her school stuff away and changed, 'Ohhh Mummm', and went upstairs. Greenfield followed her, showered quickly, dressed and came downstairs to the front porch just as the sun was disappearing over the horizon. The other farmers were already there, chatting boisterously, seated around a plain wooden table on which were placed jugs of what appeared to be the same fermented beverage accompanied by several large porcelain dishes containing cold beet soup, potato salad, cured meats, stuffed cabbage rolls, dumplings, potato pancakes and a large bowl of sour cream. Constance came out from the kitchen, where the farmers' wives had naturally separated to have their own meal together, bringing another two jugs.

"I hope that's the strong stuff," said Feldland.

"Of course, fortified with home-made vodka as usual," said Constance placing the jugs on the table. "I hope you boys have organised drivers," interjected Constance loudly in a mock-serious voice, "because all the girls are tipsy already," then laughed at the puzzled expressions and re-joined her friends.

"Have you finished your seeding, Greenfield?" asked Bartel.

"Yes, today: winter hard and soft red all done. Different paddocks of course, I wouldn't want to risk upsetting his Cyrillean majesty," he said to laughter from the group. "I got the boys to give the seeder a quick rinse, but you'll need to clean it again."

"O.K. thanks, Greenfield, much obliged," said Bartel who rented the seeder from Greenfield.

"How'd this year's harvest go?" said Greenfield.

"Almost 3.5, better than last year at least," said Bartel.

"I got 4.1," said Greenfield to the group, what about you guys?" to which various of them said '3.8', '4.2', '4'. "I know you don't want to hear it again, Bartel, but you need to rotate, at least with one other crop."

"I know I should, but it's tough. My farm's too small to justify it, much smaller than all you guys. Every time I've looked into it, the numbers just don't stack up. I just have to accept the extra costs, pesticides, herbicides, fertiliser, all the rest; that's the lot of a small farm holder. I mean, look at your tenant farmers, Greenfield. They've got a small area of land, smaller than me of course, they try to do crop rotations and look how they struggle; they almost seem to be destitute whenever I see them in town."

"You don't want to compare yourself to them, Bartel, that's much tougher farming land than yours: the topography, the river floods. Even if they weren't there I'm not sure how we would use it. Probably vegetables like them. Unless you want to do vegetables yourself?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you finally going to get your own seeder this year?" asked Raine.

"No, but I've decided to hire one long term."

"Hey, it's no problem borrowing from us," said Greenfield.

"Thanks, Greenfield, but I can't keep borrowing yours. I can get a good rate in Marvod."

"Phwaor. Be careful there!" said Raine. "Those Marvod guys are sharks, of the great white persuasion I might add. Why don't you bring it up at the next Alliance meeting? Maybe you can hire one through them."

"Yeah. O.K. I might try that first," he said uncertainly. "But maybe I should just sell to Pike and have done with it," he said lugubriously.

"What! Has he made an offer?" asked Feldman.

"No. Not in so many words."

"You'd be better dealing with one of us instead if you're thinking of selling up," said Pommer. "Me, Greenfield, Anomia; we're your closest neighbours after all. Selling to Pike makes no sense."

"Ah, don't worry. I've got no intention of selling really. Just whingeing that's all. Talking about Pike," Pommer said brightening, "I heard he had someone down in the Forket Records Office the other day, digging up old farm records."

"What's he up to?" asked Feldland.

"Perhaps he wants to buy *your* farm, Greenfield," said Bartel.

"You've been quiet tonight, Anomia. What do you say, you're closest to Pike?" said Raine.

"What do you mean 'closest'?" Anomia snapped back. "I just don't think it helps winding him up. Like that interview you gave, Raine, and the rest of you too. He's got that fruitcake Cyril in one ear and that the psychopath Bos in the other. He doesn't need us needling him as well."

"He doesn't have to listen to them," said Raine, "and who says it's not the other way round, him influencing them? I always thought the way his uncle met his fate was fishy. And what about Bishop Alexander? Do any of you guys really believe he was a paedophile?" he asked rhetorically to the group. "I reckon Pike was involved in that."

"You're just paranoid, Raine," said Feldland. "Having neighbours like Pyklit and Pike to deal with will do that to you I suppose. Anyway, the police in Marvod looked into it, didn't they?"

"Marvod Police looked into something?" said Raine scoffingly. "You're joking aren't you! They only do what Pike tells them to!"

"What Bos tells them to, you mean," corrected Feldland. "He seems to live a charmed life over there; all those dodgy businesses and he never gets charged with anything. It's far more likely to be Bos."

"Who works for? ..." said Raine.

"Hey guys," said Greenfield diplomatically. "We're not going to solve the Pike problem here. I think we can all agree he's not a particularly nice man and leave it at that," he said to general quiet nods. "Let's talk about something else instead."

Greenfield turned the conversation to their plans for winter: most intended to do some maintenance on the farm, a few were going on holiday and they discussed security while they were away, there being an increase in farm theft in the last few years. The rest of the home-brew was quickly consumed so they moved onto undiluted home-made vodka. After a couple of hours, the wives having noticed an increase in volume supplemented with occasional singing and the crash of dropped glasses, jointly decided it was time to go, came and stood behind their husband, an unspoken signal to leave now if their husband wanted a lift, walk home, or stay the night, but Greenfield's mother put paid to the latter after a request from one impudent hopeful, 'We're not a hotel, thank you very much', all

choosing the free taxi service instead.

After everyone had departed, Greenfield, his mother and Constance tidied up then went to bed. Constance lay alongside Greenfield unable to sleep, staring at the ceiling. "Honey, are you awake?" she said after several minutes to which Greenfield grunted, "What do you think Pike is up to?"

"I'm sure it's nothing, darling. Raine's just paranoid after that nasty business with Pyklit."

"But why would he be checking records years after he took over the farm?"

"I don't know. Maybe he wants to build some drainage, a road. Don't worry about it, darling. I'm sure we'll hear about it from him if it's important. Get some sleep," and rolled over.

Chapter 4 - History Intervenes

Pike finished his coffee and rose from the breakfast table, walked over to the kitchen sink where he placed his empty cup and plate next to Gemariah who was standing washing the dishes, saying to her, 'No rest for the wicked,' to which Gemariah smiled at him. Gemariah had only been living at the farm for a few weeks, but he had expected they would be married by now. His divorce to Doroly was in hand, he had got rid of that idiot Bishop Alexander, but Cyril hadn't turned out to be as compliant as he had expected. He hadn't yet told Gemariah that their plans for a wedding in Marvod church had yet to be approved, he just kept telling her 'soon' whenever she asked.

He walked down the corridor towards his study and stopped at the door to take a key from his trouser pocket. As he put the key in the lock Bos called out to him through the open door of his office opposite that he had put some post for him on the hall table: he had been expecting a letter from his lawyer for a few weeks, even had to ring him on two occasions to tell him to speed it up—normally one reminder would have been sufficient for him to get Bos involved, but on this occasion he had given Maslyan some leeway because he knew it would take some time to research thoroughly and locate all the relevant historical documents from multiple sources. He saw two envelopes, one small, standard letter size, but the other foolscap size and bulging, went and collected them then opened his

study door and shut it behind him. The letters were both addressed to him from Maslyan; he tore open the large one first, pulled out a thick wad of documents and sat down to read the letter at the top of the pile titled 'Mr Pike: Farm Ownership Records and Family History.'

He read through the first page of the letter: Uncle Coniva, his great-uncle's closest descendant, had inherited the single largest portion of the estate, however, there were many other inheritors listed, most of whom were distant cousins and had been bequeathed smaller farms; he read the names in the letter, recognising all his neighbours amongst them:

*Pyklit,
Anomia,
Feldland,
Raine,
Eastman,
Greenfield.*

... and stopped with a start at the last name: there had been no previous indication he was related to the Greenfields, even distantly. He was aware, and had been anticipating, confirmation of distant family relationships to several of his neighbours, but Greenfield! This was an unexpected and unpleasant discovery.

The letter referred to a map of the farms, an attached family tree, and copies of the title deeds. He opened out the folded map and family tree on his desk alongside each other and smoothed the creases. The map confirmed the original boundary of his great-uncle's farm was much larger than just his current farm; it was a formal version of the hand-drawn map in the letters Cyril had handed him. He searched for and found Greenfield's name, the family tree showing it was Greenfield's grandfather, a cousin twice removed from his great-uncle, who had inherited a large parcel of his land. The anger started to rise in him as he examined the wad of documents, the map, and saw the largesse bestowed by his incompetent great-uncle on Greenfield and the rest of his ungrateful distant relations-cum-neighbours; he stood up, clenching his fists on the table and recalled the day several months ago when he had read the article in the Forket Chronicle.

After his speech at the Federation, the Chronicle had published a long editorial early in the New Year rebutting all his points about wheat farmers

and the Alliance. He had expected most of the puerile slogans and uninformed counter-arguments: 'Lord Pike has presented his confused self-serving vision founded on a haphazard mishmash of communism and feudalism', 'a sadistic retrograde step for workers' rights in complete contravention of Federation regulations', 'a flagrant attempt to bully the W.F.A. to accept the necessarily profoundly low standards that would enable his lordship to gain membership of a group, which by its very title, apparently unperceived by Mr Pike, excludes rape farmers. If Mr Pike wants to set up a separate rape farmer organisation, let him proceed with our blessings and best wishes, for no-one else would want him', 'fatuous argument about biodiesel sources when it is a stated aim of both W.F.A. and N.A.F.F. to reduce reliance on oil as a fuel source whatever its origin', 'We all have shared responsibility for some of the terrible environmental degradation that has occurred from past practices, but rather than working together to aim for the highest standards Mr Pike would rather we accept the lowest common denominator, no doubt proudly offering his own farm as an exemplar'; but what had particularly infuriated him was the patronising dismissal of his quotation from the Bible and identification of rapeseed oil as 'heaven's dew' as 'a delusional misguided misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the Bible, reminiscent of the crazed ramblings of Bishop Cyril', and the reported interviews with several wheat farmers, in the paper and on the television: Greenfield's grandfather, Raine, Feldland, Bartel, Pommer amongst several others, for their reactions to the speech, where they had variously described him as 'off-the rails', 'vindictive', 'callous', 'heartless' and 'selfish'. Selfish! When they were living on farms that should belong to him! But the way Bishop Cyril's counsel had been ridiculed was the last straw. If that's how his neighbours wanted to thank him for his generosity he would return their gratitude with interest.

He turned over the page and found the letter described an earlier will and second map, 'dated over two years prior and superseded by the later will, copies of which being attached hereto', which had bequeathed all the land between the River Bogrich and the current farm boundary to his grandfather, the area where the tenant farmers live. Then, of particular interest, the letter described letters from his great-uncle to his lawyer, one containing a sketch, that referred to another will supposedly superseding the first, 'of which no trace can be found', in which the whole farm was left

to his grandfather.

He gazed unblinking and unfocussed at the wall opposite: he already knew that his great-uncle had died childless and bequeathed his farm to his sole remaining sibling, his grandfather, and his grandfather having already died, his portion of the estate had passed directly to Uncle Coniva, but what hadn't been clear to him until now was the large number of distant cousins, his neighbours, who had also benefitted from the will, Greenfield amongst them. His grandfather must have been beguiled in his dotage by some fiendish method, hoodwinked no doubt by his relatives and a compliant lawyer while his hapless drunk uncle let it all happen unconcerned and unchecked, robbed him of what was rightfully his; it was clear that he was in fact the sole rightful heir of the entire estate. He had tried hard to accommodate his neighbours, but after *that* article it was clear to him he could no longer work with them, and now this letter. Why bother working with them at all? He was the rightful owner of all their land anyway. What a waste of his time! He cursed himself when he thought he could have discovered this years ago, even before he'd removed Uncle Coniva. And this was exactly what Cyril had been telling him ever since he had assumed the see of Marvod; he should have paid more attention to him. They must have destroyed the final will and the other documents or at least hidden them. He could challenge the will in court if he could just find the originals, or perhaps copies still survived somewhere?

All this and more went through his mind while he sat at his desk for several minutes. He took a few slow deep breaths, in through the nose out through the mouth, a technique he'd learned from the gym, it helped to focus his scrambled thoughts, allowed his anger to subside, then walked over to the door, opened it, called out to Bos to join him and sat back down behind his desk.

"Yes, Boss. Good news?" said Bos when he reached Pike's desk.

"Have a look at that," Pike said calmly, ostentatiously displaying the documents laid out on the table with a wide sweep of his palm, sat back in his chair and clasped his hands in his lap.

Bos scanned the documents scattered across the table with a puzzled expression on his face then picked up a letter at random. "No, try this first," said Pike leaning forward, handing him the copy of the earlier will and pointing at the map. "The original will matches this".

"What is it?"

"My great-uncle's farm."

Bos slowly examined the map, his finger tracing the farm boundary, mouthing the names of their neighbours as he came to them. "But this means ..."

"That's right, Bostultus. All the land to Bogrich River is mine. Including Bull Island."

"But I thought the will—"

"Doesn't say that," Pike finished. "You're quite right. That's not what the will says. Not for now. But I'm going to get Maslyan to challenge the will. Based on this new information."

"So what do you want me to do, Boss?" said Bos, idly reading the letter he still held.

"I want you to help Maslyan. We're going to need documents to show the latest will is invalid. Speak to Sarlat. I want medical reports that show my great-uncle was not of sound mind when he signed it. Then speak to Iskaz. Tell him to investigate all my great-uncle's cousins, my neighbours, all my so-called relations. I want a report prepared that says they blackmailed him, threatened him—you can add whatever you want yourself as well—to hand over parts of the farm."

"But what about this?" said Bos holding out the original letter he had picked up. "Could you get the whole farm back?" he said with wonder in his voice.

"I'm getting to that," said Pike irritably. "Somewhere there's another will that gave my grandfather the whole lot. Get that private investigator you use sometimes—Zakulis, isn't it?" Bos nodded—"I want him to go through all the boxes, the ones in storage here, find anything that mentions the will. All I've got are letters that Cyril and Maslyan have provided. But they're not enough. Then when he's finished here, send him over to help Maslyan as well. He's to go through county records, marriage and death certificates, Church records, tax returns, everything. He's not to stop searching until he's found the will. You understand me?" Bos nodded. "Now get to it!" snapped Pike.

Maslyan arrived at Pike's chambers a little after four pm on Friday, the appointed day of Pike's now occasional face-to-face meetings with Mayor

Grayson, to find Bos standing on guard outside the door, muffled shouting coming from inside.

"Will he be much longer, Bos?" said Maslyan.

There being no response from Bos, his expression unchanged, Maslyan sat down in an empty chair outside Pike's chambers and waited.

A few minutes later, the door opened and Mayor Grayson emerged, "I don't expect to have to come all the way to Marvod again. Not for this *petty* stuff. Is that clear?" said Pike gravely from inside.

"Yes, Mr Pike," said the Mayor meekly without turning, shut the door, smiled wanly at Maslyan and left.

Bos gestured to Maslyan with a small tilt of his head towards the door and Maslyan rose and entered, sitting in a chair at the end of the long table separating him from Pike.

"Come in too, Bostultus," said Pike. Bos entered, closed the door and took position to one side of it.

"So, Maslyan, Bostultus tells me you're refusing to accept some documents," said Pike after several uncomfortable seconds.

"I must counsel against proceeding as you have instructed, Mr Pike. For them to consider the claim at all, so many years later, we've got to put forward a very strong case, which I believe we can for the land adjoining the Bogrich River and Bull Island, but as for the full claim: I fear failure and humiliation, at best, will be the result and potentially criminal charges, at worst," Maslyan said imploringly.

"Why?"

"Because the signature on this will is clearly a forgery," he said holding up a document. "The date appears to have been doctored, and it's been witnessed by someone who I know was not even a qualified lawyer at the time! And this," he said picking up the medical report, "is dubious at best, but if you can get Doctor ... ah ..."

"Sarlat," said Bos.

"Yes, Dr Sarlat, to testify in court it may hold up. But I saved the best for last," said Maslyan holding up the police report in his other hand. "This is based almost entirely on unreliable witness reports—with all due respect Bos," he said turning to Bos. "I mean your brothers are hardly independent witnesses anyway are they—and the evidence is too flimsy to justify the charges recommended by the police!" said Maslyan exasperated.

"Is this true, Bostultus?" said Pike impassively.

"No, I got them from Dr Sarlat and Chief Iskaz just like you asked, Boss," said Bos coolly.

"Are you calling Bostultus a liar, Maslyan?" said Pike.

"Of course not, but, but—"

"But, but, what?" said Pike mimicking Maslyan.

"But it doesn't matter what I think. It's up to the court to decide, and they will examine these documents more carefully than I have," said Maslyan. "They'll call independent experts."

"The court will do what I tell them."

"This is the State Court, Mr Pike. I fear you do not have as much influence with them as you do over the local Marvod court."

"Move the trial to Marvod then."

"We can't now, the case has already been filed and the hearing is listed for the fourth of July."

"The fourth of July! The start of summer!" thundered Pike. "Brilliant work, Maslyan! Right in the middle of harvest. You're incompetent fools, you and the court. Have it moved to the end of the year."

"Of course. My mistake, Mr Pike. What was I thinking?" said Maslyan contritely then continued quietly. "But we *do* have to raise our challenge in the State Court, Mr Pike, because it has precedence over the local court; if we raise this matter in the local court it will be immediately challenged in the State Court by the other parties to the will."

Pike got up and paced backwards and forwards a few times behind his desk as he considered his options. "All right. We must carry on. But with the full claim," said Pike holding up his hand when Maslyan started to object again. "I'm relying on you, Maslyan. I won't accept failure. And any humiliation will be entirely yours. You understand me?"

Maslyan knew better than to challenge Pike again and nodded. But he also knew that he had to be ready for the fall-out in court, so his only course now was to prepare a suitable sacrifice then just bill it all back to Pike under expenses.

On Sunday, Pike joined Cyril in his rooms after the service, a service which contained another stunning sermon this time about the sin of gluttony; how gluttony, drunkenness and laziness were always closely associated in the bible and all were equally despised; for some variety

several quotations from the previous millennium were included, 'gluttony has corrupted all the earth', 'gluttony was the vice that first flung Adam out of Paradise', it even touched on gluten intolerance, saying flatulence was a sign from God and in the Pardoner's words 'filthy music' or in another's, 'I'll blows the wind that profits nobody', how all were associated with wheat and never rapeseed oil.

"I finally got the letter from my lawyer about my farm," said Pike after they had exchanged greetings. "It's as you suspected, Cyril. It seems I've been swindled."

"*1 Corinthians: 'nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God,'*" said Cyril. "Are you now going to reclaim what is rightfully yours?"

"Maslyan has his shoulder to the wheel, Cyril."

"Ahh, an unfortunate choice of metaphor, I think. I hope that doesn't conjure up Jarndyce," said Bishop Cyril with a smirk.

"What do you mean?" asked Pike with a slightly concerned mien.

"I mean, I do hope you'll see this through to a rapid conclusion. Don't let the lawyers play with this as is their wont. The Lord said, Luke 11:

"Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.'

"If you are delayed due to inaction by the lawyers, plausible excuses or no, you have recourse to other methods; as the Lord himself said: '*neither are your ways my ways*'. Let me know how it goes, I may be able to help. By the way, where's Gemariah today? I didn't see her in church."

"She had to go and visit her sick mother. Cyril ... I want to talk to you about Gemariah. My divorce has just been finalised. Have you reconsidered your decision about our wedding?"

"That was quick! That's one blessing, I suppose. We've discussed this several times, and I admire your importunacy, but I'm afraid my decision is final; I can't offer the blessing you really want."

Pike sat in the chair quietly seething then said very slowly and carefully, "You owe me Cyril. You don't think Alexander liked boys in that way, do you? Do you think his heart attack was God's work or mine?"

"I will pretend, Pike, I didn't hear that for your and our Heavenly Father's sake" said Bishop Cyril crossing himself. He got up from his chair, walked round the table to where Pike was seated and stood behind him. "I

know you're disappointed, my son," said Cyril placing his palm on the top of Pike's head, "but this is the way it must be for the righteous. Trust in the Lord and you shall be delivered."

Cyril stood motionless in this position, apart from the almost imperceptible movement of his lips, saying an extended quiet prayer under his breath, at the completion of which Cyril removed his hand and said as he was walking back to his chair, "Did you approach Bishop Sovremen?"

"I never had any intention, Your Grace, of getting married in Forket, no matter how accommodating Sovremen would be. And after the way you and I were treated in that newspaper article, I thought you would understand that now."

"I see. Then I am afraid the die is cast. You must accept the Lord's judgment."

"Then I must have a civil wedding."

"I understand, my son. And perhaps after the civil ceremony we could formally welcome Gemariah into our small flock? I have checked the church records and can find no record of her baptism," said Cyril enquiringly.

"I presume she will then be welcome in church as my wife," said Pike artfully.

"Of course, of course, baptism cleanses one from sin and is a rebirth through God's Grace. But do not forget *yourself*, my child, you should repent through deep and ardent prayer; if you have the time I can hear your confession now."

Cyril conducted Pike's confession, during which Pike confessed to numerous minor transgressions, forgiveness was duly imparted and the penitent received absolution. "And of course repentance would not be complete without the giving of alms," said Cyril at its completion.

"Of course, alms. What do you need this time?" said Pike wearily.

"I find my rooms very cramped, don't you? And we meet here so often ... There is a small piece of land next to the church into which I could extend ..." Cyril left the sentence hanging, saying the last few words progressively slower awaiting Pike's response.

"O.K., send me the details. I'll consider it."

"Good, good, I'll get a quote next week."

On the way home, Pike first called the registry office and arranged a

priority booking for the following weekend, then Gemariah; she was disappointed she said, she 'wouldn't be able to wear a lovely dress and have the church all decorated like in the movies', but Pike said she could do that at the baptism instead, so just think of it like a wet wedding.

Pike and Bos sat in their new top-of-the-range farm utility vehicle, the engine idling quietly, passenger and driver doors wide open as the light planes roared past them in tight formation low over the fields, each leaving a wide trail of vapour that spread as it slowly fell and gently bathed the fields coating the weeds and young rape rosettes in a thin film of herbicide.

"I love this time of year," said Pike as the planes climbed together in the distance and turned for another run. "The new crop in orderly rows, the mellifluous music of farm machinery, the aerial accolade, the cool air presaging winter, the fragrant yet insidious aroma of glyphosate. It smells like ... like ..." he said leaving the sentence hanging.

"I can't smell anything, Boss. It's odourless, isn't it?"

"Supremacy. You'll never be a poet, Bostultus," said Pike smirking.

The planes reappeared and flew past in the opposite direction then at the completion of the run peeled off and climbed, heading in the direction of the local airfield.

"Show's over, Bostultus."

"Until spring," agreed Bos.

"What do you mean?"

"Ivor says the weeds are becoming herbicide resistors, or something like that. He says we'll have to do a second spray each spring when we top dress if we want to keep using that genetically modified Glypho-ready seed you prefer, Boss."

"Rubbish! Have a word with him again. I won't waste more money on insect spray. And tell him to check: see if any new varieties of GM-rapeseed are coming onto the market.

"Or we could—"

"Don't dare say it!" warned Pike. "We're sticking to rape. What concentration did they use this time?" said Pike.

"Three. Ivor says that's the maximum."

"When we first started crop dusting, it was just over one, wasn't it?" Bos nodded. "Let's head back now," he said, pulling his legs into the vehicle and

shutting the passenger door.

Bos put the car into gear and headed back to the farmhouse along the straight dirt track, bordered by rape fields on one side and a large drainage ditch on the other with rape again beyond. Pike's farm was generally flat and featureless, ideal for large crop fields, but this made it susceptible to flooding. As a result Pike's great-uncle had filled in the naturally sinuous streams and excavated numerous drainage ditches that criss-crossed the farm and drained into Lake Cordiomar. Following heavier rains in recent years, Pike had deepened and widened the drains and tasked Bos with making sure they were clear of undergrowth and debris before the rains were due. It was now the middle of autumn, a few weeks after sowing; the evenings were cold but not yet frosty and the late autumn rains were yet to appear. When the rains came they would wash the residual herbicide and the dead weeds down to Lake Cordiomar. Not only that, but the streams that used to exist on Pike's farm and were at one time teeming with life, had been replaced by sterile channels, unsuitable habitats for plant and animal species, and the water flow rates that now occurred after heavy rains resulted in soil erosion due to the lack of protection that would have been afforded by indigenous plant species. The overall impact was the death and stunted growth of native aquatic species and the preferential growth of pest species in the area of Lake Cordiomar adjacent to Pike's farm. The Alliance had become aware of this through anecdotal reports from recreational boaters and fishermen and had commissioned monitoring of the lake. They had presented studies at a recent meeting that showed that not only could low levels of the glyphosate he used have detrimental impacts on aquatic life, but it was concentrated in the dead weeds then released when they decomposed in the lake. However, Pike had responded this was exaggerated and overly conservative, his preferred monitoring method resulted in concentration readings far below levels of concern.

Adding to the running conflict with the Alliance was Pike's use of fertilisers; each spring after Pike's aerial top dressing, discoloured high turbidity water flows and occasionally, but with increasing frequency, algal blooms would appear in Lake Cordiomar at the outlets of Pike's drainage channels. The Alliance had shown a time series of satellite images to demonstrate it was caused by Pike's application of fertiliser. Pike had

responded with old aerial photos from a time before he introduced top dressing where the same had occurred, and argued the real culprit was global warming raising the surface temperature of Lake Cordiomar.

The Alliance had demanded Pike, as a minimum, significantly reduce his use of herbicides and fertilisers, preferably eliminate fertilisers altogether, and re-evaluate his crop rotation policy. Pike had counter-argued that this was further demonstration of the engrained bias of the Alliance's wheat farmers against rape farmers. He told them he had no intention of growing other crops, it was manifestly arrogant that the Alliance even thought they could dictate what he grew, but if the Alliance was willing to fully compensate him for the impact of not using fertilisers and reducing the use of herbicides, 'then go ahead and make an offer', which Pike noted scornfully they had yet to do.

Bos parked the car in the farmyard alongside the minibus, in which were seated Bos's two brothers, on the other side of which was gathered a huddle of farmworkers; it was late on Friday afternoon and the farmworkers were gathered for their weekly pay packet, Bos's brothers attending for additional security.

"Tell your brothers to wait in the hall outside your office," said Pike. Bos spoke briefly to his eldest brother then all three headed to Bos's office, Bos joining Pike who was now sitting behind the desk leaning back in Bos's chair arms folded. Bos got a bundle of envelopes from the safe, unlocked the side door leading from the office direct to the farmyard, outside which the workers had now formed in a group, and sat on the front edge of the desk holding the envelopes in one hand. Bos called out a name, one of the farmworkers came into the office and collected an envelope from Bos then returned outside opening the envelope and examining the contents as he left, this process continuing for each worker in turn, the farmworkers gathering in a group from where could be heard an increasingly loud murmur of compliant.

When the last name, Ivor's, was called out a few went over to Ivor and stopped him, speaking to him angrily. From inside the office, Bos and Pike couldn't hear what was being said, but they could see through the office window the gesticulating hands and fury in the faces.

At the urging of the farmhands Ivor hesitantly walked into the office then said forthrightly, "Mr Pike, the guys have told me they don't want to be

paid in oil any more."

Pike considered Ivor's statement for a few seconds, rubbing his stubble, then said, "I can't see what the problem is, Ivor. However, I can offer an alternative for those who want cash only." After a pause for effect, he went on in a louder voice for the benefit of the group of workers standing outside, "Those who don't want oil: they can sell it back to the farm now, for cash, at a discounted but generous rate."

Payment in crop had been a common custom in earlier times around Marvod and Forket, however, most of the local farms had discontinued this practice several decades ago and it had only been reintroduced by Pike after he took over the farm and recently followed by a few other rape farmers such as Pyklit. Pike's ensured his workers received about five per cent below the average after-tax wage in the area and were paid half in cash, half in rapeseed oil. The requisite number of barrels of rapeseed oil would be collected each week from the processing facility on the way back to their flats, loaded onto a trailer towed behind the minibus and off-loaded when the farmworkers arrived at their flats. Unfortunately for the workers, the rapeseed oil produced at Pike's farm was not culinary grade and could only be used by them as a fuel substitute, which greatly limited the opportunities for easy local sale. The workers' wives had tried unsuccessfully to sell the oil to local firms and invariably ended up selling it to a nearby trucking firm, which unbeknownst to them was owned by Pike and operated by associates of Bos's, from whom they obtained a substantially reduced rate. The trucking firm then sold the barrels of oil back to the processing facility for a small facilitation fee from which Pike received most of the profit; what Pike had described as a perfect example of a circular economy. But after rent and further fees and charges, described euphemistically in the hand-written payslips as 'employment agency expenses', were deducted the illegal immigrants had barely enough left over for food each week. And outside seeding and harvest, peak times on the farm, they had to find alternative work.

"Bostultus," said Pike with a smug grin on his face, having been anticipating this revolt for some time. "Give Ivor the rate I told you earlier. And make a note in the payroll ledger," then left the office passing Bos's brothers on the way to his study, confident he had successfully dealt with the issue.

Bos took Pike's vacated chair and told Ivor the proposed rate, a figure that was about five per cent more than the rate Bos's trucking firm in Marvod gave them, but still substantially less than the local diesel rate. Ivor gave the workers the news and after a brief discussion amidst several expletives directed at the absent Pike, came back with Barton and a few of the other workers and stood at the desk in front of Bos telling him none of them wanted to take up Pike's alternative offer either. At this Bos calmly put both palms flat on the table in front of him and mumbled something that sounded like 'Code D' into his lapel. Instantly Bos's two brothers dressed in army tactical trousers, tight tee-shirt and hopelessly undersized suit jacket appeared through the door by which Pike had left, took up strategic positions on both sides of the door, legs astride synchronously puffing out their chests and putting both hands behind their back, exposing a shoulder strap and semi-automatic pistol under their left armpit.

Ivor gaped at Bos, who returned his stare calm and unblinking, the two impassive security guards and their guns, back at Bos, then after the silent stalemate had been drawn out for several seconds turned and motioned with his head for the others to follow him out, leaving the office in melancholy bedraggled single file. The group re-formed outside and after a few minutes quiet but intense conversation Ivor returned alone and said they would accept Pike's offer. Bos revised the payslips and the workers filed through to receive their additional payment.

Having secured his office, Bos went through to Pike's study. "Are there other migrants available, Bostultus?"

"Yes. And there's plenty in the pipeline, Boss."

"Then turn these workers over to Immigration. Tonight," Pike said. "I want them all gone by morning. And new ones starting tomorrow. And I want additional security on the farm. You better get someone extra staying here. Put them up in your spare room. Is Armit still a bouncer at the club?"

Chapter 5 - Forket Forsaken

Pike did a final dumbbell curl with his right arm, put the dumbbell back in the rack and wiped his forehead with a towel hanging loosely around his neck. He drew in his bare stomach, held his head high and

back with a slightly arrogant tilt, a pose he practised for public appearances, admiring himself in both the front and side mirrors as he did so. To himself, at least, he appeared considerably younger than he was and approaching old age gracefully: he still regularly exercised in his gym and although he was of below average height, he carried himself in public with the air of someone considerably taller and more athletic. He touched his wig and adjusted it slightly until the large bald patch was almost hidden under it. He had been wearing the wig, made locally from hair involuntarily donated by his workers, for several weeks now, since not long after his wedding, after he suddenly developed a large bald patch on the top of his head that could not be disguised by the comb-over or other pilial abominations. He would only remove the wig after he turned off the bedside light at night then would re-position the wig as soon as he woke and conduct final artistic adjustments in front of the bedside mirror. To those who met him in public in Marvod it was clear he was wearing a wig, but no-one had so far had the audacity to suggest he get a transplant or shave his head, which was fortunate, because to his mind shaving his head would be to tempt the fate of Samson, and given he was defending his farm from the Philistines, now was not the time to appear weak: a wig was his best option he had decided. Satisfied with what he saw, he nodded to himself and went through to the adjoining shower.

After a quick breakfast he got changed into his best suit for the monthly Federation meeting in Forket town hall; he had not been to a Federation meeting in Forket for months, not since before his wedding. On occasion he had sent Bos as his proxy, but today he had an important announcement he wanted to make in person. He came down the stairs to find Bos waiting at the front door, said goodbye to Gemariah then got in the car and was driven to Forket through the light early November snow.

Having passed through the town hall security screening, he made his way with Bos towards their table, indicated by a large name tag placed at its front. The layout for the Federation meetings was quite different to the Alliance meetings; all the tables were arranged in a circle, Arthurian style, one for each farmer. The Federation president, a rotational position selected sequentially from an alphabetical roster and serving a one year term, was seated directly opposite him in the circle rim alongside the other farmers. He walked around the outside of the circle accompanied by a

general quiet hum of chatter, ignored by most of his neighbours several of whom turned their backs as he passed, but several rape farmers from distant properties rose to greet and obsequiously congratulate him on his last presentation at the Federation meeting as he passed. His table was next to Pyklit's and as he passed him Pyklit half stood to shake his hand.

"Ready for the big announcement?" said Pyklit as Bos drew Pike's seat out and Pike sat down.

"Of course! Why do you think I'm here?" said Pike a little impatiently.

"When's the first meeting?"

"Wait your turn. You'll find out same time as everyone else," said Pike irritably then turned to Bos who had since sat down and whispered something to him; Bos got up and returned with a carafe of water and poured out a drink for Pike.

The Federation President tapped on his microphone and announced the meeting would start in five minutes. Pike got some envelopes from his briefcase and placed them in a pile in front of Bos reminding him to hand them out after his presentation.

The President commenced the meeting with a welcome to members including an introduction to a new member of the Federation, who, at the President's request, stood up in garishly coloured tribal costume to general applause.

"Where's he from?" Pike asked Bos.

"I couldn't hear exactly. Some small rape farmer way out east, I think."

"Find out. Make sure he gets an invitation as well."

The President continued the meeting with notification of some minor changes to the day's programme, a summary of the minutes from the last meeting including some amendments with reference to the copy placed on everyone's table and general administrative announcements. After about half an hour, the President advised that the next order of business was an announcement from Mr Pike.

Pike sat forward, adjusted his microphone then began to read from his speech in his customary drear monotone:

"The Federation is a flawed institution, but it is nonetheless essential. Its processes may be cumbersome, tedious and slow, but they grind eventually to a conclusion. It may not offer the most effective forum for dispute resolution, but it offers a forum for discussion. It has been criticised for

overreach, including by me, but at least it has attempted to reach agreement on difficult issues. It has been accused of misuse and waste of resources, but what comparable organisation, with this many members, is free of this problem? None!"

Pike took a sip from his glass then continued: "Unlike some other elitist divisive groups, the Federation welcomes new members without biased entry conditions, as we just witnessed earlier today, when ..." Pike gestured across the room to where the new member was seated, "umm ... our newest member joined," said Pike going off script and continuing after he had found his place.

"But we cannot expect the Federation to do all the work; we must also nurture other more streamlined, focussed organisations that can work alongside the Federation in constructive partnership. In my last speech at the Federation I addressed problems with the Wheat Farmers' Alliance, an organisation I believed at the time could be a suitable partner to the Federation. I made several constructive suggestions for reform, but regrettably none, not one of those, has been implemented. It is now clear to me the W.F.A. is not a suitable body to represent the interests of rape farmers. I officially announce today I am withdrawing my application for membership of the W.F.A. Further, as helpfully suggested by some members of the W.F.A. who are present here today, I have formed a new rape farmers' organisation: The Association of Rape Seed Enterprises."

There were a few unintelligible shouts and some guffaws from around the audience.

"Order, please!" said the President. "Carry on please, Mr Pike."

"Today I formally announce the first official meeting will be held in Marvod town hall in two weeks' time. Official invitations, including membership application forms, will be handed out to all rape farmers at the conclusion of this announcement." Pike put down his notes, sat back in his chair and stared unblinkingly at the President opposite, the town hall gradually building into a cacophonous mix of muffled chortling and multiple conversations as he finished speaking.

"Order, please, everyone," said the President after a short pause, banging his gavel on the block to no discernible reduction in volume, then went on loudly. "Thank you, Mr Pike. I am sure I speak for all those present here in wishing you every success in your new venture and look forward to

working closely with your—What is it called?" he said looking down at his notes his face reddening—"Let's rather call it A.R.S.E." he said spelling out the letters to scattered laughter.

"Order, please," said the President waiting for the commotion to die down. "Is that minuted?" he said turning to the secretary seated next to him who nodded back. "O.K., I think that's an appropriate point for morning tea. In the Perdet room," and stood up.

At this declaration the concertina doors to the adjacent meeting room were thrown open through which several tables with refreshments laid out in readiness were to be seen. Bos took the pile of envelopes, sorted through them to find the one addressed to Pyklit and handed it to him, then followed the others handing out envelopes as he went; Pike headed to the closest table followed by Pyklit.

On each table the caterers had provided carafes of fruit juice and water, bowls of fruit and nuts and plates laden high with local pastry delicacies, specialities of Forket, with a table placard stating the baker's name, Pecker. Anomia joined Pike at one table, along with several other rape farmers, picked up a pastry and put it in his mouth, "Mmm. Very good. You not going to have one, Pike?" he said after a few chews, mouth half full, flakes drifting to the floor.

"Pecker Pastries: I don't think so; I don't want to get food poisoning. It's probably contaminated with ergot," said Pike, and picked up a small bunch of grapes, at which Anomia stopped chewing and Pyklit along with some other rape farmers in earshot spat out the pastry into their hand.

Bartel, who had been standing with a group of wheat farmers at the other end of the table, saw this and shouted across the table, "All the more for us then, eh, Nomey." Anomia self-consciously swallowed while Bartel surreptitiously took a small flask of spirits from his pocket, unscrewed the lid, tipped a large portion into the glass of fruit juice he was holding then took a long deep gulp.

The morning tea break ran for about thirty minutes, during which the wheat and rape farmers kept to separate groups, the other farmers milling aimlessly between those two main groups and others small and short-lived of no discernible denomination. Bartel's voice had been gradually getting louder; the conversation was clearly about Pike as he mentioned his name often and contemptuously. He then broke from the group ignoring a few

outstretched arms and entreaties to 'don't do it' and walked over to Pike, trailed by Greenfield and Feldland.

"Where's my invitation, Pikey?" said Bartel slurring his words slightly, barging between the rape farmers and standing directly in front of Pike.

Bos started to move forward but Pike held up his hand then motioned to Bos to give Bartel an envelope, which Bos thrust hard into his chest.

"What's this?" said Bartel swaying gently. "Oh right. Why would I want one of those? Do I look like a rapist?"

Seeing no reaction from Pike he went on, "You guys really know how to rape don't you: the soil, the air, the water. In the old days they called it rape and pillage. Are you going to start a pillage society as well then, eh, Pikey?"

"All right, Bartel, that's enough," said Feldland grabbing him by the shoulders and leading him away. "You've had a few too many fruit juices."

"Why not call it the Consortium of Rapists and Pillagers. CRAP!" Bartel shouted. "That's what comes out of an arse, isn't it?"

"Sorry about that, Pike," said Greenfield. "His brother just died and he's been drinking a bit heavily recently."

"You ought to choose your friends more wisely," retorted Pike.

"And you may want to re-think the name of your group," Greenfield rejoined quietly then followed Feldman outside.

All the envelopes having been distributed and there being no motions scheduled that meeting, Pike told Bos they were leaving. In the car on the way back to the farm Pike was unexpectedly taciturn; after a speech or a meeting he was usually at least mildly animated; Bos knew what this meant and wisely didn't attempt to speak to him. On pulling into the farmyard Pike told him to 'Get Armit ready'.

Before Armit started at the farm, when Pike had needed something on which to take out his anger, he would have pummelled a punch bag held by Bos into submission in his lavishly outfitted gym, but in the last several months Armit was proving useful as an alternative outlet. Bos went to look for Armit: he had left him that morning to clean out the cesspit, one of many odd jobs he did around the farm, he seemed to relish all the dirty jobs that no-one else would do. He found him at the septic tank, one of the other workers hosing him down in his full-body protective suit and told him to change into his sparring gear and meet him in the gym.

Pike joined Armit in the ring and circled his victim dancing lightly on his

feet in orthodox boxing stance. Armit knew his role well by now: after two minutes of seemingly intense work-out, Armit having feigned attempting to land some blows, a few telegraphed haymakers, some misdirected uppercuts, a few of Pike's having landed on Armit's head and a small smudge of blood having been created on his bottom lip, Armit saw Pike was tiring rapidly, let a jab land square on his nose, jerked his head back and feigned collapse to the floor. Bos took his cue to rush in and hold Pike back from landing any further telling blows. After a few seconds of resistance, Pike shook himself free from Bos and having delivered a few unsubtle profanities suggesting what his cowering victim could do to various of his family members he retired to the bathroom to have a shower. Pike having disappeared from sight, Armit rose to his feet with a smile, dressed and Bos slipped him the customary small cash bonus.

Bos called Ivor to his office then spent the rest of the morning arguing against the need for further herbicide treatment before next year's harvest and implementing crop rotation to control blight. Bos said, 'There's no problem now, let's go and check,' to which Ivor replied, 'The autumn frost has already killed the weeds. There's no point.' Ivor continued that he'd spoken to Pykli's farm manager and others: they were all having the same problem and were intending to do further pre-harvest spraying. Bos said they should wait until spring and see, but Ivor said they needed to book ahead now as the crop dusters would be fully booked before long, which would mean additional cost, and they needed to buy the chemicals weeks in advance, they couldn't just wait until the last minute. Bos said to get a different GM seed variety, but Ivor said it was too late for this year and he'd looked into alternatives as Bos had asked, and, 'There aren't any that would eliminate pre-harvest treatment anyway.' Ivor eventually had his way on the spraying and Bos agreed to let Ivor book the crop dusting, but only if there was a cancellation option and refused point blank to rotate crops, saying Pike would never agree to it.

The argument took Bos through until lunchtime and he heard Gemariah ring her bell. He went through to the kitchen and found the table had been set with the usual pre-ordered food from Marvod, which for a Friday meant Chinese, sweet and sour pork and chicken chow mein, and sat at the side of the table, Pike and Gemariah seated at opposite ends.

"Looks good, Gem," lied Bos and reached for the pork, Gemariah

smiled warmly.

"Boss. I've agreed with Ivor to book the crop dusting for next year. Seems like we have no choice."

Pike nodded pre-occupied and said, "Whatever's best." After a long pause, "That was my last Alliance meeting, Bostultus. And my last trip to Forket."

Greenfield glided warily downhill on the layer of snow and patches of ice covering the dirt road, gently braked and came to a stop at the village chief's front door. He removed his helmet and hung it on the handle bar of his motorbike then dismounted and knocked on the door. He waited for a while then knocked again, louder this time and when there was still no answer shouted out 'Hello'.

The door eventually slowly opened inwards until it reached the end of the security chain revealing a dimly lit corridor inside. "You didn't turn up for the monthly meeting yesterday," said Greenfield to the aperture.

A thin envelope appeared from behind the door and was thrust towards him with a wizened hand. Greenfield took the envelope and the hand slowly withdrew into the darkness. He opened the envelope and counted the money then said frustatedly, "You're twenty per cent short again."

"We no have money," said a shaky high pitched male voice in slow tempo and with a strong accent from behind the door.

"We need to discuss this face-to-face. Can you come to the farmhouse tomorrow?"

"We no want see you," said the disembodied voice.

"Look, this can't go on this way. We don't want to evict, you but if you don't pay the agreed monthly rent our only other choice is to cut off your services: no power, no phone, no water."

"Go away."

"O.K., but I'm coming back tomorrow with my grandfather. Perhaps you'd rather talk to him."

The fingers of two shrivelled hands slowly appeared, curled round the edge of the door, followed by an emaciated head with grey stubble and hooded eyes peering out from under a faded and worn fur hat: "Do what you want. This our home. We stay," spat the old head, then head and hands were withdrawn as slowly as they materialised and the door shut.

"O.K.," said Greenfield uncertainly to the closed door, "See you tomorrow."

Greenfield mounted his bike, put on his helmet and gingerly drove back up the hill until he reached the boundary fence where he stopped and contemplated the wisps of smoke rising from the tenant farmers' houses below him. This was now the third month in a row that the village chief hadn't turned up for the regular meeting with his grandfather, and the same for the shortfall in rent.

His grandfather had known the old chief for a long time now, they had never been particularly friendly, but until recently the relationship had always been cordial, even if the old man complained a lot, mainly about money. Usually their only contact with the tenant farmers was when the old man visited his grandfather at their farmhouse; they didn't mix socially with Greenfield's family and his workers, nor anyone else for that matter; they generally kept their own company except when travelling to Forket to sell their produce, buy seed, and shopping; all the fertiliser they needed came from the chickens and pigs each family bred and kept behind the house, in exchange for the food waste they threw to them each day.

Each of the tenant farmer families had its own moderately sized plot they managed and in return for accommodation and use of the farm land they paid a proportion of the profits from their vegetable harvest to the Greenfields, the old village chief handing over each month on their joint behalf a small bag of dirty notes and an assortment of coins, sometimes including foreign currency, collected from them all.

His grandfather had told him before he left this morning to expect a shortfall; he said he had no idea what the problem was, the rent was low, very low, much lower than others charged for houses and land around Forket and even Marvod, he was happy to discuss the rent if they wanted to, but admitted it was likely they would again have to accept part payment in vegetables as the tenants always complained of being short of cash these days; he expected the old man would complain about their housing as well, the houses certainly needed some maintenance, but at the rent they were charging they couldn't afford it, and he had explained that to the old man, if they wanted to do some maintenance themselves they could discuss that too; he had even offered to rent them a vehicle to drive to the market in Forket, where they sold their vegetables and the cultural knick knacks that

the women made, but they preferred to use a donkey and cart.

Greenfield had come via the suspension bridge in the hills to the north and it had proved slow and difficult going, so he decided to instead return south along the boundary and cross the river on the road bridge before heading west back to the farmhouse; the first section uphill would be tricky but once he reached the summit it should be much easier going on the relatively gentler sloping downhill side. When he came back tomorrow with his grandfather, it would have to be in the farm truck and he would need one of the other farmworkers to help load the vegetables.

After riding up the hill for about an hour he was approaching the crest when he saw what looked like two figures on Pike's farm trudging through the snow towards the boundary fence apex. By the time he reached them they were standing leaning against the fence, both wearing a thick jacket with the hood up and woollen hat, talking to each other with downturned head so he was unable to see either face. He got off his bike and walked towards them, one raising his head when he was quite close.

"Oh, Pike," said Greenfield in surprise. "Whatchu doing here?" as he shook Bos's hand over the fence.

"Admiring your farm," said Pike ogling the farmland over Greenfield's shoulder and shaking his hand.

"Yeah, it's a good viewpoint here, isn't it. Our farm's nowhere near as big as yours, of course, but we're happy with it," said Greenfield turning to view his farm; although the skies were grey and the clouds low, it was still sufficiently bright and clear to see all the way down to Lake Cordiomar.

"I heard you're challenging your great-uncle's will. What's that all about?" Greenfield said turning back to Pike.

"Just tidying up loose ends," said Pike.

"Oh O.K. How's your new association going?"

"Very well. We should be making more announcements shortly."

"Have you given some thought to a new name?"

"I hear your tenant farmers aren't very happy," said Pike changing the subject.

"Aww, they complain about everything and anything no matter what we do," said Greenfield. "They're even getting difficult with the rent payments now."

"Really? I wonder why that is?" said Pike turning to Bos and smiling.

"Better watch out, better take care," he went on coldly, "who knows what they may do, if they dare." Pike motioned to Bos to follow him then walked away.

"What do you mean by that, Mr Pike?" asked Greenfield to their receding backs.

"Mr Pike?" shouted Greenfield hopelessly as Pike and Bos got into their vehicle and drove off.

This conversation troubled Greenfield all the few hours it took to get back to the farmhouse. He found his grandfather in the lounge, sat down next to him on the sofa and told him about his visit to the tenant farmers, his grandfather agreeing to accompany him tomorrow. When he came to his encounter with Pike and related what Pike had said, finishing by repeating Pike's warning in a concerned hushed voice, his grandfather replied laughing, "Who does he think he is, Santa Claus?"

His grandfather sat forward on the sofa and after a pause continued, "Listen, Son, let me tell you a little about Pike: I used to get on well with his uncle; Coniva had been a wheat farmer and had started discussions to join the Alliance just like we had. He had never been admitted a full member, and got stuck on the same issues as we have, you know, environmental regulations, workers' rights, stubble burning, pesticides, all that stuff. We used to discuss it all the time. We'll get there in the end I'm sure, and so would Coniva I reckon, but as soon as Pike took over the farm, he reverted to rape and stopped all discussions with the Alliance. I mean he pretended to keep talking to the Alliance, but I think it was all just for show, and now he's got this arse thing it just proves it. He's developed some strange views from God knows where, it's almost like he wants to take his farm back to a feudal system: you should hear Nadia go on about him—she's in contact with the workers on his farm, you know, Ivor, Barton ..."

"Yes, yes, I know that already, Grandad, but what about the tenant farmers?"

"I wouldn't worry about it, my boy," his grandfather said reassuringly, slapping him on the thigh. "Pike can do what he wants on his farm, but the tenant farmers are on our land and he knows it. He's all talk, his bark is bigger than his bite, even if he is the biggest landowner round here. Anyway, it's time for dinner, isn't it," he said getting up and calling out to his daughter and Constance.

His grandfather's words gave Greenfield a little comfort, after all, his grandfather had been dealing with Pike for a long time now, hadn't he? But he couldn't help noticing a gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach. He repeated Pike's words to himself, but they now sounded less ominous, more yuletide nursery rhyme, at which point his stomach rumbled loudly. Chuckling to himself he put his gastral disquiet down to hunger and joined the others.

It was an early evening in December, about two weeks before Christmas, a biting cold wind blowing the snow against the window; inside, the fire in the lounge was sputtering and hissing, struggling to keep the room warm. Pike was sitting on the sofa in front of the fire and Bos in an armchair to one side, a glass of vodka in hand watching Gemariah climb the lower rungs of a stepladder and hand a large glass angel up to Ivor standing a few rungs above her, Ivor placing it carefully on the summit of the Christmas tree and securing it in place. Gemariah considered it askance, walked round to one side and tilted her head over, "You need to straighten it," she said. "No not that way ... Yes that's it," clapping her hands and bouncing up and down excitedly on the tips of her feet.

Gemariah held the ladder as Ivor descended, then when Ivor reached the floor, she looked up at Ivor standing close in front of her, said, 'Thanks Ivor' staring into his eyes for a couple of seconds then threw herself on the sofa next to Pike putting her head on his shoulder.

"Isn't it lovely, darling?" Gemariah said.

"Where did the wood come from, Ivor?" said Pike, ignoring her.

"The woodpile over near the silos."

"Well the roof must be leaking," said Pike just as the phone rang. He leaned forward and picked it up from the low table in front of him.

Maslyan greeted Pike then informed him the court case had been decided. "Already?" said Pike emphatically. "The hearing just started a few days ago!"

"Yes ... and it was ... thrown out," Maslyan said jerkily then paused, waiting for Pike's delayed response.

Pike stood up without saying a word and walked to his study shutting the door behind him, "Go on."

"The court accepted the validity of both the final will and the one

immediately preceding it," Maslyan continued. "They accepted Dr Sarlat's testimony and when they asked him why he hadn't said anything at the time, Dr Sarlat said he hadn't been called to testify; but they rejected the police report, they said it was poorly prepared and provided insufficient evidence to justify further investigation. And as for the 'so-called third will', as they termed it: they called an expert to the stand and he testified it was forged, 'An amateurish attempt at forgery at that', he said. In the end the court denied our attempt to extend the time limit for challenging the will; they said such a lengthy delay required extraordinary evidence and we had not supplied it, and recommended the police conduct an investigation into attempted fraud."

Pike stood with the phone to his ear, his mouth moving without forming words.

"Mr Pike?" Maslyan said after a long pause.

"Was the forger identified?"

"Oh yes, didn't I say?" said Maslyan cheerily. "He's already handed himself in. Yes, that was a turn-up. A junior clerk from our firm arrived at court as the judges were handing down their finding and admitted to forging the will. He said it was a few years ago when he was a law student and a heavy cocaine user, masked men broke into his flat and told him either they would inform the police he was a supplier, or he could do a simple job for them, his choice. He didn't know what happened after that because he never heard about it again, and that was his incentive to finally kick his habit. The clerk's given a formal statement to the police so you may be called to Forket for questioning."

"Me? Why me? They can try Uncle Coniva if they like. As I've already told you, Maslyan, I don't go to Forket any more. You deal with it, that's what you get paid for," he said dismissively.

"And what are your instructions vis-à-vis the will, Mr Pike?" said Maslyan.

"Instructions? Isn't it *obvious*?" said Pike incredulously.

"Ahumm ... I don't follow ... I believe we've already exhausted our options in the State Court, so—"

"Exactly! Take the case to Marvod, as I told you the first time, you incompetent ... mongrel," said Pike vehemently, struggling to articulate the appropriate insult.

"I can't do that, Mr Pike, and I object in the strongest possible—"

"Do what you're told, Maslyan," said Pike quietly but with calm venom. "Or I won't feel quite so generous this Christmas. Can you follow that?"

There was a long pause before Maslyan sighed and said he would do it immediately, as instructed. Pike added that the forged will was not to be presented in Marvod, that he would investigate further himself, then hung up.

Pike returned to the lounge and stood in the doorway, Bos, Ivor and Gemariah all scrutinising him curiously.

"Everything O.K., Boss, we could hear—"

"Come here, Bostultus," said Pike smiling weakly and crooking his finger and then went back into his study.

"What's up, Boss?" said Bos shutting the door behind him.

"That was Maslyan. The court case in Forket failed. I've told him to move it to Marvod, but without Zakulis's slipshod will. I'll talk to you about that later. You and I will call in unannounced on the Judge tomorrow, in Marvod, to clarify things for him. I need your brothers to pay Maslyan a friendly home visit. He needs a little encouragement to make sure he does the right thing."

"How much *encouragement*, Boss?" said Bos enthusiastically.

"Not that much," said Pike smirking, Bos's face dropping. "Have them wait outside his house until his wife and children appear, then give each of them a box of expensive Belgian chocolates, each nicely wrapped, his wife last. Tell her they're early Christmas presents compliments of Mr Pike. You know the routine."

Chapter 6 - Grandad Checks Out

Constance and Greenfield were packing up their weekly weekend grocery shopping at the check-out of Forket's one large supermarket, called Foodbazaar. Normally Constance would have accompanied Greenfield's mother on such a trip, but she had been confined to rest at home.

A few weeks back Greenfield's mother had complained to Constance of pain in her chest, breathlessness and admitted she had been suffering a continuous strange tingling sensation in her feet and pains in one leg for several weeks. Constance had taken her for a check-up and the doctor

found she had high blood pressure; an array of tests was performed: ECG, chest X-ray, blood and stress tests, carotid Doppler ultrasound and finally coronary angiogram, which confirmed severely clogged arteries. The doctor had immediately booked her in for a coronary bypass operation, prescribed her a rainbow array of tablets and capsules, statins, beta blockers and others, that she had to take in the meantime, as well as a daily exercise routine and dietary changes.

Constance was handing the shopping bags—filled, at the doctor's bidding, with more fish, fruit and green vegetables than would typically have been the case—to Greenfield who was placing them in the trolley. The nubile check out girl handed the last bag, two honeydew melons protruding from the top, direct to Greenfield, who took it from her, gazing distractedly at the cleavage of her matching large breasts displayed by her tightly fitting and partly unbuttoned uniform shirt.

"Hey! Mister!" said Constance banging the trolley into Greenfield's legs twice after wondering at the delay, discerning the direction of his gaze and disturbing his mammaric daze. "Baby on the way, remember?" she said patting her distended belly.

"The Doctor said more fruit, didn't he? And I've got eyes!" said Greenfield as he turned and put the bag in the trolley, opening his eyes wide and looking from side to side in exaggerated fashion, then started pulling the trolley towards the automatic doors.

"More like tit goggles," said Constance shaking her head as the door opened. "You're almost as bad as your Grandad. Is mammaintuitis hereditary?"

Greenfield stopped and turned around slowly, looked back at Constance then down at her enlarged breasts and with an exaggerated leer flashed his brows rapidly, licked his lips and held both hands out fingers groping.

"Hey! These belong to someone else now," she said taking her hands off the trolley and covering her chest with both hands, to which Greenfield changed his expression to one of exaggerated horror mouthing the word 'no'.

"Stop it, you idiot! We're blocking the exit and people are watching us," she said laughing and looking about sheepishly. "Hey, isn't that Gemariah?" said Constance nodding in the direction of a woman across the road and pushing the trolley to the left and onto the footpath under an old shopfront

veranda.

Standing under a wide ornate portico in front of an Italian designer fashion boutique, a tall lady in a long flowing dress, wearing sunglasses and holding a small bright red umbrella in one hand and several bags in the other was standing swivelling her head impatiently from side to side. Between them the heavy rain pelted down on the road and exposed areas of footpath, making a light mist in the late winter morning air, a small yet noisy torrent running through the gutters and into storm drains.

"Hard to tell, but who else would wear sunglasses in this weather?" said Greenfield.

"Look like she's been shopping for essentials again," said Constance.

"I wonder if Pike knows she's here."

"Doubt it, but I can understand why, the clothes shops in Marvod are so rubbish: the so-called designer labels there are all fake; you can't trust anything from Marvod. You know, I haven't actually spoken to Gemariah yet. Wait here, I'm going to say hello," said Constance taking her umbrella from the trolley. Just as she was opening the umbrella and preparing to cross the road, a car pulled up on the other side splashing water onto the footpath. A heavy set man got out and opened the door, the lady closed her umbrella and got in then the car sped away.

"Oh well," said Constance closing her umbrella, "maybe next time. Do you want to get something to eat in Pimples while we're here?"

Next to the supermarket was a burger chain called Pimpinson, which Constance and Greenfield used to frequent when they were students, a meeting place and hang-out for Forket youth. Greenfield had assigned his nickname for it based on the clientele's faces, and could be the only reason they all went there, a kind of culinary bond, which he said was an undersold benefit that Pimples should be using for marketing. Forket was host to five fast food chains, each specialising in a different species of carcass, but since living on the farm, Constance and Greenfield hardly went to any of them. In fact, the customer headcount at Pimples had been reducing in spite of the fact that prices were relatively cheap compared to other fast food chains and getting cheaper still. Fewer people in Forket were eating their products after independent investigations had proven beyond doubt that they were buying up artificially cheap tropical rainforest, clearing the land and using it to graze beef cattle. The decreased tree cover

was causing increased runoff from the degraded land carrying with it cattle effluent, which caused waterway siltation, decreased fish catch and increased incidence of a variety of illnesses for the locals. No locals benefitted, other than the few corrupt government officials who sold the land. All of this without considering obesity, tooth decay from the fizzy sugary water concoctions they sold as accompanying drinks, and the net impact on global warming. A slow and steady price death spiral, a salutary lesson in inverse market demand, in Forket at least.

"I think I'll give it a miss. I need to go to Derries; I'll take the bike and meet you back at the farm."

"You'd better not be visiting any of the local attractions," said Constance jokingly.

"You know me. Always on the look-out for a nice *deal*," said Greenfield as Constance kicked him in the rear.

They carried on around the corner to the car park, Greenfield got the motorbike down from the tray, kissed Constance, nodded when she said 'Oh I forgot, can you get some bread from Dad', and as she drove off rode back up the road to Pain de Forket just to the south of the town centre.

"Hi, Son. How's my girl? When's the calving date?" said Pecker as Greenfield walked into the shop.

"Bomb bay doors will open in about one month, Sir," said Greenfield saluting. "I will inform Captain Pecker when we are over the target," and picked out four loaves, placing them on the counter. "And I'll have a half dozen pastries as well, those over there right in the corner," he said pointing them out in the glass display cabinet below him, then as soon as Pecker's assistant ducked down to take them out, he snatched a chocolate éclair from the counter and put it whole in his mouth, shutting it before the assistant reappeared.

Pecker shook his head sadly. "Readiness inspection," he said.

Greenfield gripped his stomach folds and Pecker peered over counter, tutted and shook his head. "O.K., but I don't want Connie calling and telling me you've had a heart attack."

The assistant totted up the purchase: four loaves, six pains de chocolat."

"And one éclair," said Pecker.

"What éclair?" mumbled Greenfield mouth full in mock bewilderment, chewed rapidly, swallowed and opened his mouth to the assistant to show it

was empty.

"Actually, Greenfield, I wanted to talk to you seriously. Come through and I'll show you," he said, Greenfield following him to the store room after he'd paid the assistant.

"You see this flour," he said putting a gloved hand into an open sack, lifting out a handful of flour and holding it in front of Greenfield, gesturing with his eyebrows to Greenfield to open his hands then placing the flour in Greenfield's upturned cupped palms. "Can you feel that?" to which Greenfield rubbed the flour between his fingers, put it to his nose then dipped his tongue into it.

"Now compare that to flour made purely from your wheat," he said. Greenfield dropped the handful into an adjacent bin, clapped his hands together then repeated the process for the second flour.

"Can you tell the difference?" said Pecker.

"That first one is slightly finer, more silky, and maybe a bit sweeter nuttier aftertaste," said Greenfield.

"Very good. Virtually impossible to tell the difference though isn't it; the only way you can really tell is through testing. There are all sorts of tests: hardness, elasticity, strength, P over L, G and P coefficients, falling number, many others. That first flour is from France, by the way; I used it for my baguettes today. I got it from a colleague in France when I was visiting for a conference last week, it's what called T65. The T number is the ash content, from the French 'taux de cendre'; it gives an indication of the mineral content, which is mainly the bran, after milling. T65 has a lower gluten content than your equivalent, is milled finer, they use different milling and combining processes, softer, it's made from a soft wheat grain variety, and has no additives and no chemicals, in particular it's not bleached. And those two bags next to it, by the way, are T55 and T45; he uses them for all his pastries. But it's the baguette flour I wanted to talk to you about." Pecker went back into the shop and came back with two baguettes, handing one to Greenfield.

"You see Greenfield, you probably don't even know it, but you've got another job: you're really the Archangel Michael, heaven's gatekeeper. A perfectly baked fresh baguette is the pinnacle of baking, it's as close to perfection as you will ever come on earth, Greenfield, and the path to perfection starts at the wheat," he said holding up the baguette. "I've been

trying for the perfect baguette for almost forty years and I'm still not close. You have to use all five senses multiple times, you know, to enjoy a baguette. O.K., so follow me, start with sight: diameter, length, the relative proportions, the quignon, a variegated crisp surface well scored, not too deep and not too few or too many. And don't forget to turn it over; you want evenly baked not burnt to a crisp on the bottom. It's not a walking stick, it's not a baseball bat, is it? So 80%, maybe 90%, would have already failed!

"Now hold it in both hands and smell it, eyes closed," he said. "And that's just a prelude, but it's already heavenly. Now gently squeeze and flex it. No, not too hard. Can you feel the hard texture and that resistance to crushing and bending, you certainly can't bend it into a U shape like those flexible plastic rods most supermarkets laughingly call baguettes can you? That's another 10% fallen by the wayside: we're already down to the last 5% and we haven't even seen the inside yet. Now put your ear up close between your hands and gently break it open.

"Ha. Did you hear that! Beautiful. A drawn out crunch, not a single crack like a tree branch falling, not an imperceptible piff, or worst of all, nothing! You didn't have to break it over you leg, did you, or rip it apart from the side like a piece of tough beef? Now as you open it up see how a few—there go some now—flakes of the crust fall off, how the crumb resists a bit then comes apart, slightly reluctantly, and now smell it again, take a deep whiff. Ahhh. What could be better?

"Now the eyes again: look at it end on: the thin crust, not so thick it'd lacerate your gums trying to bite into it, it's not a Batard and that's an appropriate name if ever there was one! And do you see a few large voids, but mostly of assorted small sizes. No? Neither can I!" he said dispiritedly. "Well that's what it should look like, but I still struggle to get that bit right; it's too uniform this.

"Now touch again: feel how soft the inside, like velvet but a bit springy. And only now are we ready to taste; so many have failed by this point that we're biting into one in ten thousand at the very best. Now sit down, break the end off, apply a dab of Bleu de Bresse," Pecker sat on a small wooden bench, closed his eyes, took a small bite out of the bread and chewed for a few seconds, Greenfield following his example, "lift your lightly chilled glass of Grand Cru," he said lifting an imaginary glass, "or maybe even better, a

Louis Latour, and ..." Pecker's voice started breaking and his eyes welled up with tears.

"Sorry Greenfield, got a bit carried away," he said wiping his eyes." I forgot to mention the other senses, we don't just have five you know. It felt like a warm morning back in Occitania, the Aveyron, a small village somewhere in the Gorges du Tarn, sitting under the shade of a large tree in a square outside a boulangerie, freshly baked baguette in hand ..."

Pecker and Greenfield chewed on for a few seconds. "See?" said Pecker. "A beautiful combination of crunch and soft crumb; a bit chewy but not too much: you don't want a texture like Minties or a Fruit Chew, which is what you would get if you used another flour, like from America, Canada, or round here. That's right you can't make a proper baguette with your flour. It's a bit like the difference between processed cheese and any of hundreds of cheeses I could name: one is ... well, cheese, and the other is a flavourless rubber substitute; it may look like cheese, well cheddar anyway, but it's as much right to be called cheese as the sole of my shoe, and I'd rather eat the latter, it would at least have some taste. Anyway, don't get me started on cheese. The point I was making is if you don't have the right flour you've missed the starting gun, long before all the complications of getting the water content right, cold retarding, kneading, proofing, steaming, temperature, etc."

Pecker took another bite then chewed slowly. "O.K., I'd give it overall eight out of ten, again," said Pecker disappointedly. "Oh well, maybe I'll get there in another forty years," and sighed.

"Tastes great to me, Dad."

"Yeah, well, it's not just the taste is it, as I've tried to explain. I won't be winning any award in France for that, but I'd win gold here every year. So I've tried talking to the mill, but they just tell me they have no intention of changing their milling process, and they insist they would never sell flour without additives such as bleaching agents, preservatives, enrichment agents, conditioning agents, emulsifiers, their other customers demand all of them. But until they do, I'm going to keep importing French flour for baguettes and some of my other breads. I thought, as the largest wheat producer in the area you, and maybe some of the other wheat farmers, would be able to convince the mill to look into it. And have you considered planting a soft grain, at least in a couple of paddocks?"

"I don't know much about the soft and spring wheat varieties; since I've been on the farm it's always been a hard winter wheat, but maybe Grandad tried some others in the past, I'd need to discuss it with him. As for talking to the mill: they're completely independent of us and I doubt they'd listen, but we've got a meeting with them coming up so I'll raise it then."

Pecker thanked Greenfield, who collected his shopping, said goodbye to his father-in-law and left. On the way back to the farm Greenfield stopped in at the rural supply-cum-hardware store, called Derevoly, located at the southern outskirts of the town: he needed to buy a new pair of gumboots and discuss some new sunflower seed varieties Derevoly had suggested. While he was there he had a look at the latest tractor models as well; he was sitting in one of the tractor cabs, discussing its features with a sales agent, when he got a phone call.

"You need to get back here," said Constance. "Mum's in a state. She's furious with Grandad. She got a call from the secretary of the Alliance wanting to know why we'd withdrawn our application for membership. She confronted Grandad and he told her that's what he wants now. And you know she's not well, she needs to watch her blood pressure."

"Are they both still at home?"

"Yes. She doesn't want to talk to him till you get home. We need to look after her, darling, she's got her operation tomorrow!"

Greenfield found Constance preparing lunch, quietly talking to his mother who was sitting at the kitchen table, his grandfather sitting by himself in the lounge in splendid silence. He asked his grandad if they could have a meeting now, to which his grandfather assented disdainfully. Greenfield went to the kitchen and helped his mother to the lounge with the aid of her cane, where they both sat down on the sofa facing his grandfather who was staring haughtily out the window, Constance sat in an armchair to one side, all silent in their own thoughts.

"What were you doing in Marvod yesterday?" Greenfield's mother finally asked her father breaking the tense silence.

"I was meeting with Angela and Pike—"

"Meeting with Pike? What meeting?" said Greenfield's mother baffled and looked at Greenfield and Constance for any information, receiving nothing but head shakes.

"We've been neglecting some of our friends and neighbours for too

long," said her father. "I told Pike we're reverting to rapeseed and he's agreed to expedite my application for membership of his rapeseed association," he said grandiloquently.

"What! We're not doing this again, Dad. If that's what you want you can have the farm to yourself. I'm not well enough to take any more of this," said Greenfield's mother in tearful exasperation.

"Then my grandson can have it," he said imperiously.

"I will *not* farm rape, Grandad," said Greenfield slowly and emphatically. "And I will *never* go into partnership of any kind with Pike. And Mum, Nadia, Mitson, Rev, Constance, we all feel the same way," he said to slow nods from his mother and Constance.

"Is this really what you want, Dad?" said his daughter between sobs before composing herself. "You're forcing out your grandson, your great-grandchildren, forcing them to leave a farm they have called home for years, which they have helped you run for years, even looked after you when you were unwell."

Greenfield's grandfather maintained a stony-faced silence, although mention of his grandchildren seemed to unsettle him and he mumbled quietly, "I'm not forcing anyone out."

After a long pause, Greenfield's mother went on, "So who's going to run the farm now? Illegal migrants? Bos; that deranged sidekick of your new best friend? And what is this all for anyway? And what exactly is it about Marvod you seem to like so much all of a sudden, that you prefer over your own family? It's not that *girl* is it?" she said gradually getting angrier, spitting out the word girl.

"What if it is?" said her father sullenly. "Angela says—"

"Angela says," she said sarcastically repeating his words, "Is that what she told you her name was?" she said scoffing. "How would you know *Angela* said that anyway, you've probably not even looked at her face yet, seen her lips moving! For God's sake Dad, she's probably forty years younger than you," she said indignantly.

"Fifty actually," he said proudly, a smile flitting across his face. "Angela says it's a sign from the gods, our age difference is the same as her address, her phone number, her—"

"IQ," said his daughter under her breath; "Bra size?" enquired Greenfield," in quiet admiration.

"Her cat's name," said his grandfather to perplexed frowns from the others. "She says we were meant to be together. We're in love. I know it's been a while since you—"

"Don't you *dare* bring my dear late husband into this," said Greenfield's mother in a breaking voice through clenched teeth sitting forward on the settee. "I'm not going to let you do this, Dad," she said defiantly, then appearing to suddenly realise her situation went on in a shocked voice, Dad! I'm going to hospital tomorrow for my bypass operation. You knew that! How can you do this now of all times?" she said sobbing loudly and fell back in defeat.

A silence fell over the group, broken only by the sounds of weeping and occasional moans from Greenfield's mother.

"May I talk to you alone, Grandad?" said Constance who until this point had been observing each of them in patient silence, to which Greenfield's grandfather pursed his lips and said, 'Yes'.

Greenfield's mother regarded Greenfield imploringly with tears on her cheeks, Constance him for confirmation with arched brows, and Greenfield stared back at them both in turn; after a long pause he heaved a heavy sigh and nodded gently.

Constance went up the stairs followed by Greenfield's grandfather, entered his grandfather's bedroom then closed the door softly behind them both.

Greenfield and his mother sat initially in stunned silence until they could tolerate the increasingly loud and ever slowing ticking of the clock no longer, struck up a distracted conversation about arrangements for the hospital tomorrow, at his mother's insistence Greenfield helped her struggle to her feet to get a drink of water then with difficulty back to the settee, alternated between periods of silence and talk of arrangements on the farm before the start of spring. Eventually after about ten minutes a door opened upstairs and Constance walked unaccompanied slowly down the stairs and stood in the middle of the lounge, Greenfield and his mother contemplating her expectantly.

"Grandad has agreed to hand the farm over to Mum, but only on the condition that we buy him a small flat in Minar and he stays there with Angela undisturbed by us, and, this is important, we don't sow anything and don't try and re-join the Alliance for at least one month from today. I can't

tell you why," she said noticing their puzzled faces, "I've promised not to. Just trust me. And don't worry, Mum, your son will manage the farm fine by himself while you're recovering, won't you son?" she said looking to Greenfield for affirmation, who nodded vigorously. "Do you both agree?"

Greenfield's mother regarded them with a palpable air of relief and said 'yes' followed by Greenfield.

"How did you manage that?" asked Greenfield slightly awestruck when they got to their bedroom not long after.

"I'll tell you about it one day," said Constance.

PART 3

Chapter 1 - An Eye to the Future

"*J*oe," said Constance betraying a little frustration, "Sit still, will you! Your Auntie Gemma and I are trying to talk."

"Where's Olivia?" asked Gemariah.

"She'll be here with her boyfriend shortly. Then they're going down to the beach with Joe, aren't they Joey boy?" she said ruffling the hair of her son sitting next to her in the café.

"My name's Jorah, not Joe," said Jorah grandly, squirming away from his mother's hand. "Awww, do I have to go with her again, Mum? She just spends the whole time snogging," he continued in a whine.

"Does she indeed?" said Constance laughing. "I'll remind her when ... ah, but here she is now," said Constance waving to a short slender young lady who had appeared in the café entrance wearing a large straw sunhat, oversized round sunglasses, full length thin mesh translucent beach dress over a small bikini and a designer crochet beach bag over one shoulder.

"I *like* it," said Gemariah appreciatively after Olivia arrived at the table next to Constance, Olivia raising her arms flamboyantly and doing a full Flamenco turn, her dress splaying out exposing her bare legs through the full side splits on both sides.

"Where did you get it from, Livvie?" said Gemariah clapping excitedly.

"That shop right opposite your flat, Auntie Gem. They've got them on sale now," she said beaming at Gemariah.

"Young lady," said Constance sternly up to Olivia, "I hear you're spending your time at the beach focussed on your boyfriend instead of keeping an eye on Jorah like we agreed."

"You little telltale," said Olivia to Jorah smiling, who poked his tongue out at her playfully.

"Don't forget I've paid for this trip, for you *and* your boyfriend."

"Yes, Mother dear," she said saluting her playfully, "I know, and I promise I'll follow orders today. Come on Joe, let's go," she said to Jorah, grabbing his hand and leading him out reluctantly protesting, ' My name is Jorah'.

"Have you got his hat and sunscreen?" shouted Constance to Olivia's retreating back to which Olivia held up her other hand and signalled with thumb up and disappeared from view out the door into the autumnal morning sun.

"When do you have to go back, Connie?" said Gemariah.

"At the weekend, school holidays finish tomorrow," said Constance glumly.

"Cheer up, Connie. It'll be all over soon then you can come and live with me here," said Gemariah gaily.

Connie looked gloomily out the window past the park to the beach. Although the days were getting shorter and night time temperatures were bracing, the weather here was balmy around midday and the ocean was yet pleasantly warm having not received its winter chill: a day at the beach in Gemariah's bolt-hole, even in late autumn, was certainly a welcome change from the cold and frosty days back home on the farm.

"How old is Joe now?" said Gemariah.

"Almost thirteen," said Constance roused from her thoughts, "and Olivia just turned twenty two before you ask. Yeah, I know," she said responding to Gemariah's surprised face, "It seems like a lifetime ago when he was born, doesn't it."

"Well it sort of is for me, Connie, you know living here now. You're still at home most of the time, dealing with all that stress. But compared to when Jorah was born ... I don't know how you coped Connie, I mean you had a new baby, a young daughter, your mum was recovering from her operation, your grandad—Can I mention him?—in Minar with that girl ..."

"Angela."

"Angela, yes. And how much help was Greenfield? Then that Bull Island thing, when Pike got given it by—"

"Stole you mean."

"Well, I don't understand all the lawyer lingo, Connie, but Pike told me it was all legal, he said it was called 'advert possession'."

"Adverse, you mean, but you're getting confused with the tenant farmer land where the tenant farmers argued they had been occupying our land for years. No, for Bull Island, after that ruling on his great-uncle's will, Pike got a court order from Marvod transferring land ownership to him and a possession order to evict us. But Mum refused to sign the Court Order and

both were rejected in the State Court anyway so it was never legal.

"Actually Gem, that's what I wanted to talk to you about today, Bull Island I mean, and the tenant farmers' land, well the land they farmed anyway. It felt to me at the time it wasn't coincidence that everything happened at once. I'm sure Pike picked the time carefully to take over Bull Island and then right after that the tenant farmers issue. I mean he could have done it any time, but he chose then when it was chaos at our farm. I don't mean the baby of course, I'm talking about Grandad's ridiculous behaviour, mum's long recovery—"

"You're not suggesting Pike had anything to do with your Mum's operation, are you!" said Gemariah perturbed.

"No of course not, she had a chronic condition, but he must have known it would mean a long recovery, and with Grandad out of the way that just left me and Greenfield to manage everything for several months. And then right at that time, pow! Pike decides to act."

"What about Nadia and the other farmworkers?"

"Well, sure, they helped a bit; Greenfield basically just left the running of the farm to Nadia for several months while everything else was going on, but it was still hectic for us. Did Pike say anything to you back then about any of this?"

"Well he didn't say anything about your grandad, not to me anyway. But I did see some photos of your grandad and Angela sticking out of an envelope on Bos's desk when I was dusting Bos's office and I had a little peek. They looked like they were taken in one of Bos's hotels, some of them in bed, some nude. I'm not going to forget the nude ones in a hurry, I can tell you, that's how I remember it so well," she said laughing. "You know, it wouldn't surprise me if Bos was involved actually. Ivor said he and his brothers got up to some real mischief sometimes," said Gemariah blithely.

"Mischief!" said Constance incredulously. "I think more appropriate to say extortion, fraud, money laundering, sex trafficking, prostitution, intimidation, violence ..."

"All right, all right, Connie," said Gemariah harassed. "I didn't know anything about any of that. Bos and Pike kept all their business stuff from me. You would need to talk to Bos about it, wouldn't you?"

"I would if I could," said Constance dejectedly. "You didn't get a copy?"

she went on hopefully to shakes of Gemariah's head. "No of course not, why would you. But can you remember anything else? What else was in the envelope?"

"There were several other sheets of paper in there. It was some kind of surveyranc report and I saw part of a birth certificate. That's all I had time to see before I heard Bos coming back."

"O.K. That must have been Angela's. I'll get a copy," said Constance making a mental note. "Did Pike ever mention anything about the Cowboy?" she said foxily.

"The Cowboy? Why would you be interested in him?" said Gemariah nonplussed.

"Well he threatened Greenfield, you know."

"No! Really!" said Gemariah shocked. "I didn't know that. But he didn't start visiting us until the farm after the tenant farmer thing started, I think," she said slightly bemused.

"Yes, I know. I didn't think he was involved right from the beginning, but I'm pretty sure he had some influence later. Didn't they used to be friends or something?"

"Yeah, they were. He was always so jolly when he was with Pike, it was like a bromance. A bit embarrassing sometimes, you know, it was like he had a crush on Pike," she said putting her hand over her mouth and giggling. "The first I ever heard of him was when Pike said I had to get dressed up for the visit of an important overseas guest. But they kept most of their business talk private, all I ever heard them talking about over dinner was oil."

"Well if you think of anything let me know. What about Bull Island or the tenant farmers?"

"Oh well. Pike talked about Bull Island a lot. He was really proud of it. Those court cases started just after I moved to the farm, you know. Pike said he'd found out that he owned Bull Island and he was just waiting to find the the right evidence to get it back. He was disappointed about the State Court ruling of course, but he said he didn't care, it was what happened in Marvod that mattered to him most."

"But why? It must have been obvious, even to him, that the State Court is a higher authority."

"I don't know, he never said. I think it was probably just because he had

so many friends in Marvod, police, judges, councillors, lawyers, loads of friends and they always agreed with him. I don't think he had any friends at the State Court; it's in Forket, after all! He always preferred Marvod to anywhere else anyway, so that must be it, I suppose. It was around then that he published all those articles in the Marvod Gazette as well. He used to show me them in the paper, he was so proud of them. He said he wrote them all, but I know at least some of them were written by people at the town council, because I overheard him discussing them on the phone."

"What articles do you mean?" Constance said cautiously.

"Well not '*That Article*', as you called it, that one about your farm; that came much later. There was one called 'Farmhood', another called 'Focus on the Farm', another called "The Modern Democratic Farm' I think, another—"

"Whoa! How many were there? Dozens? Really! Pike lecturing others about farming and democracy! Wow, it's even more obvious to me now that he was hiding in plain sight as an archetypal run-of-the-mill tyrant with a bloated vision of self-grandeur cloaked by words of majestic altruism," said Constance as if thinking to herself aloud.

"I don't know what you mean, Connie. I've told you before I always thought he told me the truth. And he always kept fit, he's never looked bloated to me," said Gemariah peeved.

"When did all this start?" said Constance brushing aside Gemariah's comments.

"You mean the articles?"

"Well, yes, but before that even."

"He'd been writing articles to the Marvod Gazette for a long time. He did it quite a lot, 'whenever I've got an itch I need to scratch,' he used to say."

"Like an eczemic cur," said Constance under her breath.

"He was writing them even before we got married. Don't forget his big speeches at the Federation, Connie, and he always wrote articles around the same time. He used to discuss them with Cyril. He's been in contact with Cyril since before he came to Marvod, you know."

"Yes, you said already," said Constance, then went on to herself in a low voice, "Cyril! I knew that *parasite* would be involved somewhere."

"I printed out all those articles and some other stuff as well—Well I got

Ivor to do it for me, I mean, I can't use the computer—I thought you would want to see them; you seem to be so interested in anything Pike wrote. Do you?"

Constance said she did so Gemariah went up to her flat above the café and same back ten minutes later with a thick heavy folder which she handed to Constance, Constance taking the sheets from the folder and placing it in a pile in front of her.

"I recognise some of these, Gem. Are they all from the Gazette?" said Constance she leafed through the large pile, quickly scanning each sheet before transferring it to another pile alongside.

"Mostly, but I just got Ivor to print out everything on Pike's computer. Ivor said some of it is just thought bubbles, like notes for essays."

Constance stopped at a sheet headed 'Farmhood: A Question of History', reading the title out loud.

"That was one he wrote before he gave one of his big speeches at the Federation, I think," said Gemariah. "It's something about crops, isn't it?"

"No, I don't think so, Gem," said Constance after a long pause, turning over the page and moving through the following sheets. "It seems like the basis for his views about farm management and his historical justification for it. This was the first time I heard the word 'farmhood', you know, it's a made-up word, a Pike-ism."

"I know. He was so clever, wasn't he?" said Gemariah proudly. "He could invent his own words, he said it made him feel like Shakespeare, he said he understood exactly how he must have felt having his intellect constricted by a dictionary."

Constance read out passages from the article as she skimmed down the first page:

"The pros and cons of feudal land tenure and its impact on farm management practices and the environment ...'

"A fair wage: risk and reward for the owner and the worker ...'

"Migration: how to manage migration to the benefit of the farm? Examples and warnings from overseas and our own history.'

"This is more relevant, this passage here," said Constance after turning over the page and read:

"We are one people, we share one language, why can we not work together for the common good? The barriers between us are artificial, they

have come about only recently in our shared history. Hundreds of years ago, nay, even as far back as one thousand years or more, we were one. Outside forces would seek to tear us asunder, to separate us; separated we are weak, we succumb to the devil's temptation, the forces of darkness, but together we are strong, together we work with the will of God on our side.

"My mission is to re-unite us, that is my earnest wish for us all. It is a mission I began in my time as Mayor in Marvod, I strengthened there our institutions, our judiciary, the police, our laws and regulations, but there is still so much to do. I did not realise till later that our education system has also played its part in weakening us, this was a failure on my part that I acknowledge, but who of us is without flaw? Our youth are our future. If they are not being taught today what makes us strong, how can we prosper tomorrow? How can we guarantee a profitable harvest if we do not plant the right crop, in the right soil, with the right fertilisers, do not use the right herbicides, do not till the land ...'

"That speech at the Federation was all about the Alliance, Gem, but there's nothing much here about that, in this article at least, although his favourite 'them and us' trope certainly stands out. Superficially, it all looks fairly bland, I mean I can't see any evidence so far of Cyril's blood and thunder, his venom; nothing to suggest what happened later. But I guess that's what people said about Hitler's speeches as well, the focus on common perceived grievances, whether real or not, devious almost unobtrusive reference to latent themes that were more explicitly expounded by others, purposely vague proposed solutions that then through intentional insidiousness gradually became policy; like the way a single virus hitches a ride into a host many orders of magnitude larger, multiplies rapidly, then even while its host is dying or dead spreads to its next victim."

"Are you comparing Pike to Hitler?" said Gemariah confused.

"Not really; just using his widely recognised speech writing style as an example, even if it is admittedly a bit of a loaded comparison." Constance, noticing she had barely started on the pile of papers, continued matter-of-factly, "Thanks Gem, that's very helpful. I can't see anything specifically about Bull Island or the tenant farmers but I'll have a thorough read of all of these tonight." She re-assembled the papers into one neat pile and returned it to the folder expecting to later find a conflation of a self-serving

view of history, duly glossing over any inconvenient facts, with Pike's personal circumstances as embodied by his great-uncle's suitably amended will. "Anyway, how are you going for money? Have you sorted out your frozen accounts yet?"

"I'm O.K. for the moment." Gemariah got up and came round the table to sit next to Constance. After checking for eavesdroppers, she leaned forward, her head close to Constance's and whispered, "I'm using the overseas bank account they don't know about. My lawyer says it could take years to get access to some of the other accounts," then sat back and continued in a louder voice. "Not until after all the court cases are over, but she's hopeful some will be unfrozen soon. You know there's no extradition treaty here, right?"

"Of course, Gem. Why else would you be here?" said Constance slightly bewildered.

"Oh yes, of course," giggled Gemariah, "silly me. Well the lawyer says it's similar for bank accounts as well. I don't understand all that stuff. She tried to explain it to me, but, I mean, how could you extradite a bank account? I just leave it all up to her."

"It that wise? She is a lawyer after all," said Constance slightly concerned.

"She's not like Maslyan, Connie. For one, she's a woman," she said counting with the finger of one hand on the other. "Two, she's not from Marvod. Three, all my expat friends around here use her. Four ... I was sure there was a fourth."

"She's cheap?" offered Constance helpfully.

"Cheap! Hah! You must be joking, Connie."

"Well that's three good things at least, I suppose," tittered Constance.

"How is Greenfield, by the way? How's he coping?" said Gemariah.

"Oh, as well as can be expected I suppose. I see him every week."

"How much longer now till you hear?"

"I'm told it shouldn't be longer than twelve months, but hopefully as little as six," sighed Constance her head drooping.

Gemariah put her hand over Constance's and clasped it. "Chin up Connie. I'm sure it will all work out for the best in the end. Look at me!"

Chapter 2 - The Preliminaries

Within Lake Cordiomar, the large deep lake that formed the southern boundary to Pike's and Greenfield's farms, was a small low-lying lightly wooded island that lay close to the northern edge of the lake, straddling the boundary between the farms, but a part of Greenfield's farm having been included in the land bequeathed to Greenfield's grandfather. The island was generally rocky, which was unusual for the area as all the nearby land was marshy, and was believed to have been formed from the topmost portion of an exposed and now heavily eroded pluton. It was in fact not even an island any more, having been connected for thousands of years to what was now Greenfield's farm via a narrow stone causeway, built by anonymous hands, but it had been known for as far back as could be remembered as Bull Island, for reasons unclear as the area was not renowned for cattle farming, but perhaps related to its use in late Neolithic times as a site of worship including, allegedly, animal sacrifice, although no evidence had ever been found for the latter except for a single large flat rock with a notch and faint red stain, which was attributed by geologists to a naturally occurring vein of haematite. These days it had a more benign reputation as the best fishing spot in the entire lake likely due to its proximity to the outlet of Bogrich River, the largest river flowing into Lake Cordiomar, as well as several other streams passing through Pike's and Greenfield's land.

Not long after moving to the farm Greenfield had built a small shack and jetty on the island from which he often fished in the warmer months with friends and on occasion stayed overnight. Most years, photos of Greenfield and his farmer friends—including Anomia, but strangely not Pyklit, who although invited felt it better not to go—were published in the Forket Chronicle, the group standing on Greenfield's jetty, Bogrich River in the background, each struggling to hold with both arms a large freshwater fish of different species, typically under banners such as: 'Another Bumper Year at Bull Island', 'More Monsters From the Deep' and the like.

Although Bull Island was close to Pike's farm, his access to it was obstructed by large reed beds, shallow water but deep muddy soil beneath.

He could access the lake by boat much further to the east where the fringing reed beds narrowed, but it would mean a long trip to the prime fishing grounds around the island and in spite of appearances, as presented by several photos of himself he had published in the Gazette in front of large marlins hanging by the tail all taken with him standing on a wharf, he was in fact not a good sailor. The lake also had a reputation for sudden severe squalls, often several simultaneously from different directions, causing multi-directional short period but relatively high amplitude short crested steep waves, that when combined with the wind resulted in a maelstrom of surf more akin to a washing machine. Over the years numerous fishing boats had been caught in the squalls, capsized and the unprepared occupants drowned, even when in close proximity to the shore and wearing lifejackets: Pike was more comfortable fishing from dry land. Pike had for several years had to endure infuriating ribbing from the other farmers at Alliance meetings comparing his fishing exploits to those of Greenfield and the other farmers at Bull Island. He recalled with distaste some of the comments: 'That's a nice big boat, Mr Pike, why haven't we seen it on the Lake yet?' or, 'That marlin's smaller than Greenfield's sturgeon, and he didn't have to pay anyone else to catch it for him!' or the most maddening, 'Why go on an expensive overseas trip when you could have caught one better right on your doorstep?' The last had decided it for him and, in spite of protests from bothersome environmentalists, he had recently built a long narrow wooden walkway through the reeds down to the lake that finished in a short jetty jutting out as close to the island as the authorities would allow, his contacts within Marvod council ensuring he was able to build much closer than would otherwise have been permitted. The walkway was completed in early spring and Pike had been fishing from the jetty for a few days with no success as yet.

Greenfield's sowing activities were finally completed by mid-spring, and he rose early to prepare in a mood of eager anticipation: fishing season had already started. In previous years he would have been accompanied by one or more of his neighbours, but this year's sowing had been delayed due to unseasonably dry conditions prior to seeding and the others were still busy on their farm. Instead, Constance was joining him in order to supervise a contractor they had employed to renovate and extend the shack in readiness for its use as a holiday house for paying guests, an idea

Constance had proposed.

The sun had yet to appear above the low hills on Pike's farm when Greenfield and Constance arrived at the western end of Bull Island along the ancient causeway; Pike was also approaching from the north on his brand new walkway.

Both Greenfield and Pike walked to the end of their respective jetty where they began to set up their fishing equipment not far apart from each other, far enough apart that they could conduct themselves safely independent of each other, but certainly within shouting distance particularly when windless as it was on this particular day. The shack being close to both jetties Constance was able to see and overhear most of what transpired.

"Morning, Pike," Greenfield greeted cheerily. "Looks like a good day for a big catch."

Pike grunted what could be construed as, 'Yes'.

Greenfield made his his third and final cast then having checked the lines one by one sat down on his deckchair, took a sandwich and flask of tea from his hamper that Constance had packed for him, turned and waved to his wife in the shack and settled in for the morning.

Pike followed a similar ritual, however, after checking his rival, he made sure he had one more line in the water, sat down in his deckchair facing south out over the lake, and pulled a drink from from his rucksack, a protein shake he had made himself that morning.

Just as Pike sat down, Greenfield rose quickly to his feet and shouted, "Looks like I've got one already, Pike." Straining at the rod Greenfield reeled in a medium-sized salmon to his net and held it up, "Not bad for starters, eh?" Pike fired a withering stare at Greenfield, but was too far away to cause injury.

For the next two hours Greenfield continued to pull out a range of fish mostly trout and salmon, some of which he put into his fish bin and the others he released, but as expected no sturgeon given they were becoming rare now their stock level had plummeted; local regulations would have required him to release them anyway. Seeing that Pike was still having no success in spite of re-baiting and re-casting, Greenfield refrained from further comments, but on each catch glanced furtively at Pike who studiously ignored him.

Towards mid morning, just as Greenfield was starting to pack up, Pike jumped startled to his feet and grabbed one of his rods that was twitching slightly. He carefully flicked the rod then started to reel in his catch with some difficulty, straining for several minutes watched with interest by Greenfield and Constance out the window of the shack. Finally after conducting several disentangling manoeuvres around all corners of his jetty, Pike managed to pull into his net what appeared to be a large wad of lake weed. Delving into the net he disentangled his catch and held up to his face without comment a modestly sized lamprey.

Greenfield seeing Pike's harvest, said blithely, "That's a small sucker! You can have a couple of mine if you like."

The word 'sucker' appeared to freeze Pike, he stood tensed and unmoving holding his gaze on the fish. After a few seconds, he relaxed, put the fish in his bin, packed up the rest of his equipment and turned to Greenfield saying with quiet menace, "You'll find all about *suckers* soon enough," then stormed off down his jetty.

Greenfield, unsure of the meaning of Pike's latest crypticism just shook his head slowly and watched as Pike disappeared down the walkway. Before Pike had walked more than a dozen paces, Greenfield saw the lamprey climb out of the open bin falling onto the wooden planks then between them with a faint plop into the water unnoticed by its former captor.

Greenfield walked over to the shack where Constance greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. "That's a good catch darling. Don't worry, I'm sure Pike will buy his fish anyway. What was that he said to you when he left, I couldn't hear clearly?"

"No idea."

Pike opened his study door, "Bostultus, Gemariah," he shouted, "come into my study." Leaving the door open he sat on the front edge of his desk holding a letter, as relaxed as he was able but looking uncomfortable trying to conceal his emotions.

Gemariah, who was in the kitchen placing phone orders for lunch, having just finished tidying up after breakfast, took off her apron and ran upstairs to her bedroom. Bos, who was in his office opposite, immediately joined Pike and waited with him in awkward silence for what seemed an

eternity, but what was the five minutes it took for Gemariah to hurriedly put on her make-up, brush her hair, and put on her morning shoes, as she called them, a process Pike knew there was little point in telling Gemariah to eliminate or even curtail.

"What is it, honey?" said Gemariah her heels clicking softly as she walked into Pike's study. "What's wrong?"

"This," he said gravely, waving the letter in front of them both, "is a letter addressed to me from my lawyer." Pike waited for an uncomfortably long period until someone reacted.

"Yes—" started Bos eventually.

"In it," said Pike loudly interrupting Bos, "it states, and I quote," he cleared his throat, "Your application to Marvod District Court to have your great-uncle's will amended has been successful", to a gasp of relief from Gemariah. "Attached are the requisite court order transferring ownership, requiring your and the current owner's signatures, and a possession order notice for Bull Island'," he said and lowered the letter.

"That's wonderful news, darling," said Gemariah hugging Pike who accepted the embrace reluctantly, a faint smile flitting across his face.

"Great news, Boss. When do we move in?"

"Yes, when can I re-decorate that yucky shack?" said Gemariah excitedly, releasing Pike.

"Not so fast, both of you" said Pike slowly. "Maslyan rang me earlier today to check I'd received the letter. He said since sending it he'd spoken to Greenfield's lawyer who denied receiving notification of the hearing and would need to consult with his client. This was all as expected. I'll give them a few days to squirm," he said lingering on the last word with relish.

Gemariah skipped out of Pike's study chatting to herself merrily as she went. Pike leant forward in his chair and steepled his hands on the desk. "Iskaz also rang me today, Bostultus," he said quietly. "Apparently the mail van was held up, robbed en route to Forket a few weeks ago. Evidently the day the letter was sent to Greenfield. All the mail bags were later found in a stream beside the abandoned vehicle and recovered. But apparently not that letter. Know anything about that?"

"Me, Boss?" said Bos grinning. "How would I know? Must be an unlucky coincidence. But what about the tenant farmer land. Isn't that yours as well now?"

"Why so impatient, Bostultus? I have another plan for the tenant farmers. Leave them to me. In the meantime we need to prepare. I want a large gate, barbed wire barrier, security system, warning sign, for the western end of the causeway. All ready to be installed on my word."

"Sure thing, Boss. What do you want on the sign?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination, Bostultus. And I want a new farm gate and security post for the entrance road. In case they try their luck there. Get that done straight away. We'll need twenty four hour security at the front gate from now. And later at Bull Island as well. Get some reserves in case we need them at short notice. We need to be ready for trouble. Check with Armit, just the best, understood. No makeweights. Then I want to see all my troops. Arrange an inspection parade in the farmyard for tomorrow morning."

"Where will they stay?"

"They can sleep in the farmworkers' rooms for now. Then in the shack after we take over the Island."

"Weapons?"

"Just you, your brothers, Armit. But make everyone's got a radio. And show them all how to use it."

The following morning two minibusses pulled up in the farmyard, their contents spilling out into the courtyard watched attentively by Bos's two younger brothers who had driven them from Marvod. A small platoon-sized contingent formed before dividing into small ethnic groups from which came a low murmur. Bos and Pike came out of the farmhouse and stood several paces distant to examine them for a few minutes, Gemariah observing from the kitchen window.

"Where are they all from, Bostultus?" said Pike.

"Africa and Middle East mainly."

"Can they speak our language?"

"Armit says they all have a smattering. They've been in Marvod for at least six months," said Bos as his brothers joined alongside him.

"Any with army training?"

"A few. But several others say they were in the militia."

"O.K. Bostultus, have them fall in. Let's see who can follow simple orders."

Bos took two steps forward and stood at attention, then shouted out 'Fall

in' at the top of his voice, followed by 'Dress Right' and 'Attention', then after a long pause Pike told Bos to have them 'Stand Easy'.

"O.K., that's enough, Bostultus. I think it's clear already who's had training. Split them into three sections. You pick the best for yours, your brothers take the rest. Take them round the back of the barn for some simple drills. And weed out the weaklings."

"Firearms training too?"

"Just see who can handle a gun for now. But no ammunition. Clear?"

At the end of about one hour's training under Pike's curious gaze, Bos re-formed the men and inspected each in turn with his brothers agreeing a ranking that Bos recorded in a notebook. After all had been assessed he dismissed them and ordered them back onto the busses. Just as the final man was taking his seat, Bos's eldest brother received a brief call. He motioned Bos aside and whispered something in his ear.

Bos came over to Pike, "There's a problem at White's, Boss."

"Go and sort it, Bostultus," said Pike bilyously. "Don't bother me with your problems." Bos frowned and started towards the minibusses, but after he had only taken a few steps Pike called after him to wait, catching up near the driver's door of one of the minibusses.

"Give the troops' wives special treatment," said Pike sotto voce standing close to Bos. "No extra services for them, O.K.? Try and get them something decent, cleaner, maybe. We don't want a mutiny on the farm, do we?"

The minibusses passed Marvod Levels around half an hour later then continued to the nearby workers' flats where the troops were disgorged. Bos left his youngest brother to organise them then, accompanied by his eldest brother, Si, Bos drove off at speed to the north, shortly afterwards passing a recently constructed two storey brick building painted vivid white with a large neon sign boldly proclaiming itself to be 'White's - Marvod's Most Exclusive Men's Club' in large white letters.

"I thought we were going to White's?" asked Si confused, looking over his shoulder as they passed it.

"No, Kitty's."

"But you told Pike—"

"Pike doesn't know about Kitty's. And I want it to stay that way, O.K.?"

They drove on in silence for thirty minutes, generally following the winding river, out through farmland to the north-west of Marvod and beyond until they reached the outskirts of the adjacent town, Minar, and a junction with a new flashing neon sign saying 'Kitty's' in garish yellow above a faded road sign indicating 'Minar Docks', both pointing to the right. Bos turned off the road, passing a large open tarmacked area used as a truck stop and drove for about five minutes along a bumpy potholed road between abandoned fields surrounded by drainage ditches, illuminated occasionally by a street light. They continued for a few minutes until they arrived at a dilapidated building in the centre of a string of several former warehouses running to the north and south of it, behind which could be seen disused wharves. In front of the centre building was another large neon sign announcing 'Kitty's - The Be*t Pu**ies in *own', some letters having dropped to the ground, with about a dozen cars in front of it in a poorly lit car park and several trucks along the road in front of the other disused structures.

Bos and Si were waved through the front entrance by the door security, walked through the bar-cum-lounge, techno music playing loudly and disco lights glittering on an empty dance floor, nodding at the patrons seated in black high-backed vinyl nightclub couches as they passed, a glass held in one hand and adorned by a young lady in a glittering skimpy sequin dress seated in their lap, parted a pleated portière and continued along the corridor beyond, past a door on which was stapled a picture of Mickey Mouse from behind which could be heard the sound of someone reading a children's nursery rhyme, past several other doors from where came muffled grunts, through a door at the end of the corridor policed by another security guard and into a dim and dusty room set up like a cattle auction, with a large open floor and wooden benches rising towards the back wall, except the cattle were seated where the audience should be. Sunlight was streaming through a long narrow window at the top of the wall illuminating from behind rows of numbered scantily dressed women seated on the benches for the most part in complete silence, many with pallid blotched faces and several appearing to have their eyes closed swaying from a breeze of unknown source. Armit was standing menacingly with his back to them in front of a loudly sobbing woman of African appearance with streaks of blue mascara running down over a large crimson bruise just

below her right eye.

"What's the problem now, Armit?" said Bos in a riled tone as he drew alongside

"*Thees* one, and *thees* one, and *thees* one, refooz play narz," he said rhythmically and aggressively jabbing a thick heavily tanned finger in the direction of the woman and the two on either side of her.

"You no juggy juggy," he said intensely to the young lady who turned her face up to him, to which he responded with several vigorous rapid nods and gestures with a single digit of this right hand entering a circle formed with the thumb and first finger of his left hand, "you go home!" and pointed out the window in the direction of the river with a wide-eyed expression on his face. The woman turned her face back to the floor and re-commenced her sobbing.

"I threaten," he said pugnaciously, stooping and holding his massive fist just in front of the sobbing woman's bruise, a tear brushing his hand, "but she know I no touch merkandize. She go now?" Armit said curiously, rising and turning to face Bos and wiping his fist on the back of his trousers.

The distraught woman threw herself sideways at Bos's legs and hugged them, her face buried between his legs just above his knees babbling something loudly in a foreign language.

"Hey, Bos. I think she'd rather give you a blowjob instead," said Si laughing and shaking his head with faux pity.

Bos extracted the woman's arms from behind and thrust her violently towards the wooden bench, the woman falling off the back of the seat and into the legs of the woman behind.

"O.K., Armit," said Bos, while the woman was helped up by her fellow victims, "Thanks for filling in. Si will sort it out from here. Go and wait in the bar."

Armit raised both hands and shrugged, "O.K., Bozz," he said then obediently left the room.

"Si," said Bos quietly after pulling him to the corner of the room, "Armit's all muscle, no mind," he said tapping his temple. "He's no good here. Get rid of the trouble maker, then use your powers of persuasion. And see if the other two still want to complain. If they do then they can go too. Plenty more fish in the sea."

"What about her kids?" said Si flatly.

"They go with her," said Bos then scrutinised the women. "And some of those others are probably not even worth keeping anyway. Look at them, who would want that?" he said faking a zombie expression and swaying from side-to-side. "We may have to re-think our drugs policy," he chuckled, Si joining in, then putting his arm round Si's shoulder led him to Armit in the bar.

Pike had given Bos free rein to make use of the illegal migrants as he saw fit when they weren't needed on the farm, which for the majority of them amounted to about nine months each year, provided he passed on his usual share of the profits. Illegal migrants were particularly in demand at the clubs, or, for the lucky ones, as maids and cleaners at one of Pike's hotels or other businesses, the pinnacle of employment, reserved for those who had picked up the language the quickest, being receptionist. Those working at the clubs, males and females, were expected to perform extra services that were frequently demanded by customers, those who refused were sent to one of their brothels anyway for re-education. Drugs were freely available at the establishments Bos ran and many welcomed the relief offered by his cheap supplements, some were mentally scarred by their experiences in vicious civil wars others became disillusioned with what they had thought would be a better life away from the personal hell of their homeland only to be confronted with the bleak realities of Marvod, but few of those that succumbed to the temptation of the mental anaesthetic survived unscathed: migrants who became drug addicts and were deemed no longer saleable even at the moderately salubrious brothels were sent to Kitty's. Those unfortunates who ended up at Kitty's were one step, one minor infringement, away from being declared human waste, at which point this excrement of Bos's food chain was diverted to an ostensibly disused warehouse next door to Kitty's, were they were kept in unbearable squalor and stench in a small cramped room for months with other previously designated refractories, only buckets available for toilets, stiflingly hot in summer and bitingly cold in winter. Those who didn't eventually beg to return to Kitty's would be locked in the container of a semi-trailer, driven to a truck stop outside Marvod, the driver detaching the container and tipping off a compliant immigration official before leaving. (The container being recovered later from the police at auction for a pre-agreed nominal fee.) The occasional migrant, toxic waste as termed by Bos,

who had tried to escape from Kitty's or had been found trying to report Bos or his brothers to one of the customers, some of whom were long distance truck drivers and not locals, found themself floating face down in the large swamps to the south of Marvod.

As far as Pike was aware, all those migrant workers taken from the clubs were deported, but by using fake deportation records provided by his friends in Immigration, Bos was able to first divert them through Kitty's fully realising their business potential to his and his brothers' advantage. The model had become so lucrative that Bos had recently expanded into people trafficking, the migrants being smuggled in via small ships and barges up the Marvod River to the wharf behind Kitty's, from where those without sufficient funds to pay his exorbitant fees were fed back into the system. Kitty's was now a pivotal distribution hub for the human conveyors feeding it.

Bos found Armit leaning with his elbows on the drink stained counter, an orange juice in one hand, talking to the bar manager behind the counter while he mixed a drink for one of the customers. The bar manager raised his eyebrows in a pre-agreed signal; Bos told Si to wait with Armit while he spoke with the manager out back, allowed the manager to finish his transaction with the punter then followed him through a door behind the bar into a room previously used as an office shutting the door behind him.

"The barge is coming in tonight, two a.m. as usual," said the bar manager turning and facing Bos, framed against the wharf and the river beyond it by a large floor-to-ceiling window and glass door.

"With the new cargo of rice flour as well?"

"Yep. The exporter said it's all set, three containers of meat, ten sacks of rice flour," he said using the agreed terms for human cargo and cocaine.

"O.K., good," said Bos then stepped forward until separated by the length of a cigarette from the manager's face. "But no overnight parking," he continued slowly through clenched teeth emphasising each word," then raised his finger and held it in front of the manager's face wagging it from side to side. "Not like that truckie last night."

"Oh. You heard about that," said the manager apprehensively. "That won't happen again, Bos."

"Tell them they have to park in the truck stop for their own security," said Bos after lowering his finger. "If they're too drunk then get them a taxi

to Palm Springs Motel in Minar. Late check-in has already been arranged with the manager." Bos took something from his pocket and thrust it into the manager's chest, the manager flinching at first, then took the business card and held it up to his face. "Take the money for the taxi off them." Bos paused for several seconds then turned and went out to meet Si in the bar.

"All set?" asked Si.

"Yes. O.K., Armit, see you in the car." After Armit left, Bos draped his arm round Si's shoulder then said quietly to him, "You'll have to stay tonight for this first delivery. Watch the manager. I've already warned him about unwelcome overnight guests. And Pike doesn't know anything about this either, O.K?"

Greenfield followed the nurse down the aisle of the public ward abuzz with a multitude of quiet conversations, past some beds with privacy screens around, past others with a small huddle gathered close to the patient's head, until they arrived at the last bed where the nurse opened one side of the divider curtain disclosing a frail elderly lady sitting up in bed reading a magazine, a smile lighting his mother's face as she saw Greenfield and Olivia behind him. The nurse said 'thirty minutes' then left.

"Is that pretty pink peony posy for me, son?" she said taking off her glasses and looking at the vibrant pink flowers Greenfield was carrying.

"No, they're for Connie, nice alliteration though. These are for you," said Greenfield turning to Olivia and motioning with his eyes and head for her to come forward. Olivia approached the head of the bed and stood for a few seconds with her face almost level with her grandmother's then like a magician brought out a bunch of deep burgundy roses from behind her back and pushed them forward, some being crushed under her grandmother's chin, causing her to puff from her nose several times for a few seconds.

"Careful, Livvie," said Greenfield pulling the roses back from his mother's face.

"Oh, they're lovely, Livvie. Thank you," said his mother. "Put them in the vase, will you dear," she said pointing to the bedside table.

"So how are you, Mum?" said Greenfield in a quiet anxious voice while Olivia was florally pre-occupied. "Is the Doctor still concerned?"

"No, he says the atrial fibrillation that they've been keeping me in for has

quietened down. I should be able to go home in a couple of days. Everything else is fine: no signs of infection or bleeding, kidney function good, just a bit weak," said his mother optimistically.

"Well you're looking much better now," he said trying to put on a brave face and ignoring evidence to the contrary: the whitening of her hair, the thin pallor of her face, a general sense of sudden premature ageing.

"Who's going to cook for me?" said his mother seeing through his façade. "I do hope it's not you, I need to put some weight back on," she said touching the hollow of both her cheeks with her fingers.

"No," said Greenfield smiling. "Don't worry. Nadia's offered to make extra for us until Connie's recovered, and I'll order in on the other days."

"Pizza, Dad?" said Olivia suddenly taking an interest.

"Maybe pizza for us, Liv, but Gran's gonna be on a strict diet; so we need to give her proper food, not just bread, cheese and tomato purée."

"Humph. Grandpa says all you need to live on is bread and cheese and wine," said Olivia petulantly still arranging the roses.

"Well Grandpa Pecker hasn't just had a heart bypass operation, has he?" said Greenfield.

"How is Connie?" said his mother.

"She and the baby are doing fine. It was just all the stress that caused her to deliver two weeks premature. She'll be ready to go home almost the same time as you."

"What are you going to call him?"

"We've agreed Jorah. It means 'early rain' apparently, which Connie said was appropriate, even though it makes me a bit queasy every time I think of the mess on the kitchen floor," said Greenfield shuddering at the memory. "Well, Connie told me the name and I agreed with her, as per usual."

"Knowing Connie, I doubt she was referring to her waters breaking," she said slightly pompously. "The name seems very apposite to me for a farmer's son. Did you bring the documents, like I asked?

"Yes. But are you sure you're O.K. to read them?"

In answer, his mother put her glasses back on and peered expectantly at him over the rims. Greenfield put his flowers down on the bed then opened the khaki messenger bag over his shoulder and produced two letters and some folded documents for his mother, which she took from

him and perused carefully, scoffing and tut-tutting at intervals, shaking her head several times, while Greenfield sat patiently on a chair next to the bed. Olivia, having finished arranging the roses and unable to find anything locally to keep her occupied, wandered off to look at all the other families, scuffing her feet along the floor as she went and doing ballet moves at the foot of each bed she passed, smiling warmly at the scowls of some of the elderly patients.

"What *planet* is he *on*?" said his mother angrily after finishing the second letter.

"Hey, calm down, Mum," said Greenfield in a concerned voice grabbing her arm. "Planet Pike," he responded after his mother had regained her equanimity. "He's in orbit round his own sun, I'm not sure if his planetary system has been discovered yet."

"Well I'm certainly not going to sign his court order, that goes without saying. And I agree we need to challenge in the State Court, but forget Marvod: the result is a foregone conclusion in his private fiefdom. And Dad has signed over the farm to me I see. Give me a pen, will you," and she scribbled her signature and initials at locations indicated by small coloured tags. "What about Dad; have you managed to get hold of him yet?"

"No. He won't answer his phone. I wrote him a quick note and sent it to the address he gave us for his new flat as well, but he hasn't replied yet. He said he didn't want to be disturbed anyway, remember?"

"Forget what he said, he's still my Father. Don't you need to start sowing shortly by the way?"

"Just waiting for that one month delay we agreed with Grandad, Mum. We're all ready to go."

"Ignore that, son; we need to sow as soon as possible before it's too late not follow some artificial deadline. How are you coping generally?"

"Fine. Nadia's been a great help, Mitson as well. Rev ... Well he's been Rev ... And Olivia has been less exuberant than normal, thankfully; I think she misses her Mum. One other thing, the Alliance have been hassling me, they want to know what's going on."

His mother sat quietly thinking it over, then said abruptly, "Stuff him! I don't know how I know but I know that's Pike not Dad. It's got nothing to do with Pike what organisations we belong to and we're certainly not

joining his corrupt little boy's club, his arse," gradually getting louder until reaching a climax at the last word.

"Mum! Keep your voice down," said Greenfield imploringly, the room having gone quiet, several faces now turned in their direction.

"Tell the Alliance we're re-applying," said his mother defiantly.

At that point the nurse returned holding and half-dragging Olivia by the hand, and asked, 'Is this your little ballet dancer?' Greenfield said it was, apologised for the disturbance when described by the nurse, gently scolded Olivia, said goodbye to his mother, promised to come and bring her home in two days, then took the lift with Olivia to the maternity ward two floors above.

The following morning Greenfield attended a pre-arranged meeting with their lawyer, a friend from college. He arrived at the lawyer's office in Forket with grey clouds skimming low and slow overhead, handed over the documents his mother had signed and passed on her instructions. The lawyer agreed to represent them in the State Court and said not to be concerned, the Marvod court did not have jurisdiction, the higher State Court judgment would prevail and the court order was invalid without their assent and signature anyway, said it was a pointless piece of theatre by Pike and no more valid than illegally squatting on their land. At these words, the rain that had been threatening started and there was a deluge for about thirty minutes. After it had relented somewhat, Greenfield hurried back to the farm and found Nadia and the others already in the paddocks sowing the sugar beet, corn and sunflowers in the light but steady drizzle. He watched briefly, waved to Nadia in one of the seeders, then returned to the farmhouse and called the Alliance.

Pike had driven down that morning to the elevated viewpoint on the boundary with Greenfield's farm in time for the spectacle, he was standing with Gemariah several paces away from his utility vehicle, both tracking through binoculars a squadron of planes performing low passes of his fields, the silence only interrupted by an occasional short burst of buzzing when the aircraft pulled up to turn and make another run, as of a mosquito coming close to your ear at night. The fields before them had until only a few days ago been a largely featureless white with occasional patches of brown lightly tinged by green where the snow had melted, but were now a

patchwork quilt of green rape rosettes bursting out of their winter dormancy and newly competing weeds almost appearing to cover the ground from their vantage point, bordered by the tan of wet dirt farm tracks and ditches. Yesterday, the early spring rains having finally relented, with a forecast for clear skies and warm daytime temperatures for a few days followed by further rain, and after Ivor had weeks earlier finished his extensive research and found there was no better alternative to the herbicide-resistant GM seed they used and recommended they continue using it for the foreseeable future, Pike had given Bos the go-ahead for the spring crop dusting and top dressing campaign.

Pike luxuriated in a warm sense of satisfaction washing over him as he thought of the frustration and annoyance his aerial spraying would cause amongst the Alliance members; he could almost picture the meeting: the hand wringing, the distraught faces, the powerless bickering; it was almost worth it to re-join the Alliance just for the entertainment. But no, he would satisfy his urges by smugly revelling later in second hand reports from Anomia. He glanced at his watch and saw it was almost ten o'clock, the agreed time for his regular weekly meeting with Pyklit during spring. At that moment he heard a scratchy squawk from his two-way radio in the car followed by, 'Pike, Pike, this is Bos, over,' repeated as he walked over to the car, reaching through the open door he took the handset from the central console.

"Go ahead, Bostultus."

"Pyklit's on his way down to the farmhouse, Boss. Over."

"Received." Pike leant forward to return the speaker microphone to its mount when Bos continued, "Boss, Anomia is at the front gate. He says he needs to see you urgently, over."

"I don't have an appointment with him, do I?"

"No. I checked already, Boss. Just Pyklit, over."

"Then tell him to call me," said Pike acerbically.

"I already did. He says he needs to see you right away, in person, over."

"O.K., let him through then," said Pike after a brief pause.

"Roger. Over and out."

Pike arrived back at the farmhouse fifteen minutes later to find Anomia and Pyklit chatting with Gemariah in the lounge, all rising as he entered. Gemariah took everyone's coffee order then left for the kitchen. Pike told

Pyklit to wait while he first spoke to Anomia in this study, directing Anomia to follow him.

"Well what is it, Anomia?" said Pike irritably after Anomia shut the door. "Have you finally decided to join us? Decided to tell me in person? Is that it?"

"Still considering it, Mr Pike, still considering it," said Anomia meekly.

"Well the offer won't be open forever," said Pike sitting behind the desk and waving with his arm for Anomia to sit.

"No, I'll stand if that's O.K. with you," said Anomia smiling weakly, "I won't keep you long, I can see you're busy."

"Well get on with it then," said Pike curtly.

"I just came to tell you in person something I thought you needed to know."

"Yes. What is it?" said Pike testily.

"Well I was speaking to the Alliance secretary yesterday and she told me Greenfield had re-applied to the Alliance." Anomia waited for a reaction and seeing none continued. "I remember you announcing his grandfather was joining your ... umm ... group so I thought you would want to know straight away."

"You came all this way just to tell me that?" said Pike sharply.

"No, no. I also heard from one of the wheat farmers that Greenfield has already started planting spring crops and none of them is rape. And there's something else," he said as Pike began to rise, "Well, one of the ladies who was in the hospital with Greenfield's mother, who's a friend of my mother ... O.K. ... she overheard her saying she wouldn't be signing a court order from you about some land and would challenge you in the State Court. What's this about a court order, Mr Pike? What land?"

"None of your business, Anomia," said Pike angrily. "I'll decide what you need to know."

Just then there was a knock on the door and Bos walked in at Pike's invitation. "Just arrived, Boss, from Maslyan," said Bos and handed him a letter. "Thought it might be important," he then left closing the door.

Pike started reading the letter waving Anomia to leave with his other hand, followed by another knock on the door shortly following Anomia's departure. Pike, ignoring the knock, finished reading the letter then flung it away on his desk, opened the door and called out to Bos, leaving Pyklit

standing expectantly in the doorway.

"Where is that old fool Greenfield?" said Pike to Bos as he was entering.

"Pike," said Pyklit expectantly.

"Isn't he on the farm?" said Bos as he was closing the door, ignoring Pyklit.

"Mr Pike. I know where he is," said Pyklit loudly to the closed door.

"See what he's jabbering about," said Pike motioning at Bos with his head in the direction of the door.

"He's in Minar, Pike," said Pyklit entering. "One of my farmworkers spotted his girlfriend in a supermarket, working at the check-out—She's pretty easy to identify as you know—so I had her followed, just like I thought you would ask. She's living in a flat with old Mr Greenfield; they've been there for a few weeks now. He must have moved off the farm."

"O.K., Pyklit," said Pike after a long deathly silence. "You can go now."

"But our regular meeting—"

"It can wait," said Pike interrupting him and staring at the door until Pyklit left.

"So it didn't work, Boss. Do you want me to show him how unhappy we are?"

Pike rubbed the palm of his right hand on his lips for a few seconds then said, "No. He's not a problem for us now. He must have handed over the farm to his daughter. So it's her we have to deal with now. We can have him arrested for underage sex any time we want. The photos, the videos, they aren't going anywhere, are they? He may be of value in the future but forget him for now. We have bigger issues," he said picking up the letter and waving it. "The Greenfield's are never going to listen to reason. So I'm going to be reasonable no longer. We recover Bull Island tonight."

Chapter 3 - Occupation

Shortly after midnight Bos's team arrived at the equipment shed on the back of a tip truck accompanied by Bos's brothers. With Pike watching on, Bos directed them to load the tools and equipment they would need that night, then the troops climbed back onto the truck and headed down to Bull Island followed by Si and Ivor in a farm utility, Bos and Pike staying

behind and going back to bed. Once they reached the start of the timber walkway four of the workers got off and unloaded light but strong aluminium alloy telescopic ramps and accompanied by others with hand torches carried them to the jetty, where two men jumped into the lake and helped slide the ramps into position between the jetty and Bull Island. While this was happening, a diesel generator was offloaded using the truck's HIAB crane and positioned near the shoreline followed by barrels of rapeseed oil on which the generator had been configured to run. After the generator was successfully started one of the troops inserted a steel rod through the centre of a drum of electrical cable, two picked it up and half ran down the walkway uncoiling cable along its length as they went then began assembling temporary site lighting on the jetty. Under Si's continual insistent chivvying, some of the men half-ran half-jogged across the ramps while they were still being bolted into place carrying the new gate, razor wire fencing and assorted equipment, carrying on past the shack to the far end of Greenfield's causeway. Once there they dug postholes using petrol powered jackhammers and cordless augers then installed steel posts into freshly hand mixed concrete, held upright by temporary supports while the concrete was curing, followed by the gate and fence. As work was finished, workers that became free cleared out Greenfield's part-renovated part-constructed shack and set up makeshift sleeping, washing and cooking facilities. Most tasks had been completed just before dawn at which point the day shift arrived to take over allowing the exhausted night shift to collapse onto their folding beds after a quick breakfast, Si being replaced by his younger brother.

Pike rose before sunbreak curious to know how fortifications had progressed overnight on his re-acquired land. Gemariah prepared him a simple breakfast, Bos joining them just as she handed him a flask of coffee to go. Pike and Bos then toured the island together, the causeway with its new fence and gate, the shack, the jetties, the sentries on duty, giving instructions duly noted by Si's younger brother who was accompanying them. After completing their inspection they retired to a table that had been moved onto a flat area in front of the shack with a view over the lake and causeway whence Greenfield would approach. Over coffee, Pike reviewed with Bos what activities remained, in particular instructing that the hidden surveillance cameras and motion sensors should be installed on the

causeway and jetties as a priority then sat and waited for Greenfield.

After an hour, approaching mid morning, it was clear Greenfield would not come that day, which was not entirely unexpected to Pike knowing that Greenfield would be pre-occupied tending to his convalescent wife and mother. Pike rose and left instructions to be informed the moment anyone appeared at the gate then drove back to the farmhouse with Bos.

No-one from Greenfield's farm appeared at Bull Island that day, by the end of which security upgrades were complete, nor the next, the day Fixa accompanied Pike to Bull Island to go over Pike's plans. Pike showed Fixa the location for his luxurious townhouses on the highest point of the island and at the landward end of the walkway. Options for heavy construction equipment access to the island were discussed: upgrading the walkway to vehicle loads or using a shallow water barge, Pike deciding on the latter necessitating the dredging of an approach channel through 'the swamp', as he called it, alongside the existing jetty, and construction of a concrete ramp and landing on the island, Pike reassuring an agitated Fixa that council approval would be forthcoming shortly for all. By the end of the week Pike had submitted updated outline plans, council approval being given on receipt by Mayor Grayson in Pike's chambers as per the usual processes and surveyors were already pegging out the island.

Greenfield got off the phone and called out down the corridor to Constance, who was breast feeding Jorah in the lounge watched on curiously by Olivia, that he was going to meet the usual crowd down at Bull Island tomorrow morning. It had been several weeks since he last went fishing, since his mother and Constance had been home. His mother was coming along well enough and although Constance was not fully recovered she was now able to walk fairly comfortably, do light exercises and most of her normal chores around the farm, although she left any heavy lifting to Greenfield and Nadia. After the complications with Olivia—the torn perineum that had prolonged her recovery—that was at least one blessing of a premature delivery, that and the short labour—Luckily he had been able to drive her to the hospital immediately after her waters broke or she might have had the baby in the car—so her convalescence had been progressing faster and less painfully with Jorah. Nadia had been a great help, she had stayed over at the farm for the first couple of weeks, cooked all the meals

and attended Constance and his mother in the bathroom and Mitson had stepped up too, assisting him organise the itinerant workers during the busy spring sowing period that had coincided. But spring sowing was now complete, freeing up everybody and the itinerant workers had moved on to other farms.

Greenfield flushed the toilet and washed his hands then came up behind Constance on the lounge sofa, and peeked over her shoulder at his new son, who greedily sucked on intently, eyes closed, completely oblivious to all the attention. "Nice technique, son," he said appreciatively, stroking the softy downy hair, Jorah taking a breath then snuggling in and resuming. "He's inherited that from the master," he said nodding to himself sagely.

His mother tutted loudly. "Sorry, Mum!" said Greenfield in started embarrassment. "Didn't see you over there."

"Who's going with you?" said Constance her eyes remaining fixed on her newborn's head.

"Just a few of the usual bunch: Pommer, Bartel, Raine; not everyone's finished sowing yet."

"Take it easy with the drinking, darling," she said. "Terry—you know, Bartel's wife—she's a bit worried by how much her husband drinks when you all get together."

"O.K. I'll keep an eye on him. We won't stay long anyway; should be back before lunch."

"That's what you always say," she said sceptically. "I thought rain was forecast for tomorrow?"

"Early in the morning, yes, then it's supposed to clear up; but that should make for better biting," said Greenfield then leant over and kissed Constance on the top of the head.

About an hour before dawn the next morning, Greenfield crept out of the bedroom so as not to disturb his wife and child, taking some packed food from the kitchen fridge on the way outside. He walked through steady drizzle to the equipment shed, packed his food in the little space that remained on the bike's cargo basket already piled high with fishing equipment, did a last check of the fishing rods strapped to the back and re-tightened the judiciously placed bungee straps, mounted the farm quad and rode down the long muddy farm track towards Bull Island.

About a quarter of an hour later he noticed a diffuse glow of light in the

distance ahead that appeared to be coming from Bull Island and assumed someone must have left the light on at the shack, although it was strange it could be seen from this far away. As he got closer he saw that the single glow was formed by three distinct lights mounted on high towers. Closer again he could see figures walking on the top of Bull Island under one light tower and what resembled a low flat boat alongside the jetty under a second light. This would not be the first time uninvited guests had turned up on the island: in the past he had removed small groups of fishermen he found sleeping in the shack, their boat tied up to the jetty, and on other occasions found the ashes of recent fires on the island, rotting fish carcasses scattered around, but they had always been surreptitious, never previously advertised their presence by any lighting, let alone such substantial towers. It appeared whoever they were this time, they intended to stay a while.

When he was near the end of the farm track, the point where the old stone causeway started, he could see a high fence metal fence not far along with a gate in the middle and signboard mounted above, coils of razor wire leading across the top and down into the water on both sides, and as he was slowing down to park a loud siren started sounding and a blindingly bright amber light mounted on a post behind the gate was activated illuminating the approach to it. He dismounted and walked up to the fence splashing through large puddles of water, shielded his eyes and read the hand written sign that stated in uneven capital letters:

*PROPRITY OV MR PIKE
TRESPASEURS WIL B SHAT ON SITE'*

In the background he could see a small group of workers in hard hats and waterproofs, standing in front of the shack and looking in his direction. He waved his arms above his head and called out to them, but one just pointed to his ears then over his shoulder in the direction of Pike's walkway. He squinted and in the dim distance could just make out two figures approaching through the rain illuminated by small lanterns hanging from poles spaced at regular intervals along the walkway.

He watched the figures as they walked to the jetty, where on reaching it one of the group of workers broke away to meet them for a couple of minutes before going over to the shack, at which point the siren was abruptly silenced. The figures then walked towards the gate stopping below

the amber light, while behind them the worker re-joined his colleagues and led them to a flattop barge moored alongside the jetty.

"What's going on, Bos? I need to get to my shack," said Greenfield uncertainly after guessing the identity of the figure by his stature and the lack of any facial features protruding into the light from beyond his rain hood. In the background an engine started up then a reversing alarm and Greenfield could see a forklift backing off the barge onto the ramp.

"Pike owns the island now," said one of the pair gruffly. "Can't you read the sign?"

"No, this is my property!" shouted Greenfield. The two figures whispered then one left and went to the shack.

The sound of a car, which had been growing louder as they spoke, was ended by a screech of brakes and Pommer, Bartel and Raine joined Greenfield.

"What the! ..." said Pommer abruptly.

"What's happened?" said Bartel.

"Seems he wasn't joking with that eviction notice," said Raine.

"No, I guess not," said Greenfield drily.

The figure returned with a deckchair in one hand and a sack in the other.

"Watch out!" shouted Greenfield, all four of them backing off as the deckchair was lobbed over the fence, landing in a crumpled heap in the middle of where the four had just been standing, followed shortly afterwards by the sack, which fell at the foot of the gate with a loud crash as of breaking crockery. Finally a flat rectangular object was thrown spinning rapidly over their head, landing and sticking out of the mud, the words, ***PRIVATE PROPERTY GREENFIELD FARM***, clearly visible.

"There's your property, Greenfield!" said one of the figures then both laughed, turned and walked back to the shack, the forklift meanwhile driving up the ramp with another large package.

Greenfield gathered his three friends briefly in a huddle and told them he arrived not long before they did, they knew as much as him, but said he would speak to his lawyer immediately about what they should do next. Then after asking them to put his motley possessions in their boot and drop them at the farmhouse, he sped back to the farmhouse.

After informing Constance, his mother and Nadia, he rang his lawyer

and described briefly on the phone what had happened, his lawyer listening intently then telling him to meet him in his office immediately.

Later that morning, having discussed the circumstances in detail, Greenfield, standing alongside his lawyer in Forket, and at his lawyer's suggestion, rang Pike. "Yes," said Pike stopping in the middle of his daily exercise routine his chest glistening with sweat and answering the phone after several rings.

"Greenfield speaking, Pike." Greenfield paused for Pike to speak but as he did not he continued. "I've been discussing your illegal annexation of Bull Island with my lawyer this morning. He tells me there are multiple issues with your court ruling and we will be challenging that ruling and your actions in the state Upper Court at the earliest opportunity."

Pike admired himself from the side in the gym mirror, head proudly held back holding his stomach in. With no response again forthcoming from Pike, Greenfield went on after a long pause, "With luck this unfortunate error should be resolved quickly, so I'm asking you, politely, to stop any further construction work."

After wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead with a towel, Pike retorted dispassionately, "Luck has nothing to do with it. I warned you, *sucker*. Well now you know what I meant. Direct any further discussion to my lawyer," and hung up, Greenfield looking in bemusement first at his phone then his attorney.

"You had to try," said his lawyer smiling weakly. "I'll start preparing documents for court and apply for an immediate injunction."

The following morning, Greenfield was sitting pensively at the breakfast table, sipping on his coffee and staring at a blank spot on the opposite wall, the rest of the family seated with him around the table engrossed in their own thoughts.

"You've been quiet this morning, darling," said Constance soothingly. "Still thinking about Bull Island?"

"What? Oh, yes," he said spasmodically his train of thought disrupted. "I've decided I'm going round to try and see Pike today," he said resolutely after several seconds, all staring back at him except Jorah, who continued to suck gently on his dummy with eyes closed lying in his mother's arms.

"Is that wise, honey?" said Constance pacifically. "Didn't he tell you to only communicate with him through his lawyer?"

"Yes, but I think one final effort to get through to him before the police turn up on his doorstep would be in everyone's best interests, don't you."

"Possibly," said Constance uncertainly, "but don't go alone; take Rev or Mitson with you."

Greenfield kissed Constance on the lips, took a new bottle of vodka from the drinks cabinet as a peace offering, went outside to find Rev, then full of hope drove them both in the utility to Pike's property, returning around an hour and a half later. He left Rev to carry on with his farm tasks, and found Constance and his mother walking round the farmyard as part of their joint daily exercise routine: six laps round the farm buildings after assorted stretches: pelvic tilts, Kegels and others.

"That was a complete waste of time, Connie," he said deflated after catching up to the pair. "I couldn't even get past his gate. He's got a big new security gate and a phone that only goes through to Bos, and Bos refused to get Pike."

"So what next?" said Constance.

"Well the lawyer will call me when we've got the injunction, then I'll accompany—" his phone started ringing, "Ah, that'll be him now—accompany the police to Bull Island," said Greenfield breaking off the lap to stop and talk to his lawyer. "O.K.," he said after re-joining them about one minute later, "The State police will meet me here nine a.m. tomorrow morning then we'll drive over to serve the injunction."

"It's too dangerous," said Constance anxiously, "I don't want you to go."

"It'll be fine," said Greenfield reassuringly. "Pike has to give access to the State Police, and they'll be armed just in case anyway."

"That's what worries me."

The following day the police van drove along the meandering rural road heading northeast from Greenfield's farm, then before reaching the outskirts of Marvod took a right turn arriving at the entrance to Pike's farm about twenty minutes later, where it was confronted by a large metal swing barrier gate and standing behind it three policemen in triangle formation. The officer at the apex wore a police uniform with Marvod badge and sergeant rank insignia, police cap, and was armed with a pistol buttoned in its holster; the two behind wore the same uniform but without insignia, name badge and cap, submachine gun slung over one shoulder held pointing at the ground and balaclava obscuring most of their face. The

sergeant held up one hand palm outwards while with the other hand pressed the button on a two-way radio and spoke down towards it, the police van coming to a halt in the driveway.

"I thought you said it wasn't manned, Mister Greenfield," said the driver nervously.

"I did," said Greenfield surprised seated on one of the benches in the rear. "It wasn't when I came here yesterday."

"Please stay in the vehicle, Mr Greenfield," said the senior State Police Officer over his shoulder from the passenger seat. "Do not get out under any circumstances." The police officer took a sheet of paper from the glove compartment, he and his colleague then checked their pistol before both put on their cap, alighted from the van and approached the gate, the junior officer remaining a couple of paces back from it, the senior officer approaching right up to it close to the Marvod Sergeant.

"Does a Mister Pike live here?" the State Police officer asked.

"You know he does. Who are you?" said one of the masked men impassively from the rear. "Do you have an appointment?" said the other pointing to a sign to the right of gate that stated:

*"PRIVATE PROPERTY OF MR PIKE
ENTRANCE BY APPOINTMENT ONLY
TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT"*

"I am required," said the State Police officer displaying his warrant card with one hand and reading from the paper held in the other, "in accordance with the instructions of the State Court, to serve an injunction on Mister Pike to immediately cease all construction work on the land known as Bull Island, to remove all illegal barriers and to provide unhindered access to the aforesaid island to its lawful owner, Mister Greenfield. Please open the gate, Sergeant."

There was a pause, followed by some indistinguishable chatter then laughter between the masked men, one of them saying, "You don't have jurisdiction here."

"Mr Pike's farm is state land. By the authority of the State Court we demand access. Open the gate immediately," he said assertively.

"If you try and enter you will be treated like any other trespasser," said the masked man, both then stepping forward to the gate.

The State Police Officer retreated a couple of paces to his colleague and

briefly spoke to him, after which they both advanced and attempted to lift the barrier causing a klaxon alarm to sound as they broke an invisible beam sensor. Simultaneously both masked men raised their weapon, flicked off their safety and trained it on the two policemen, shouting, 'Halt! Hands up!'

After a long pause during which no-one moved, one of the masked men said to the State Police officer at whom his gun was aimed, "Slowly take out your pistol with thumb and little finger and put it on the ground. Slowly. Now back off two paces. O.K. good. Now you too," he said to the other. He then ducked under the barrier and kicked the two pistols to his colleague. "Who else is in the van?"

"Just Mr Greenfield."

The masked man picked up both pistols in turn, emptied the magazine on the ground then came round the barrier and handed them to his colleague, who motioned to him to put them on the ground at his feet, before resuming his original position behind the gate weapon trained on the van. His masked colleague walked past the State officers, peered cautiously through the tinted van windows as he passed, opened the driver-side door and checked inside the vehicle for weapons, slid open the rear door and did the same, Greenfield sitting in the back with hands held up, then returned to his original position and said, "Now get back in your van." After both were seated he approached the driver's window and indicated with hand rotation for the window to be opened, waiting until it was fully down. "Now start the engine. If you come back you'll find more of us, more heavily armed, and we may not be so friendly next time," then dropped the pistols behind the driver's head onto the floor then slapped hard on the door and indicated with a gesturing thumb they were to go. The van sped away, the masked man triumphantly firing a burst with his weapon into the sky followed by the other.

The two masked men left the Marvod policeman on duty at the gate and drove back to Bos's house continuing to chat merrily about the morning's events as they walked in pulling off their balaclava to reveal their face. After they had changed, Si returned to Marvod to resume his normal duties and Bos took the connecting door to the farmhouse and reported to Pike in his study.

"They'll be back, Bostultus," said Pike at the conclusion of Bos's

disjointed recollection. "And they may try at Bull Island next time."

"We'll be ready, Boss. We have a guard on twenty four rotation. And the remote systems give us about ten minutes warning. It only takes ten minutes, fifteen minutes max, to get down there from the farmhouse."

"Yes. But not at the front gate. They might try and ram it next time," said Pike. "We need to have the barrier replaced. Install a high security crash gate. Get onto it immediately."

"Sure thing, Boss," said Bos dutifully. "But if the police are planning to come," he continued with a puzzled expression, "won't our informant give us plenty of notice anyway? Just like today?"

"Onions, Bostultus," said Pike to an expression of bewilderment from Bos. "Layers of defence, as I've told you before," he said shaking his head at Bos's continued confusion. "Anyway, we need to talk about something else," he said ominously and stood up turning his back to Bos. "You made a mistake using Zakulis for the will," said Pike after a long pause. Bos, knowing better than to point out to Pike that it was he who had suggested using Zakulis, kept his thoughts to himself. "Do a proper job this time," he continued. "No expense spared. Use the best, fingerprints, the works. Date it a month after the first will and get it signed by Maslyan. If he whinges about it, you know what to do. I'll talk to Iskaz. We'll get a new police investigation done after an anonymous tip-off. Conduct a search of my great-uncle's old law firm, unexpectedly discover the will there. Deliberately concealed in their records office. Charges will be laid, of course." Pike turned around to face Bos and continued, "I want to check the will myself this time. Have it brought to my chambers when it's ready."

Chapter 4 - A Convenient Alliance

A few days later the State Police tried to enter Bull Island directly from Greenfield's farm, as Pike had anticipated, but met with a similar fate, on this occasion abandoning the endeavour when opposition reinforcements arrived on the island. Then the following day another ultimately futile attempt at the front gate, though in larger strength this time, encountered the new reinforced crash gate topped by razor wire, several mute and immovable guards and a recorded message that played back over the

intercom referring unscheduled visitors to Marvod Police. After three consecutive failures the State Police told Greenfield they didn't have the budget to attempt further action nor sufficient resources to overcome the Marvod Police who appeared to have access to more. They encouraged him to instead speak to his member of parliament to ensure better funding at a state level in future. His only other options, they had said, were to raise the issue at a federal level, which they warned would likely take longer than his lifetime even if he were able to get the case heard, hope that Pike would eventually come to his senses, consider making a deal with Pike as others had in similar circumstances, or finally, 'Had he contemplated prayer?' The first two were exercises in futility, Pike would likely only come to his senses post mortem, he had no intention of gifting Pike anything, and he certainly wasn't going to rely solely on supplication, even if they were being serious, which he wasn't sure they were. He had expected the state authorities would have had the power to enforce legal penalties, but they had turned out to be powerless and ineffectual, just as his friends had warned him they would be. He determined that if he was unable to remove Pike from his land using legal means, he would try to make it financially untenable, a burdensome albatross for him and his friends. Through his friends, he would propose sanctions, embargos, tariffs, fines, anything that would hurt Pike where he would feel it most acutely, at the next Alliance meeting, the next Federation meeting, any forum of which he was a member, even the negative publicity might clip his wings and tighten his small circle of so-called friends.

Such thoughts filled Greenfield's mind as he melancholically dangled his fishing rod in the water. Since access to his prime fishing grounds had been impeded, Greenfield had tried fishing off the derelict bridge at the southern end of Bogrich River, it was not far from the island and he reasoned the fishing there should be just as good. He had some moderate success, landing a reasonable catch if not the same to which he had become accustomed on Bull Island, but there was no shack at this location, so he was exposed to all weather, had nowhere to keep his beer cold or prepare the fish, nowhere to stay overnight if he wanted to, and as for scenery, the dilapidated bridge, the overgrown and long disused dirt tracks leading to it, the view only of the muddy opposite bank, it could not compete. He had invited his friends, but they, knowing full well where

Greenfield was fishing, had said they were too busy for the moment or offered some other excuse, so he ended up there alone. For the first few days he had stopped by the new entrance to Bull Island on the way to the bridge, dolefully watching the construction work that continued unabated, all the while under the vigilant observation of an uncommunicative heavily armed guard. But it had grown too painful to see what was being done to his island and his powerlessness to prevent it, so he had stopped visiting and avoided going that way.

However, other thoughts were also intruding: he had been trying to manage an unrelated issue for several months, an issue that affected their access to the north-east of the farm, but also, importantly as it would turn out, was disrupting the life of the tenant farmers, and was it now coming to a head. The small hamlet where the tenant farmers lived near the Bogrich River suspension bridge was at the intersection of several ancient foot tracks, one of which connected Forket to Marvod. The tenant farmers had for many years travelled along this track from their farms to sell their goods in Forket and buy provisions. This was the shortest path to market, significantly quicker than going to Marvod, but meant they had to carry goods on their head across the pedestrian bridge, load them onto carts they left on the other side then hitch each to donkeys they brought with them. This alone was not a problem; this was after all the way the tenant farmers had transported goods for generations past: even when Greenfield's grandfather had offered them rental of a truck they had refused. But a little way along the track heading towards Forket it passed alongside a large stream with steep grade and sheer banks and across a low rickety wooden bridge. The track here was cut into the banks and became tortuous and tight with a precipitous drop on one side and was subject to frequent floods and erosion. When the track became impassable a circuitous undulating alternative route was necessitated, crossing the stream much higher up where it was more often just a strong trickle, but this bypass was narrow, often covered in deep mud and could add several hours to the journey for both farm bikes and donkey carts until repairs had been performed. Greenfield, with his mother's agreement, had decided to mitigate the risk permanently by re-routeing the stream, but in an ultimately misguided expectation that it would expedite construction, and in spite of his mother's misgivings at his chosen approach, had religiously followed the correct

approval process by applying to the Forket town council planning department. Greenfield's proposal for the new stream included a straight channel with multi-stage waterfall allowing a controlled drop in elevation, connecting deep wide pools filled with native reeds and vegetation, fish ladders, and at the narrowest section between the largest two pools a short elevated bridge. A surveyor, one of the vestiges of the old Marvod town council and its practices, part of a mafia-like hold-out controlling the planning department and resisting change from within, had called Greenfield shortly after submission and told him that on payment of an additional facilitation fee, approval would be straight-forward. But Greenfield had declined his offer on principle and as a consequence had been punitively subjected to several months of back-and-forth, increasingly frustrating correspondence, the surveyor making additional demands for new information on each occasion including details that were not normally required and not even of any apparent relevance, and taking care to ensure there was a suitable interval between each correspondence to give the impression of meticulous consideration with the added benefit of drawing out the process, before with unexpected suddenness approving the application. The surveyor transmitted his approval correspondence late one Friday afternoon, adding to the final approval, inserted with no prior discussion and agreement, conditions that included inane imperatives such as the requirement to install concrete pipes at specified invert levels that would have meant the water would have had to flow uphill in several places, and other absurdities that similarly broke the laws of physics. Greenfield had immediately reviewed the new stipulations and responded seeking clarification within a few minutes, but received in return an out-of-office reply saying the surveyor had left on two month's leave.

Greenfield had rung the council at the next opportunity, the following Monday morning, to challenge the conditions and was told by the surveyor's colleague who took his call that it would be best to wait until his colleague returned from leave and discuss it with him then. The surveyor explained that he had no knowledge of the application himself and Greenfield risked significant delay if he tried to respond, alternatively, he could of course re-submit the application, he helpfully offered, but that was no guarantee of any more expeditious resolution. Greenfield decided to wait until the surveyor returned from leave.

Just last week he had called the surveyor. The surveyor had pointedly refused to remove any conditions from the approval stating they were based on local government guidelines for which the surveyor listed the relevant references and it was not within his authority to countermand them. Greenfield had commented sarcastically that it was surprising he hadn't been asked to provide a water treatment plant to which the surveyor humourlessly and earnestly replied, 'That is what the regulations normally require, but I have determined in your favour in this instance,' perhaps expecting congratulations for his philanthropic gesture. Greenfield had realised, somewhat belatedly, the pointless waste of time and energy that had resulted from following the rules, having to deal with oft officious, half-witted, ill-informed, ignorant civil servants, thanked the surveyor through gritted teeth and hung up. He grudgingly conceded that Pike's approach, circumvention of the rules-based approach whenever it suited him, definitely had some merit, but instead of sending the surveyor a horse's head by courier, he had elected to ignore the conditions and proceed with his original plan (Later validated when Greenfield found that the referenced guidelines were in fact town water supply guidelines written over forty years ago, but recently amended to include a paragraph, presumably added in ill-considered haste, stating that they were to be used for 'all water systems'!)

Recent heavy spring rains had resulted in frequent closure of the track for repairs, the bypass also getting increasingly difficult to traverse, and the tenant farmers had been growing more and more agitated. Early to middle spring was a peak time for their vegetables, particularly those from last years' autumn harvest, onions, potatoes, carrots, beetrots and leeks that they had stored over winter and had to be sold quickly as the air temperature rose before they sprouted and rotted. Greenfield had informed them months back, last autumn, of his plan to re-route the stream and his expectation it would be finished long before spring, but the delays caused by the planning process had only served to convince the tenant farmers that Greenfield couldn't be trusted, he was incompetent, that they would need to look for another solution elsewhere, and they told him as much on each recent occasion he visited them to collect rent, increasingly vehemently. Tomorrow the civil works contractor would finally arrive to commence the diversion works and he would be busy with them.

After hooking yet another eel and releasing the unwanted anguilliform, he decided this would be his last day fishing this season.

Just after seven in the morning, Greenfield arrived by motorbike not far to the west of the stream crossing, where the construction team was gathering for a briefing prior to commencing work. Greenfield found the site supervisor and laid out his copy of the plans on the bonnet of his car. He told him to ignore any reference to concrete pipes shown in the council's notes, explaining that they would be installed later by another contractor. The supervisor advised that as they had been told the works would begin in early winter, when the partly frozen ground and low stream level would have facilitated earthworks, the spring rain would result in delays to the work that, based on his experience, meant it was unlikely the diversion would be completed until well into summer. Greenfield acknowledged the bad news, arranged a daily meeting time with the contractor then left. Shortly down the track he had to pull to the side to allow a group of tenant farmers, each appalled in vivid market garb and traditional fur hat, leading two donkeys with two lightly loaded four-wheeled carts, a few seated bouncing uncomfortably on the cart-bed, to pass on their way back from Forket. He decided not to communicate the estimated completion date for the works, thinking it would be more likely to antagonise them; they would see the diversion sign and the contractor for themselves, and at least know construction had started. They all ignored his friendly greeting as they trundled through the muddy ruts keeping their gaze fixed on the path ahead.

The driver of the lead cart called the small convoy to a halt when they reached the entrance to the construction site, approached the site supervisor to talk to him briefly, then returned to the cart and continued homewards along the diversion. The group, minus the carts that were left on the far side of the pedestrian bridge, arrived back at their small village about two hours later, the leader spoke to the others then left them to unload the two heavily laden donkeys while he headed toward the village chief's house. He opened the door and entered, gingerly stepping along a dingy corridor, dodging a crooked line of unevenly stacked boxes extending almost to the ceiling on both sides, in danger of toppling should any be touched, past a steep narrow staircase to a gloomy room at the back. His grandfather was seated in a threadbare armchair at the rear of the

room, both arms lying flat on the armrests, facing down the corridor towards him with his back to a pair of heavy curtains covering half the back wall and extending almost to the ceiling, dark patches so numerous they almost covered the original drab midnight blue dyed grain sack cloth, thin streams of light escaping around the sides and top. In the dim milieu he could barely distinguish the dozens of dusty framed photos on the walls on both sides of the curtain, on the wall to his right and around the fireplace on his left, that he knew displayed family groupings and panoramas of a different place whence his father's grandparents had fled, the most redolent reminder of an earlier time in the family history. He felt for the armchair behind him and to this right and sat down facing the weazened but still vital old man and spoke in his native dialect, his grandfather replying likewise:

"Detan (as they had designated Greenfield in their vernacular) has finally started the repair work, but his contractor says it won't be finished for months, maybe not until autumn."

His grandfather nodded in recognition. "I visited the weather-vane while you were away this morning," he said in his shrill tremulous voice referring to an old lady of indeterminate age but certainly older than him, who lived by herself in a small hut high in the hills near the boundary with Pike's farm, renowned for her ability to predict the weather and consulted before sowing and harvest every year. "She says we can expect a deluge starting next week and lasting for up to two weeks, a flood such as we have never seen here before."

"Then we need to get as much to market now as we can, Opa. How long does she give us?"

"Five days. But, son, what about the track ... the bridges?"

He thought for several seconds recalling what he had seen of conditions that morning, "If it's as bad as you say, I think the track leading to the bridge and the bridge itself could be washed away, the bridge is in such poor condition already. As for the rest of the track and the bypass, that could be virtually impassable for weeks, we might have to carry everything by hand, take the whole village and stay in Forket overnight."

"I thought so," he said triumphantly. "I have been considering this for some time now, and this has decided it. We need to start taking our goods to Marvod instead. We will need to pass through Pike's farm, so we need to go and see him today. We leave immediately."

Ten minutes later, the old man was on his way out of the hamlet seated uneasily on a donkey, his grandson walking ahead of him with the lead rope in his hand, a sparse crowd waving to them as they carefully picked their way along the track that headed north-east, headed for the woods at the north-eastern corner of Pike's farm, an isolated congregation of trees larger than a copse on a small rocky hill forming a salient that jutted into Pike's property. They entered the arboreal island surrounded by fields and followed the winding path between boulders rounded smooth by wind, rain and the touch of passing hands until further progress was blocked by a tall wire fence. The old man half turned and nodded to his grandson, who pulled a pair of wire cutters from his saddle bag and cut a large hole, large enough to allow passage for the donkey, helped his grandfather down and lifting a flap of wire guided them both through the breach. After he had helped his grandfather to re-mount, they continued along the well trodden track, which although overgrown and clearly disused for some years allowed steady progress until they cleared the trees where they found themselves at the edge of a field, the old track from this point enshrouded by fields of rape stretching to the horizon. The old man pointed east in the direction of Pike's farmhouse, although not in view from here, and his grandson led the donkey the shortest path across the field between the rows of juvenile plants to another farm track, then by orthogonal paths between crop fields as if following the pattern of a crossword.

Pike was reviewing the accounts in his study, some inconsistencies about the records from White's that the accountant had brought to his attention, and as he pondered over some figures he caught sight of a bald headed figure on the wall opposite. For a fleeting instant he didn't recognise who it was, then he recalled yesterday's decision: in the warm glow of his successful re-occupation of Bull Island, his fear of a loss of power had fully avolated and he had felt confident enough to abandon his wig and go full cranial commando. He studied his new look in the mirror, admiringly rubbing his self-shaved pate and decided 'the Brynner', as Gemariah had called it after she had got over the initial shock when he emerged from the bathroom last night, suited him. He even liked the term 'commando', it would be a constant reminder of recent exploits and what he had planned.

Any further admiration/consideration/deliberation was interrupted when

he heard the two-way radio on the corner of his desk crackle then a voice announced, 'Pike, Pike. Intruders in the paddocks to the west. Two men, one donkey, over', a syncopated echo coming from Bos's office.

Immediately there was a knock on his door and Bos entered. "Do you want me to throw them out, Boss?"

"It's hardly an all-out armoured assault! *Is it, Bostultus?*" said Pike sardonically. "Now go and find out who it is."

Ten minutes later Bos called back on the radio to say it was two tenant farmers. Pike was taken aback, but his initial anger at the intrusion was quickly supplanted by curiosity. He had never before had a visit from the tenant farmers, and since he had upgraded the boundary fence had not expected any. He had not considered the west boundary of his farm a security threat and had not installed any cameras or sensors there. He picked up the handset. "What do they want?" he said intrigued.

"They won't tell me. They say they need to speak to you. Over." Pike brought his free hand to his chin and rubbed his morning stubble reflectively. He had been planning to visit the tenant farmers in a few weeks, after the fall-out from Bull Island had dissipated, to discuss the next phase of his campaign. Still spring was a relatively quiet time on the farm, he had no meetings planned in Marvod that day and the accounts could wait. "Bring them to me then," he said.

Almost an hour later a car arrived in front of the farmhouse, Ivor and Bos got out, a donkey and two figures appearing shortly afterwards behind him. "What took you so long?" said Pike crankily after Bos joined him on the porch.

"The old man insisted on using the donkey, Boss," said Bos defensively. "He refused to get in the car and leave the animal for Ivor to mind."

The old jack, led by a young man, plodded rhythmically across the farmyard until it reached the porch rail behind which Pike and Bos were stood leaning. The old man scanned the faces in front of him from his elevated perch on the donkey.

"You're trespassing. This is private property, old man," said Bos breaking the silence.

"Are you Meester Pike?" said the gaunt mounted figure to Bos.

"I am Mr Pike," said Pike.

"I am Lupee," said the old man with a respectful bow of his head to Pike

who reciprocated. "Thees, grandson," he added gesturing to the young man with an upturned downward pointing hand, bows again exchanged and further when Pike introduced Bos.

"We have something important to discuss with you," added his grandson.

Pike turned to Bos and said, 'Show them in', then walked through the front door. Having helped his grandfather to the ground and tied the donkey to the rail, the young man led the elder through the hall, both removing their traditional fur hat on entering the house, passed Gemariah and nodded to her politely, followed Bos into Pike's study where Pike was seated and sat down with his grandfather. Bos shut the door and remained standing inside next to it.

"I will speak on behalf of my grandfather," said the young man. "His grasp of your language is not so good." Pike indicated his acquiescence to the request with a small nod.

"We need to speak in private," continued the young man to Pike, half turning his head to look at Bos.

"Bostultus stays," said Pike.

The old man met his grandson's eyes then nodded after a brief pause. "We'd like to ask your permission to cross your land to get to market in Marvod," said the young man.

"Why? What's wrong with the Forket track?"

"There will be a big flood and the track will be washed away."

"That's not the forecast," said Pike slightly alarmed looking to Bos for confirmation. Bos pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"It's what our weather-vane says," said the young man, the old man adding a single word in a different dialect no-one else could understand. "That's the name for our oracle," he explained. "We have a lot of produce we need to sell this spring. So we need to make daily trips. Urgently," adding the last word to emphasise the importance.

"There's no track to Marvod on my farm. Not any more. You know that?" said Pike. "You'd have to cross the fields. Do you have vehicles?"

"We don't use vehicles, we use donkey carts."

"It's a long trip. I could rent you a vehicle," offered Pike.

"Not nezry," said the old man.

"What would I get for my ... munificence?" said Pike.

"We would pay you a daily fee," said the young man.

Pike stood up and turned to face the wall behind his desk rubbing his chin. The young man exchanging glances with the elder, the latter shaking his head in reply. In silence Pike pondered for half a minute the new opportunities this afforded. "You've been living there a long time now. In that little town of yours. Working the fields ... Have you ever thought about claiming squatter rights?" he eventually said.

"We not squat," said the old man haltingly with indignant pride. "We pay rent."

"Semantics," said Pike with a flitting smile his back still turned. "But if you wanted to stay as tenants. I could accommodate that. You'd like a reduction in your rent, I assume?" said Pike rhetorically and simultaneously turned around, the young man returning his gaze with puzzlement. Without waiting for a reply Pike continued, "You can pass over my farm tomorrow. Today if you like. Don't worry about the fee. We'll sort that out later. In return I want to discuss a proposal. I think we can help each other. Meet me and my lawyer tomorrow in my Marvod office."

The old man invited his grandson to come closer then they conducted an extended hushed conversation. "My grandfather agrees," said the young man. "I will come to your office after we have finished our business tomorrow, but by myself; it is too far for my grandfather to travel. I will convey your proposal to him." Pike came round the table and shook the young man's hand vigorously, who by then had risen, and after the still seated and behatted old man had spat on his own hand, shook hands with him too, a faint expression of disgust on Pike's face.

"By the way, where did you cross my fence?" said Pike.

"In the woods," said the young Lupee.

"But how did you get through?" asked Bos accusingly.

"Don't worry about that," said Pike putting his arm round the young man's shoulders, guessing they must have cut it and continued, "I'm sure it was already damaged. Bostultus will install a gate. And he'll clear a path through the woods, won't you, Bostultus?" he said to Bos who expressed his assent.

Pike showed the Lupee family to his study door, instructed Bos to follow them to the woods then give the young man directions to his chambers and tell them Ivor would accompany them as far as the main

road tomorrow. After they had left, Pike had a lengthy phone call with Maslyan.

Mid-morning the following day, after selling their produce at Marvod market, the young Lupee arrived at Temny Inn where he was met by a security guard and escorted to Pike's chambers. Maslyan rose from one of the chairs in the corridor where he had been waiting to greet him then both were shown through. Pike wasted no time in putting his proposal to him, the young man listening intently and clarifying several issues with Maslyan as he went. During the meeting Pike received a call from Bos and went to one of the bedrooms to take it in private, leaving the other two alone together momentarily.

"Is this all legal?" the young Lupee asked Maslyan in astonishment after Pike had left.

"It will be," said Maslyan chortling. "The amendment to the law will be back dated."

"How can he do that?" the young man asked disbelievingly.

"In Marvod, Mr Pike can do anything," said Maslyan. "You'll learn that soon enough, young man."

Pike returned, the young man thanked him and told them both he would discuss the offer with the elder Lupee that night then departed.

The following day, on the way home from market, the village chief's grandson consigned the donkey carts to the eldest of his companions while he diverted to Pike's farmhouse and informed Pike of their decision, agreeing with Pike that he and his grandfather would come to the farmhouse to sign the paperwork as soon as the weather permitted, saying they were busy for the moment with early harvest, market and preparations for the storm.

The forecast until a few days before had been predicting cloudy skies and light rain for the next week, but as each day passed the updated predictions had been getting progressively more ominous with heavy rain predicted every day for as far the forecast went, rainfall totals being increased daily. Initially, Greenfield had not been concerned, sowing was complete and the majority of the roots would be well set by now; provided the rains were not heavy they should only sustain minor losses, but the revised values had meant it was possible a large proportion of the crops

would be washed away. As a consequence Greenfield had brought back as many workers as he could obtain at short notice and had been frantically getting all the drains and ditches cleared out, even digging makeshift trenches at the top of each field to try and divert water away from the crops. He checked all the windows and doors to make sure they were secure, inspected the roof and gutters of all the buildings, doing repairs as necessary, but the work was still proceeding when the light rain got too heavy to safely continue, leaving him to curse that he hadn't started earlier, wasn't better prepared and pray the storm would pass quickly.

The following day he was awoken at daybreak by a whistling noise, in irregular alternating crescendo and diminuendo, accompanied by fitful bursts of rain spitting against the window. He opened the curtains simultaneously to a large thunderclap, the daylight only imperceptibly brightening the room until two seconds later a bright flash of lightning lit the shed opposite him and the farmyard between reflecting into the room casting his shadow on the wall above the bed. Outside he discovered was a melee of white streaks of wind driven rain, a burst of wind in one direction briefly gaining ascendancy before being usurped by another of seemingly random direction, against a churning background maelstrom of sky with different hues of grey. Below him, appearing from behind the shed was a new stream running down what was previously the road before disappearing behind the adjacent shed. An intermittent sheet of water was falling from the gutter to his right and underneath it he could see a shallow slit trench had formed where the rainwater fell before flowing across the farmyard and joining the stream.

Greenfield stood for a while transfixed by the tumultuous scene before him, his transient human troubles temporarily displaced from his mind by this salutary reminder of the pre-eminence of nature. After a few moments of reflection a thought of gratitude surfaced for the prescient person who had selected the site for the farmhouse and adjacent sheds on a slightly elevated hump in the landscape that sloped away on all sides then went downstairs to prepare himself breakfast, joined shortly afterwards by Constance and Olivia both complaining about being woken by the noise of the storm.

Over breakfast it was agreed that it was too dangerous for Olivia to go to school, and as there was nothing that could be done outside that day until

the storm passed they decided to bring out the board games, all four joining in with some little initial excitement, the games not having been seen for quite a while, watched on by a gurgling Jorah, spasmodically jerking and waving his arms setting his baby bouncer bobbing. The storm appeared to pass around lunchtime, the skies briefly brightening, but the ferocious rain continued unabated, and another front soon hit them, continuing through to the middle of the following morning when the power suddenly went off, Greenfield running across the farmyard to the equipment shed, shielding his head under the front of his raincoat from the driving rain and after several minutes managing to start the emergency generator. It rained all the following day as well and it was not until the day after that he was able to get outside again in a brief respite, the rain dwindling for a few hours to a heavy drizzle, to top up the diesel and inspect for damage. He walked up the road, threading his way between scattered debris, checking the power lines that ran alongside until after a few minutes he saw in the distance ahead two power poles lying across the road. He retreated to the farmhouse, through rain of gradually increasing intensity, and after over two hours waiting in a phone queue reported the damage to the power company.

Tempers in the farmhouse had been progressively fraying as forced confinement is inclined: predictably charades had only lasted the first day, some of the monopoly pieces were still missing from the second day after Olivia had thrown them across the lounge, scrabble had been abandoned on day three after an argument about the validity of a word had caused a day's petulant silence between Greenfield and his mother, and on the fourth day, Olivia lost a tug of war with Greenfield over the playing cards and in a huff went to the corner of the room to make her own deck from Greenfield's collection of beer mats inscribing each with a suit denomination in permanent black marker pen. By the end of the fourth day each was in a different room, meeting up only for meals that were conducted in almost complete silence except for the incessant background music of wind and rain.

After a full week of near continuous rain Greenfield was finally greeted by rainless bright sunshine and scattered clouds when he opened the curtains, his spirits lifted further when he opened the window and closed his eyes inhaling deeply of the purified air. But when he opened his eyes

and saw the debris in the road he was reminded with a sinking feeling of the clean-up that awaited. Following breakfast, during which the testiness of the last few days was forgotten, memories washed clean by the warming rays of the sun, he called his principal farmhands to the farm, warning them to come by bike, to avoid the main entrance road and come down the parallel direct track. He met them in the equipment shed and tasked each with inspection of a compass quadrant centred on the farmhouse: Mitson would take northwest and the farm building area, Rev southwest, Nadia the largest southeast quadrant, leaving Greenfield with the most difficult and second largest northeast quadrant. They each collected a shovel and small petrol-powered chainsaw, checked their phone, took a freshly charged two-way radio as back-up, and received with gratitude a packed lunch and hot flask of tea from Constance. Greenfield and Nadia took the farm bikes and the other two used their own; they agreed to check in each hour and report back that night.

Greenfield made his way down the muddy farm track in fits and starts, stopping occasionally to cut large branches and move debris to the side, taking notes as he went. The crops were surprisingly unaffected in many areas, particularly where the ground was flat; evidence of an elevated water level appeared on the leaves of the crops, but the water had by now largely drained away aside from isolated muddy patches. However, on sloping sections, wherever a ditch or trench had overflowed or become blocked, the diverted flow had left a long wide tan brushstroke through the darker brown and green of the crop field, smothering the young plants, before being intercepted by a ditch at the end of the field, then in several cases continued across the tracks between crop fields and through the fields beyond towards the south-east.

Late in the morning Greenfield arrived at an abrupt new termination of the track above the location of the old bridge. He got off his bike and walked up to the jagged edge; below the small precipice he could see intact sections of the track fallen on the side of the stream, similar on the other side, and between where the bridge used to be only the broken ends of wooden piles protruding upwards, scanning downstream he thought he could see far in the distance remnants of it partially obscured by large trees carried away by the deluge. Unable to go further he retraced his tracks until he reached the start of the bypass. He found the track here barely passable:

it was in long sections intermittently half eroded lengthwise the rideable portion alternating sinuously from one side to the other, the drop from sound ground almost the depth of his tyre, allowing him to follow a narrow path just wide enough for the bike in most places, in others having to dismount and push it. He struggled onwards for two hours until he reached the pedestrian bridge, the tenant farmers' carts parked just before it. The pedestrian bridge appearing to be intact he crossed and continued to the tenant farmers' hamlet.

As he approached the outermost house in the village he heard a muffled voice shout out, 'Detan's here', curtains rustling at an upstairs window. He slowed to a stop facing sideways across the road leaving the engine idling. Shortly after a young man emerged from the village chief's house and stormed towards him with pumping arms and furious countenance halting a few paces from him. Through the torrent of words, mixed with some in the man's own language, and wild gesticulation, he gathered that almost every roof had leaked and flood waters had penetrated the ground floor of the lower houses in spite of the use of wheat sacks as makeshift sand bags.

In a brief interlude in the tirade, Greenfield managed to get out apologetically that the bridge across the stream was destroyed, but before he could say any more the young man was joined by two other men with spades, both pointing them at him menacingly, others behind closing on his location. Sensing a threat to his safety, Greenfield thought it best to depart and sped back up the hill hearing one shout as he left, 'And don't come back!' a spade landing with a clatter on the gravel close behind him, thankful to the fortuitous prescience that had caused him to leave the bike running.

Greenfield met up with the other three in the barn late in the afternoon and they shared their findings. They estimated twenty per cent overall crop loss, many of the roads were heavily rutted where temporary streams had crossed, flowed down their length or deviated around debris, the ditches were filled with deep mud and occasional dense tangled patches of broken branches and undergrowth, Mitson said he had passed a repair crew on the entrance road who waved him through and told him power should be restored by the end of the day, Nadia added that the road bridge over the Bogrich River was now missing its central span, Greenfield apprised them of the state of the bridges in his sector but decided not to give details about

the tenant farmers, instead merely saying he didn't have time to inspect the cottages; it was bad, they agreed, but could have been worse if they hadn't done last minute preparations. Greenfield concluded by allocating repair assignments for the next few days for all except the road bridge, which he said would have to wait until they could afford it, the likely crop losses meaning they would struggle to break even this year. After dinner that evening he told his mother and Constance of his treatment by the tenant farmers, Constance telling him to let tempers cool a couple of days before returning to see what repairs were needed.

Old man Lupee had been conducting his own inspections: the morning the rains broke he sent some of the villagers to inspect all corners of their farmland. The reports that came back confirmed crop losses were low, as he had expected due to the low gently undulating nature of most of their farm land, but mostly because the majority of their spring crops had already been harvested and stored in expectation of the rain; damage was principally to the road bridge, tracks and their houses. They had exaggerated the latter to Greenfield: there had been a few leaks in their roofs but they had minimised the concomitant impact by bucket shuffling with teams of young children, and the wheat sacks had been surprisingly effective in keeping all the rain water out except for a few easily mopped up dribbles.

Pike would be expecting them at his farmhouse any day now, but as he had not yet inked the deal with him, the old man saw an ideal opportunity for a last minute sweetener. Having seen off Detan, the old man sent his young deputy to visit Pike again and ask him to, 'Bring the papers for signing, as, unfortunately, Mr Lupee is unable to travel because of the track conditions and a recent bad turn in his health'. Pike asked why the young man couldn't take them back with him when he returned, but he told him his grandfather would only sign in Pike's presence; it was tradition. Pike enquired about the track conditions, the young man told Pike that they were only passable on their side of the woods on donkey or on foot, earnestly offering Pike the use of one of their donkeys, to which Pike thanked him grinning mildly but informed him he would organise his own transport. When Pike asked if Greenfield had visited recently, the younger Lupee said they had seen him off only that morning. He told Pike what

Greenfield had said about the damage to the track and bridge over the stream, and added that the road bridge was destroyed but the pedestrian bridge was still intact. After some consideration, Pike told him he would come on condition that the pedestrian bridge was barricaded by the villagers until he had departed the hamlet. The young man confirmed this would be done immediately he returned, in which case Pike said he would visit with his lawyer tomorrow.

The following morning at the hamlet, another clear sunny day, was interrupted by a rapidly repeated gradually intensifying thwump, thwump sound. The villagers, most never having heard the sound before, came out of their houses and looked around for its source; one of them pointing in the sky at what they said was an approaching aircraft.

A bright red helicopter, with livery indicating it was local news, descended warily between the trees and landed in the road. While the pilot was completing his post-landing procedure the co-pilot got out and opened the rear door, Pike squeezing out of the narrow aperture followed by Maslyan, the young Lupee who had come outside greeting them then immediately leading the way to his house.

The old man was seated in his usual chair facing the door, the heavy curtains behind him having been drawn aside and tied back. The young Lupee sat next to his grandfather and gestured to Pike and Maslyan to sit in the vacant seats illuminated by the sun streaming across the room.

Maslyan introduced himself and the two tenant farmers did likewise, then Maslyan explained he was present at Mister Pike's request to act as witness and to explain any legal details. After the elder Lupee had acknowledged this, the lawyer handed over an envelope, which the old man leant forward and accepted. The old man withdrew several documents from inside and proceeded to read over each carefully passing them one by one to the younger as he finished his review, who then placed them side by side on the table in front. After several minutes, the last document having been completed, the old man sat back in his chair and paused several seconds as he gathered his thoughts.

"This deal," said the old man breaking the long silence and selecting one page, "it say we own tools, equipment, animals. But the tools, equipment, animals, they ours already. So this just offer what already ours, yes?"

"Yes, that is true," said Maslyan, "but this just confirms—"

"And this deal, it say we own house. But Detan no repair house. They leak. So this deal say we get leaky house, yes?"

"Yes, but—"

"Why we want leaky house? You want live leaky house?" he said glaring savagely at Maslyan.

"No of course not, but—"

"So why you offer us leaky house then?" said the old man tutting and squinting penetratively alternately at the lawyer and Pike for a few seconds. He stopped and picked up another page with his left hand. "And this deal say free access across Meester Pike farm, yes?"

"Yes, that's correct," said Maslyan.

"Very nice, very generous," he said nodding appreciatively, "but how we get cart to Meester Pike farm?" he stopped nodding, turned to Maslyan, and raised his eyebrows. "Huh? Detan he no repair road. Now we no can get cart from house to Meester Pike farm!"

"Well, I wasn't aware—"

"And this deal, it say Meester Pike own all land except houses, yes?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"And land lease agreement say rent-free, ninety nine year, but we pay 'produce levy' it say, yes?"

"Yes."

"But this deal no say how much levy, yes?"

"It says," said Maslyan clearing his throat, "and I quote, 'an amount to be determined—'"

"So we determine now, yes? Then no need determine later," he said triumphantly catching the eyes of each of the other three in turn, placed both sheets on the table then sat back staring directly at Pike.

Until this point, Pike had been sitting back in his armchair observing proceedings, or more correctly watching the old man with grudging admiration. After a long pause, Pike sat forward and said slowly, "We will repair the leaks in the houses and the road. The levy will be two per cent of sales." The old man nodded gently and he went on, "And ... I'll give you one of our farm trucks. But ..." he said holding up his index finger to emphasise the point, followed by a long pause, "you only get all this on two conditions. One. That you do not share the terms of the deal with anyone outside this room. And two. That you maintain a twenty four hour a day

blockade of both bridges across Bogrich River. If there's any trouble with Greenfield, call Bostultus immediately. I'll give you his number."

The old man thought intently for several seconds then his face lit up with a smile, he ritually spat on his hand, leant forward and offered it to Pike who shook it. Pike told Maslyan to prepare two hand written copies of the amendment and all present initialled both. The old man then signed all the remaining documents, Maslyan assisting by pointing out the locations. Maslyan collected the signed documents in a neat pile, did a final check then nodded to Pike, all shook hands and Pike and Maslyan departed.

"So you're clear on the process, Maslyan?" said Pike as they sat in the helicopter waiting for the blades to gather speed.

"Yes," replied Maslyan, then continued hesitantly, "but I'm still concerned about the State Court."

"As am I," said Pike seriously, "as much as Alison and the lodger Nicholas were of her carpenter John," said Pike breaking into a sarcastic chortle. "Just look at Bull Island!" he added disdainfully.

Within the week all Pike's legal processes had been completed, a process that in Forket would have taken years from the usual delays caused by challenges and additional court appearances. In Pike's eyes he was now the legal owner of the tenant farmers' land. To celebrate he decided to write another long article to the Gazette and in follow up he was interviewed by the Gazette, the interview being conducted in his chambers by an intense young journalist, an extract of the unedited transcript for which appears below:

Journalist: 'The amendment to the property laws passed by the town council is reputed to have been written by you. How do you respond to that allegation?'

Pike: That is a complete fabrication. I was consulted, as I am sure were several other prominent Marvod citizens, but the council wrote the law. The independence of institutions is a vital part of a functioning democracy, in Marvod just as much as it is elsewhere. Any competent journalist should know that.'

J: I quote from the amendment: "Tenant farmers who have lived on the same land for a continuous period of not less than fifty years may claim ownership subject to demonstrating their continuing relationship to, and stewardship of, the land." And this amendment was back-dated fifty years.

The retrospectivity of the property law amendment has been described as unique, something that could only have been done in Marvod.'

P: Yes it's something I am particularly proud of ... proud principally on behalf of our town, of course. We are setting a leading example for others on citizens' rights.'

J: You claim that the tenant farmers were mistreated by the Greenfields. What evidence do you have for that?'

P: Evidence! What do you mean evidence? Do you walk around with your eyes closed you stupid woman? O.K, I want that removed from the transcript before publishing. The disgraceful state, the disrepair, of the tenant farmers' houses is sufficient evidence in itself. As landlords the Greenfields were responsible for providing adequate housing and they have clearly failed to do that. But what about the unsafe condition of the bridges and the atrociously maintained track they were forced to use. So bad they had to transport their goods to market with their bare hands and donkey carts. Donkey carts! Yes I know, it's hard to believe in this day and age. But it's not just the Greenfields it's the whole of Forket. Anyone who has been to Forket will have witnessed the abuse they received just because they dressed and talked differently: pretending not to understand them, making fun of their traditional costume, some even making reference to methods employed by Nazi Germany that they thought should be used to deal with them. This is racial discrimination and should not have been tolerated, but it was being actively encouraged in Forket!'

J: You said that your farm boundary is at the Bogrich River.'

P: That is just a statement of fact as ruled by the Marvod Court; an indisputable and clear judgment that is on the record already. Did you not do any research for this interview? Why are you so unprepared?'

J: Your claim to Bull Island is disputed by the Greenfields and many others who know of its traditional history. Yet you refuse to comply with the State Court ruling and return it to its rightful owners.'

P: The State Court does not have jurisdiction and I've already told you about the Marvod Court ruling. Are you deaf or a fool or both? Are you being paid by the Greenfields or one of their cronies to ask these inane questions? That's enough! Your questions are ridiculous. I will discuss your behaviour with the Editor. Do not expect to be at your desk tomorrow. Come in, Bostultus! Our guest is leaving; make sure she receives our usual

hospitality and don't skimp on the pleasantries.'

The final printed article, attributed to the Editor as its original author had been dismissed before publication, consisted of a sanitised version a few dozen lines in length that contained extracts of Pike's claims about the mistreatment of the tenant farmers and his pride in the work of the Marvod Town Council, but no mention of Bull Island.

The article, and the changes to Marvod borough property law it promulgated, drew much attention in Forket, in many other towns within the state and beyond. All Pike's neighbours were soon acquainted with the details of the amendments, knew they would have been drafted by Pike and rang him within days to find out what was going on. The rape farmers, and those whose farm was within the greater Marvod council boundary and had sitting tenants, requested face-to-face meetings with Pike at his farm. But rather than receive visitors there, as they would have preferred, Pike scheduled a series of meetings in his chambers over two days, times deliberately overlapping so they were forced to wait outside his office for hours and squabble over the limited number of chairs outside, Pike watching through a C.C.T.V. screen on his table and chuckling when Bos intervened to separate the elderly male pugilists. All told Pike they had not been consulted, most expressed their displeasure with him and many said their tenants would now be able to apply for adverse possession thanks to Pike and asked what he was going to do about it. Pike's standard response was to first deny he had anything to do with the new laws, then tell them it was their problem. But, he said for his friends he was prepared to facilitate temporary eviction of their tenants before they could make a successful claim, which would then break the continuity required to be successful, and use his influence at court to ensure the order of the cases and the length of time for them to be processed went in their favour, thereby securing them in a Thucydidean embrace.

Pyklit was the last visitor on the second day and had been waiting for three hours by the time Bos showed him in. "You're early, Pyklit," said Pike abruptly.

"But you said—"

"Do you want to speak to me or not?" asked Pike impatiently.

"Yes, of course. My mistake," said Pyklit obsequiously.

Pike went through the same routine as he had with the others and thought the meeting had finished until Pyklit surprisingly added, "I hear that you're repairing the tenant farmers' houses for them."

Pike, realising there was little point in denying it given he had told Bos to use the migrants as he wanted and any one of them could have let slip where they were working, replied spikily, "Yes. What of it?"

"O.K., well," said Pyklit submissively and having secured admission of the minor point tried for that of more substance, "I also heard a rumour that they're getting their farmland rent free except for a two per cent produce levy. Is that true?"

Pike was taken aback; at this point this information was only known to the four who signed the deal and Bos, whom he had to inform to organise collection of the fee. "Where did you hear that?" said Pike snapping back.

"I overheard it in the market in Marvod," lied Pyklit trying to protect his informant. "I didn't see who said it."

"My dealings with the tenant farmers are *none* of your business. Would you want me to share our private discussions with others?" said Pike sarcastically.

"But I have tenant farmers too," persisted Pyklit insensitive to the growing danger. "Any deal you make—"

"Is none of your business. You're getting *dangerously* close to the line, Pyklit," said Pike with an explosive viciousness that startled Pyklit. "I'm beginning to see now you're more like Greenfield than I had thought. Perhaps I should start looking at your farm in a different light," said Pike contemptuously.

"No, no, please. I'm so sorry, Mister Pike. What can I do to prove my friendship to you?" he said imploringly. In endeavouring to uncover the terms of Pike's deal with his tenants, expecting his tenants would ask for the same, Pyklit suddenly saw he had inadvertently stepped across a narrow and unsignposted boundary with his neighbour and was now anxious to withdraw as rapidly as he could.

The meeting concluded under ten minutes later, Pike extracting more hasty concessions from Pyklit than he had anticipated at its start, leaving him alone in his chambers. A long but satisfactory day's work thought Pike, with the unexpected bonus that he had learnt there was someone in his inner circle who couldn't be trusted.

Chapter 5 - Bridges to Nowhere

Three days after the storm had passed the civil contractor rang Greenfield and arranged to inspect site conditions the next day. Having done so they advised they could re-commence the stream re-alignment works tomorrow.

The morning they arrived, Greenfield took some time out of the repair work on the farm to visit the site and afterwards, accompanied by Mitson, took the opportunity to check on the tenant farmers. Arriving at the pedestrian bridge they found their forward passage blocked by two wooden planks tied in a cross diagonally from main cable to wooden walkway plank, in front of some untidily trimmed branches positioned horizontally between the guard wires, and a hastily erected hand written sign fixed to the cross inscribed with the words:

'NO AXES

'UNSAVE STRUKCHA'

On the far end of the bridge he could see a similar barricade and beyond it two men in typical tenant farmer attire sitting with their back to the bridge. "Hello!" he shouted across the bridge to the men who both turned, Greenfield waving to them.

One of the men rose to his feet, peered across the river then removed a cigarette from his mouth. "Hello, Detan," he shouted waving back, followed by loud laughter from the other still seated man.

"What is wrong with the bridge?" he said slowly enunciating each word clearly over the noise of the still swollen and rushing river.

"Feet," said the man, jabbing his finger vigorously downwards towards the bridge, and lifting one foot pointing at it to emphasise.

Greenfield moved several paces to one side for a better view below and now saw that indeed the river bank around both cable tower footings had been removed exposing a significant portion of the concrete. He gave a thumbs up sign to the man on the far side of the bridge, who did likewise then the latter curiously raised a spade from the ground beside him and pointed at it with exaggerated arched eyebrows, wide open eyes and open mouth while looking at Greenfield, followed by sustained raucous laughter

from both the men opposite him. Greenfield looked at Mitson who shrugged his shoulders.

"What about food, market?" shouted Greenfield brokenly.

"Marvod now," shouted the man pointing over his shoulder, "Bye bye," he said flicking his hand several times dismissively at Greenfield and sat down again his back to the bridge.

"Well at least there's no need to rush now to fix it," said Greenfield to Mitson, who pursed his lips and nodded. "They must have got Pike's permission to cross his farm," he said half to himself. Still, he thought, it was a long way for them to Marvod or Forket via Pike's farm and as it was the land owner's responsibility to repair the bridge he spoke to the contractor's supervisor on the return journey and asked him to perform an inspection.

A few days later at breakfast, Greenfield opened the Chronicle to find Pike's article in the Marvod Gazette the lead article on the front page, summarised there and re-printed in full on two pages within. After reading the news piece thoroughly he passed the paper to his mother who did likewise. His mother, who was by now almost fully recovered from her operation, asked him to speak to their neighbours and find out what they knew.

Greenfield called his best friend Feldland first, who recommended he check with his lawyer, then worked his way round the others. All were convinced it was Pike's doing, apart from Anomia who had not read the article, but was unperturbed, merely suggesting Greenfield speak directly to Pike. Lastly Greenfield spoke to their lawyer who said he would check what had been lodged in Marvod court, ringing back just after lunch to complete the picture.

Greenfield told his mother briefly what he had learned, his mother saying to leave out the details, save them for a farm meeting they should have that evening.

"Surely this Marvod council ruling only applies to properties within Marvod borough, so it doesn't apply to us, does it?" said Greenfield's mother starting the meeting off wishfully.

"That's correct, according to our lawyer," said Greenfield, "but he also said that the Marvod council has taken it upon itself to change the boundaries based on Pike's law suit. So the Marvod municipal boundary,

according to them anyway, as of this week, apparently runs along the Bogrich River. I rang the Forket Council to check and they're not aware of it; they say as far as they're concerned the boundary is just as it was, unchanged."

"O.K., but worst case, even if our land *is* in two boroughs, so what?" said Greenfield's mother. "I can live with that. Is that all?"

"No," said Greenfield agitated, Constance grabbing his arm for support. "He said the court records at Marvod show that Pike now owns all the tenant farmers land: the tenant farmers were first granted adverse possession of the land, then immediately afterwards they transferred ownership to Pike. He said it was an astounding performance, normally it would have required months or even years of preparation, perusal and challenge for each submission for all the farmers, but Pike's lawyer presented the tenant farmers' documents at Marvod court one day and after a short adjournment to review the documents, the court awarded ownership of the land to the farmers then the following day to Pike."

"This has got ridiculous!" said his mother. "Pike is living in some parallel universe. We weren't even represented at that hearing! If he thinks he can get away with this theft..."

"What have you got to say about all this, Nadia?" Greenfield said to Nadia, his mother still engrossed in thought, Greenfield having noticed that Nadia had stayed strangely silent throughout, listening intently but offering little more than occasional nods.

"I don't know, you run the farm, not me," said Nadia shrugging and gazing at her feet, Greenfield staring at her with a puzzled expression.

"Get a court order from the State Court," said Greenfield's mother ignoring Nadia, "but get permission for it to be served by the Forket Police, we're within their jurisdiction. We're wasting our time involving the State police any further after what happened last time."

Greenfield's lawyer was granted an emergency hearing by the State court, given the nature of the transgression, and went with the court order he was provided to the Forket Police Chief. There was an intense rivalry between the Forket and Marvod Police forces: The reputation of the Marvod Police Force was well known around the state and felt by other forces to be a blight on their profession. The senior officers within Forket Police Force strongly discouraged any contact by the junior ranks with their Marvod

counterparts in case the Marvod infection should spread through the callow and impressionable. Bishop Cyril's ravings had not gone unnoticed either and the Forket Police ranks being drawn mainly from wheat farming stock added to the bitter competition. Any opportunity for the Forket Police to outwit, humiliate or generally demonstrate moral superiority was seized with relish. Greenfield's lawyer was welcomed enthusiastically by the Forket Police chief who said he would be very happy to assist, informing him, 'We will attend tomorrow', and rang Greenfield to make arrangements for the tactical unit.

Mid-morning the following day a convoy of two armoured vehicles and two midi low-loaders with motorbikes strapped into a rack across both decks, arrived at Greenfield's farmyard and an officer in riot uniform, visor lifted open, came to the farmhouse to ask for directions. "Like I told your boss already, Commander," said Greenfield at the front door, "the new track and bridge across the stream is not finished yet, so you can't travel by vehicle the whole way; you'll have to go by bike or on foot for the last section. Actually, the bypass is a little tricky to find, so it's best I accompany you that far at least." The Commander concurred. "By the way, I checked with the contractor before you arrived this morning: they're still working on their report, but he said based on a visual only, it would be unsafe to allow any pedestrian traffic across the suspension bridge, at least until they've finished their assessment." The officer acknowledged this, but said he would check for himself when he got there.

Greenfield went inside to get his helmet and keys, meeting Constance who had been listening behind the door with their baby lying over one shoulder, tapping it on the back. "Let the police do their job, darling. Keep your distance," pleaded Constance gently. "You remember what happened last time," she said intently putting her free arm around his waist.

Greenfield reassured Constance he would keep well out of gunshot range, kissed his snoozing baby on the back of the head, who let out a loud milky burp in response, then kissed Constance on the lips.

The convoy, led by Greenfield on his farm bike, arrived at the bypass about an hour later, Greenfield stopped, kicked out his bike stand and went back to the lead vehicle.

"It's bike or foot only from here, I'm afraid," said Greenfield through the passenger side window that had been opened by the officer in charge, and

pointed down the narrow muddy track that branched off to the north. "I'll take you as far as the bridge."

The team leader turned his head to address the police seated behind him in the armoured vehicle. "O.K., boys and girls," he said authoritatively. "Everyone out. Mount up!"

Each police officer unloaded their bike then gingerly followed Greenfield in long single file. When the bridge first came in sight, Greenfield stopped and allowed the others to pass, hanging back out of earshot to observe. From his vantage point the scene at the approach to the bridge appeared unchanged from his last visit, but on the far side he could see thick chains had been installed across the bridge and two men dressed in nondescript army camouflage and balaclavas with rifle slung over their shoulder now stood guard.

The riders dismounted and their leader walked up to the bridge by himself while the others remained several paces back. Watched cautiously by the two men on the far side, rifles held at the ready, he reconnoitred the area, checking the underside of the bridge and its footings before returning to the barrier and commencing an inaudible back and forth across the river that rapidly descended into a shouting match, accompanied by dramatic hand waving from the pair opposite. After a couple of minutes of this activity there was an extended pause as the rival groups stood eyeballing each other in stalemate, the two men opposite then enticed the policeman to cross the river, one pointing down to it apparently indicating the ancient crossing point where rocks and boulders had been moved by others long ago their green tinged top surfaces visible just below the fast-moving translucent surface.

The commander re-joined his colleagues and after a brief discussion assigned two men who then left the group to remove their police tactical boots and don rubber waders. They descended the muddy bank on all fours in a semi-controlled slide then scrambled to the water's edge across a jumble of boulders and trees dislodged by the previously raging torrent, which had since subsided to a coiling sinuous surge, monitored with interest by the two combatants who had since transferred along the opposite bank to a better vantage point. One tested the water then with his trailing arm being held by the other took a tentative step from the bank onto a submerged rock, water bifurcating round and high up his leg

creating a churning wake downstream. He gingerly transferred his weight onto his leading foot and was instantly upended, only prevented from being washed downstream by the other tightly holding his arm. His colleague swung him round to the river bank from where he emerged gasping and dripping after a brief dunking in the still frigid water. Their combatant audience doubled over in laughter, one jokingly making a rifle gesture with his outstretched arm aimed at the hapless victim and pulling an imaginary trigger with the finger of his other hand.

After a de-brief, the motorbikes returned to Greenfield's position a few minutes later, their leader raising his visor when he arrived. "O.K., you said there's another bridge," said a chastened red-faced policeman. Greenfield nodded. "Perhaps we'll have more success there. Lead on!" he said gunning his bike and sped off up the track.

The convoy was re-formed, low loaders were reversed with difficulty in the construction parking area after multi-point turns, motorbikes re-mounted in their racks, officers returned to their seats in the armoured vehicles, and passed the farmhouse again almost two hours later stopping beside the barn to load some long wooden planks. Constance came out to hand Greenfield a packed lunch, hugged him then left him to race back to his pathfinder post.

Greenfield stopped the convoy at the edge of a small copse around fifteen minutes walk from the road bridge at the southern end of Bogrich River, from where they could observe unseen and unheard. Not seeing any guards, two scouts were sent ahead on foot and they reported back that the central span was still unrepairs, and a small hut was located on the far river bank next to the bridge; they had got as closed as they dared and no-one was to be seen, but they could hear snoring coming from the hut and smoke coming from a small fire and makeshift barbecue alongside.

Instructions were issued to the team, they collected their guns and the planks of wood, each carried by two men, and departed on foot leaving behind two to guard over the vehicles. Greenfield followed the party closer to the bridge, stopping to lie under the shade of a small bush next to the road. He watched as half the group of men snuck onto the bridge the other half staying back at the edge of the wheat field in prone position to provide covering fire if needed. Two planks were silently raised in the air until vertical then at a signal both were dropped across the breach landing with a

loud thunk on the far side. The men ran across the planks and surrounded the hut shouting instructions as they went.

Two boys in ill-fitting baggy army uniforms came timorously out of the hut, arms raised, still groggy with sleep, two of the team coming forward to frisk then hand-cuff them. The forward team then fanned out to secure the position, one reporting back a few minutes later at which point the rear section rose from their position amongst the crops, raised the remaining planks and arranged them alongside the first two.

Seeing that the path to the far side of the river was now open, Greenfield walked back to the copse to collect his bike and was passed by both low-loaders on their way down to the river, where, on arriving, the bikes were unloaded. The prisoners and bridge were left under the guard of a small contingent while the rest mounted their bikes and headed north up the left bank of the river in the direction of the tenant farmer hamlet, followed by Greenfield at a discreet distance as instructed by the senior officer.

After about half an hour, the road began to deviate away from the river and began climbing steadily winding through small grassy hills, the riders in front disappearing from view behind them. Ten minutes later Greenfield heard a sudden burst of gunfire ahead followed by scattered small arms fire. He dropped his bike on its side and ran to the top of a nearby hill from where he could get a view and slowly raised his head over the rim. Below him he could see the snaking road, mostly visible but occasionally hidden by the side of grassy hillocks and trees. The two lead scout riders were lying in long grass beside the track, their bike near their feet, both firing occasional shots up the hills on both sides. Another larger group also lay on both sides of the track in the long grass much closer to him and not visible to the scouts. One of the men, who appeared to be their leader, was squatting low and jumping up to run from man to man.

At this point a large group of farmers appeared in the distance, running down the road armed with pitchforks, spades, poles, an assortment of various items of farming equipment, shouting at the top of their voice. They surrounded the two scouts, who dropped their weapon and raised their hands. The police leader, who had crept forward to see what was happening, saw them taken prisoner and ran crouching back to his men. Gesturing to the others and after a muffled shout, gunfire rang out and several of the group ran to their bike and with considerable difficulty raised

it then started their engine. Once mounted they provided cover fire while others repeated their actions. Then the whole group, including two who were forced to ride passenger when their bike would not start, sped back down the track in his direction, accompanied by shouts and bursts of gunfire as several men in army uniform rose from their concealed position and fired their weapon. Greenfield ran down the hill and mounted his bike, joining amongst the group of riders as they sped past.

They didn't stop until they reached the bridge where they all rode over and parked their bike on the far side. The leader called them to gather round him. "Anyone hurt?" he asked the group. All shook their head, but one said he had taken two bullets to his armoured vest, several others saying the same.

"What happened?" said Greenfield joining the circle.

"It was an ambush," said the Commander turning to Greenfield. "Someone must have spotted us and warned them. We had to leave two behind."

The leader redirected his attention to the group and for several minutes conducted a question and answer session with each man in turn. While they were still talking, one whistled and pointed to something coming down the track whence they had just come. The group's heads swivelled as one to see a single bike approaching slowly with a white cloth attached to the top of a small branch strapped to the handlebars. It slowed to a stop some distance before it reached the bridge where the rider dismounted and waited. Shortly afterwards a large man in army camouflage and dark sunglasses appeared from the track leading to Bull Island, walking with arms raised half heartedly and joined the other, both then approaching the bridge. The Commander and his senior sergeant walked up to speak to the two men, both pairs stopping on their own side of the missing span. The large man lowered his arms and removed his glasses, Greenfield now recognising Bos. A short conversation ensued then both pairs returned to their original position.

"Bring the prisoners here," said the deflated team leader into his radio as he walked back to the group.

A minute later two handcuffed boys were delivered to him from the copse where they had been moved for safe keeping with the vehicles. Almost simultaneously two bikes approached, again under white flag, and

halted at the bridge. A shivering naked man with vegetable sack over his head and hands tied behind his back was lifted by the armpit off both and led by the driver to the centre of the bridge. Once the four men and boys forming the prisoner exchange were positioned at the start of the planks, a signal was given and the handcuffs and ropes were respectively unlocked and cut. Both men removed their makeshift head covering revealing a part shaven head and wild scared eyes then walked over the plank to their colleagues, crossing the boys passing in the opposite direction.

Bos stopped the youngsters who were growing increasingly terrified as they approached him and said something to both with a snarl while pointing with his index finger into both faces, then clipped them round the head and kicked them in the pants as they passed him to start the long walk home. Having despatched the underachievers, Bos walked forward and kicked the planks into the river one after the other, joined by one of the bike riders who came forward and threw a bundle of police uniforms across the gap. The naked officers collected their clothes and got dressed, both now sporting in bright red paint the words 'Detan Sux' on the back of their shirt and a large swastika on its front.

"It was a miracle someone wasn't killed today," said Greenfield's mother at the completion of Greenfield's narrative of the day's events, seated on the settee before him, Greenfield standing with Constance hugging him round the chest. "He already thinks he owns Bull Island," continued his mother, "thanks to our incompetent and useless State authorities. And now he thinks he's got the tenant farmer land as well. What's next?"

"Do we really need that land?" said Greenfield. "It's no good to use for our crops and the tenant farmers are a pain in the arse. Perhaps we should make a deal with Pike?"

"Never! Don't speak like that!" his mother scolded. "It's our land." After a short pause she stood and announced, "I'm well enough to start running the farm again."

Chapter 6 - The Cowboy

The Cowboy was rushed by his black suited, sunglass tinted security team down the steps of his private jet, one holding a large umbrella above

his head under the steady late spring drizzle, on across the tarmac his attendants forming a phalanx around their Caesar, on through the short distance to the VIP back entrance of the arrivals hall at Marvod airport, the lackeys brusquely and unceremoniously clearing the path ahead through the waiting passengers and in the process knocking over a blind lady with cane who they left on the ground in their wake as flotsam salvaged with concerned looks by passers-by, to a small lectern where he had agreed to conduct a short interview.

The Cowboy's actual name was Nevaletim Roole, prefixed by him on official documentation with the initials F.G.S., which he proudly said was the pre-nominal Farmhand Graduate Scholar to which he was entitled after attaining the highest achievable qualification from a vocational college he briefly attended part-time to prove to his father his competence and readiness to take over the family business, even though no-one had ever been able to find any institution that supported his claims, even his claimed alma mater whose pre-nominal he vaingloriously flaunted had no record of his having completed studies there. But after an article had been printed in his local paper under the banner '**COWBOY TACTICS WIN AGAIN**'—Nevaletim didn't read below headlines as he hadn't the patience for articles, 'Who reads the fine print anyway apart from the lawyers?' he would say—he proudly had the article enlarged, framed and hung above his office desk and insisted thereafter everyone call him by his moniker, 'the Cowboy'. A large man, his modus operandi in business meetings was to use his intimidating physical presence, assisted by further inflating his barrel chest and loud overbearing but grating voice, to pummel his supposed partner with a disjointed verbal chain punch of his self-professed talents and achievements before swarming his opponent with a proposition presented as a bewildering and partly incomprehensible barrage of alternating unachievable promises and threats, wilfully disregard the others' views and objections and hold them in the corner until overwhelmed they submitted, a style described with whispered disparaging admiration by a witness in one notable meeting as showboating chutzpah, the Cowboy mishearing it as '**Sherbet and Shoppa**', the names of two of his prize bulls, launching into a further round expounding his breeding skills, only cut short when the cowed opponent's perceptive assistant reminded of an impending flight departure whisking his grateful charge out of the room.

The Cowboy's early business ventures had all ended disastrously, at least for the unfortunate and misguided souls who had been browbeaten into investing in his flawed schemes, but by trial and error, bailed out by paternal largesse at every false turn, he had managed to survive what were seemingly fatal transactional blows, much as a cockroach is inaccurately reputed to be able withstand a nuclear blast (as had been erroneously repeated in the aforementioned newspaper article). On inheriting his father's estate, he had decided to expand his father's cattle ranch empire into oil and had acquired interests in multiple fields; he had even started drilling on his ranches and fortuitously had been able, by means of long horizontally deviated wells, to access a reservoir underneath an adjoining property, an action that was still before the courts.

Having just moved into oil, the Cowboy was concerned to discover there was a growing worldwide trend to replace or substitute hydrocarbons, and rapeseed oil was being increasingly used for biodiesel, promoted as a green alternative, with the specious argument that the carbon dioxide produced was the same as was consumed to grow the crop, without considering the carbon produced in transportation and processing, the impact of the lost agricultural land, heavy use of herbicides and the nitrous oxide and P.A.H. combustion products. Fortunately for him, the Cowboy lived in a country where purported business acumen had usurped the informed will of the people, a corporatocracy but democracy in name only, so it was of little surprise that the current leadership was fully aligned with the Cowboy's views to maximise profits from oil at the expense of all else. But he had sufficient nous to realise the threat, he could see that, unfortunately, what he viewed as insanity would eventually prevail and the value of his oil assets would be adversely affected. The Cowboy's advisers had told him he should diversify to limit his risk, so he had already bought up large palm oil plantations in the Amazon basin and expanded into the forest through deals with accommodating local politicians, and was actively considering other oil alternatives. Having found Pike and his neighbours constituted one of the largest rapeseed oil producing areas he had come to discuss some business proposals.

The Cowboy's imminent arrival had generated a lot of local interest: amongst the rape farmers in Marvod, amongst the wheat farmers and other producers in Forket, and across a wider area of the state, helped by the

Cowboy's marketing team having disseminated a wide range of false and misleading claims in support of rape ahead of the visit, and a large crowd of journalists and curious onlookers was patiently waiting for him.

The Cowboy stood back from the lectern under a large banner suspended from the ceiling proclaiming, 'MARVOD WELCOMES COWBOY BUSNESSMEN', hatted in a large leather Stetson as always in public, held off by his security team as they checked it was safe to proceed.

"What do you think rig stands for?" asked one of the reporters at the back quietly to the others beside her, referring to the initials R.I.G. stencilled on the front of the Cowboy's hat in large stylized capital letters. One replied he thought it must refer to his oil interests but another muttered sarcastically they thought it more likely his style of business dealing.

At a nod from his security lead, the Cowboy stepped forward from his cordon to the microphone, his personal assistant standing just behind. "Looks like a nice group. I have real good news," he said grandiosely. "Good people of Mooront. I'm talking to the farmers, not you journalist scum—Yes, all right, Rhonda," he said as an aside to his assistant who leant forward to whisper something in his ear—"I will be going to the Federal meeting here in Mooront today. I hope to meet many of your wonderful rape farmers. And I will be visiting some as well. Like Mister Pike. Fantastic man. Marvellous. A real gem. I hope to further our common interests. I think there are some real great things we can do together. Real great. Any questions? You there," he said pointing at one.

"You have been quoted as saying that using vegetable oil as a fuel is like putting French fries in an ice-cream sundae."

"Fake news," he said with dismissive scorn. "Any sort of oil is good. Real beautiful stuff. Super useful. Like rape oil. I hear your preacher, Syran, outstanding man, real ummm ... errr ... Christian, a real honourable upstanding man, has been promoting its benefits here."

"You! Over there."

"You did not support the Federation's proposed embargo on Mr Pike. How can you justify that decision in light of recent events on Bull Island and the allegations by the Alliance members against him?"

"What was that he said about the Federalnation, Rhonda? Must be from

Forket. How did he get in here? The Cowboy turned to one side and Rhonda whispered at length into his ear.

"All right. I'm not going to answer that question. I'll give you guys some leeway. I know it's not your native language. You don't speak as good as I do. But don't push your luck."

"Yes ... there ... the lovely young lady at the front."

"Your braggadocians postulata are now frequently characterised as rhodomontade, how would you respond to that assertion?"

"No, Rhonda. I understood her. I can answer without your assistance, thank you—That idiot over there ... yes, you ... you see, that's the sort of intelligent question you should have asked—Yes, that is a fact: bigger shows with pop stars are now frequently characterised as rodeo entertainment. We put on a great family show at my rodeos. Family entertainment. It's not just bull now, young lady. Perhaps you would like to come to one?—Get her number will you, Rhonda," he added unsuccessfully attempting to disguise the aside with his hand.

"Yes, you."

"Are you here in your capacity as mayor or businessman?"

"What's the difference?" said the Cowboy scoffing and turning to engage his entourage who knew to feign a smile, the only disturbance in their otherwise statuesque deportment. "Yes, I am. You."

"What does rig stand for?" asked the reporter he pointed to at the back.

"Real Intellectual Genius," said the Cowboy proudly and turned to face the interrogator his chest swelling." An adjacent reporter let out a loud but quickly stifled blast of laughter, then after a short pause the Cowboy continued, "I'm kidding. Well, not that I'm not a genius, of course I am. My tutors told me. But RIG stands for 'Rape is Good', and that's why I'm here," he said bombastically, his personal assistant rolling her eyes.

"Sir, you meant to say 'Rapeseed'," she whispered in his ear.

"Don't keep correcting me, Rhonda," he said indignantly, his hand partly over the microphone, "everyone knows what I mean," and scanned the faces of his audience with a broad smile to stunned silence. After waiting a few seconds and taking the continuing silence for a signal there were no more questions, he went on, "O.K., let's go, guys," and adding while punching the air enthusiastically as he was led away, "Rape is good."

The P.A. approached the microphone and said, "O.K., that's it for

today, ladies and gentlemen. We're heading to the Town Hall first then Mister Pike's farm; the Cowboy won't be available for any further interviews." At this point a tumult of frenzily waved hands and raised voices erupted amongst the reporters, one shouting out, 'Does the Cowboy really mean—'

"All right, calm down, everyone," the P.A. interrupted holding both hands out in front of her, palms down. "Settle down. You all know he meant rapeseed. And don't say any different or I'll have you shut down!" she added sharply and left to follow the Cowboy to the attendant limousine through the still frothing pack. The reporters mostly drifted away, a few briefly gathering in a huddle, from which one was heard to say, 'Apparently what the tutor *actually* said was, 'Neva is clearly a genius at feathering his nest'.

The Cowboy and his team were ushered straight to the visitors' galley about half way through the morning session of the Farmers' Federation meeting, the large entourage creating a distracting kerfuffle as they rearranged seats during a speech from Mr Bartel, this year's chairman, Mr Raine, interrupting Bartel mid-flow and announcing the arrival of Mr Roole, the Cowboy waving to the craned heads of the assemblage.

To the evident annoyance and frustration of the chairman, over the rest of the meeting a steady stream of farmers made their way up to the balcony where the Cowboy held temporary court with his retinue, each encounter following a similar pattern: the farmer would first introduce himself, the Cowboy's P.A. would check a list she held and nod or shake her head, existing members of Pike's association were told to speak to Mr Pike later then ushered away, the others were told the Cowboy wanted to buy their farm and they could stay as tenants, incentives were offered to convert to rape if they hadn't already, all were given his contact details in case they changed their mind. Only the poorest of the farmers, those who couldn't afford to get a loan to upgrade their equipment, showed any initial interest in a deal. When asked by one farmer why he had to sell the farm to get any development funding, the Cowboy replied, 'What did you expect? I'm not a bank!'

As the last farmer in the queue walked away, the Cowboy checked with Rhonda which farmers they had not yet seen, the P.A. listing the names which included Greenfield, the Cowboy despatching her to go and find

him and bring him back.

A few minutes after the Federation session had broken for lunch, Greenfield and his mother came to the Cowboy's impromptu interview room.

"Mrs Greenfield," said Greenfield's mother introducing herself to the Cowboy, "and my son."

"Yes, Grateford. You can call me, 'The Cowboy'."

The Cowboy waited for a few seconds for the expectant toadying, but on receiving silence went on, "I'm in town visiting all the farmers."

"But I heard you only want to talk to farmers who want to sell or convert to rape."

"That's right."

"Well, we don't want to do either."

"O.K., but you haven't heard what I've got to say yet. Mister Pike assures me that all the farmers round here want to farm rape, but just need the right incentive."

"You've spoken to Pike already then?"

"Of course. He's the biggest, the most prestonous farm owner round here. I presume you know him?"

"I am very familiar with Mister Pike. You may be aware he is illegally occupying some of our land which he thinks he owns. But he's wrong."

"Pike mentioned some recent hijinks, so it seems you do want it back then. I may be able to help. I'm seeing Mister Pike this afternoon. If you were to consider converting to rape and joining Mister Pike's Association ..."

"And what would you get out of it?"

"I would get a percentage of the rape oil, I'll be negotiating with Pike for that. But I'd also want sole access to any minerals or oil under your land. Anyway, think about it. It's the only way you're going to get any of your farm back," he said ostentatiously turning away.

Greenfield's mother asked the Cowboy to see what Pike had to say then left with Greenfield, passing Bos, who had been representing Pike earlier that day at the Federation meeting, on the stairs, ignoring his steely gaze. Bos introduced himself to the Cowboy then said to follow him to the farmhouse for their pre-arranged meeting.

The enlarged cavalcade, Bos's car followed by three identical limousines,

arrived at Pike's farmhouse around thirty minutes later where the Cowboy's security detail exited from the lead and trailing vehicle in the courtyard and formed a cordon around the central limousine from which two emerged to open the rear doors for the Cowboy and Rhonda, umbrellas held above their head. Gemariah had spent all morning, with the assistance of a small army seconded from Bos's migrant workforce, dressing up the farmhouse for the Cowboy's arrival: all the floors scrubbed, baskets with fresh flowers hanging the length of the front veranda and from every available point on the outbuildings around the farmyard, fresh flowers in vases scattered strategically around the farmhouse, flowers even bedecking all the farm vehicles gleaming after a washdown lined up on parade inside the equipment shed, new freshly laundered table and bed linen and a red carpet leading outside from the front door, dampened by the persistent light drizzle. Pike and Gemariah had come to stand at its head under the shelter of the front verandah roof to greet their guests, Gemariah in a translucent sheer figure-hugging ankle length sequin dress bejewelled with her most ostentatious glittering mounted gems, Pike in a fresh suit and tie, alongside Bos and Ivor who had joined them.

"Mister Pike, I presume?" said the Cowboy walking up to Pike and shaking the proffered hand vigorously, grasping Pike behind his upper arm with his other hand and attempting to draw him towards him, a simian trial of strength that began all his negotiations. "It's an honour to finally meet you in person."

"Mr Roole," said Pike doing likewise.

"Just call me ... the Cowboy ... Everyone else ... does," said the Cowboy the energetic embrace and tug-of-war continuing.

"I'd rather ... address you by ... your name if ... you don't object," replied Pike.

Both bravely maintained a smile with only occasional grunts and puffs giving a hint of the underlying exertions required to try and exert superiority in the wrestling bout. After a few uncomfortable seconds the Cowboy apparently decided not to humiliate his idol and released his grip, Pike almost over-balancing backwards in a neat demonstration of Newtonian physics. "Home ground privilege," said the Cowboy acknowledging the stalemate.

"This is my wife, Gemariah," said Pike having regained his formal

posture and indicating the others. "My head of security, Bostultus, and my lead farmhand, Ivor."

"Rhonda, my P.A., and my head of security," countered the Cowboy, handshakes amongst all, the Cowboy declining to initiate a trial of strength with the other three.

"Impressive security you have, Cowboy."

"Yes. Ever since I was viciously attacked by a mugger while my bodyguard was in the corner shop buying me coke and an ice cream bar. I managed to fight him off single handed, you know. Got a nasty gash. Nicked my carotid artery, they said. Very lucky. Anyway, the bodyguard came out to help, but not until after I'd pinned the brute to the ground," said the Cowboy attempting to demonstrate the manoeuvre with his right elbow and knee, slightly squatting on his right side. "I sacked the bodyguard of course. Too slow. Wasn't doing his job. Replaced him with a bigger team. My advisers insisted."

Pike nodded appreciatively, Gemariah raising her hands to cover her gaping mouth, an expression of mock horror on her face. "Your wife didn't accompany you today?" said Pike.

"She stayed at home this trip. Some family thing. You know women. Nice place you got here, Pike," said the Cowboy gesturing at the farmhouse.

"Would you like to take a look around? Do we have time before we get down to business?"

"Sure. An hour or so. Why not?"

Pike nodded in assent then signalled to Bos who paired with the Cowboy's head of security in the lead, followed by Pike and the Cowboy, Rhonda and Gemariah, and finally Ivor by himself at the rear, the remainder of the security dispersing to re-form as a perimeter screen around the farm buildings. Pike showed the Cowboy around the farmhouse, with particular focus on his gym and in pride of place the mechanical bull he had purchased several months previously, the Cowboy nodding admiringly when Pike described his training routine. Afterwards he was given a quick tour of the farm in two of the utility vehicles. They started in the nearest rape field, the sun momentarily breaking through the clouds to display the flowers at their glorious yellow best, the steady rain finally relenting seemingly in empathy as the two vehicles disgorged their

occupants amongst the blooms.

"Ewww! What's that pungent overcooked cabbage smell?" said Rhonda screwing up her nose.

"That's the rape flowers," said Ivor.

"Beautiful!" said the Cowboy. "So where's the oil come from?"

"The seeds. See the pod here, that's newly formed," said Ivor pulling off one young green pod to show the Cowboy then splitting it open to show its contents. "In a few weeks each of these little green seeds here will have grown bigger, hardened and turned black. Then we harvest them and deliver them to the processing facility. The oil comes from a multi-stage process including pressing they do there."

"Arrsome. Just like crude oil," said the Cowboy to a puzzled frown from Ivor.

Ivor then described the harvest and production process to the Cowboy and gave some figures on the farm, Pike and Bos watching on carefully. After Ivor had finished, Pike said to the group to follow him down to Bull Island.

"That's where some of the townhouses will be built," said Pike indicating survey pegs in the ground alongside a new sealed car park located at the end of the jetty where the vehicles parked about fifteen minutes later. "With a view of Lake Cordiomar as you can see. And that new road," he said pointing to a construction track that headed west, a truck coming into view in the distance, "will be a new road across the causeway to Bull Island. Where I'm building a new townhouse complex."

"Where do the tenants live?" asked the Cowboy.

"Not on the Island. Beyond those hills," said Pike waving his arm further round in the direction of some low hills visible to the northwest, "in a small hamlet."

"We don't have time to visit them or tour the Island. It's still under construction anyway," said Pike. "But you can see the Island from the jetty. If you want to," the Cowboy nodded. Pike started leading the tour group along the jetty, but they hadn't gone very far when the sun's brief appearance was suddenly dulled behind some slate-hued clouds.

"O.K., thanks, Pike," said the Cowboy stopping. "I get the picture. I'm heading back before it starts raining," he said as he turned and started walking back to the vehicles.

Pike led the Cowboy to his study when they arrived back at the farmhouse. "Drink?" he asked the Cowboy at his study door.

"Never before a deal, Pike," said the Cowboy, Pike responding with a slight facial shrug of resigned acceptance and disappointment. Pike opened the door and ushered the Cowboy to a chair in front of his desk, leaving Bos and the Cowboy's security head sharing vigil outside the door.

"Very impressive, Pike," said the Cowboy after Pike was seated. "Now to business. I'll get straight to the point. You're a successful businessman. Like me. Very successful. You've got your fingers in lots of pies: hotels, clubs, Marvod council," the Cowboy said closely examining Pike for any reaction.

"You've been doing your research, I see," said Pike expressionlessly.

"Of course. I don't make deals with people I don't know. But I'm not here to talk about your clubs, your illegal migrant work force, I'm here to discuss oil. I know you've been struggling for years to get a fair price for your oil. That damned Alliance! They impose tariffs on your Association's oil just because you have different environmental standards to them. It's a goddamned disgrace! Restraint of trade I call it. Then just recently, after you came into that land, they imposed sanctions because they said it was an illegal acquisition. And they tried to convince the Federalnation to put an embargo on you," he said shaking his head.

"We do all right. There are enough like-minded members of the Federation," said Pike casually without any apparent concern.

"So you've had to sell to Federalnation members who refused to vote for the embargo," continued the Cowboy ignoring Pike's response, "and you get a bad—very bad in my opinion—price. I own a majority holding in a major fuel distributor that blends biodiesel. I'm prepared to offer you ninety per cent of the international rapeseed oil rate, pegged, for all your Association's oil. I will blend it and sell it as B20 biodiesel. You could call it an oil sanctification process."

"How will you get away with it?"

"That's not your concern. All you need to know is that you'll get a guaranteed price for your oil."

Pike contemplated the offer quietly. At first blush it was a good offer. But not just commercially, also for the immense satisfaction it would give him just thinking of the look on the face of those self-righteous hypocrites at the Alliance if they only knew.

"And there's one other thing," the Cowboy continued sitting forward in his chair. "Mrs Grateford came to see me earlier this afternoon. Now I've got to be honest with you, Pike, I don't like her much. And I'll tell you why. See, I'm a poker player, Pike, a very good one. I understand the rules of the game. Completely. You play the cards you're dealt, don't you? You don't whinge about happened last hand, or last year, or what cards you could have got. You don't blame someone else for losing. Now, Grateford, she's a whinger and not only that a coward. And she's weak. She hides behind the Alliance and the Federalnation. See if I was playing cards with you Pike, with her hand, I wouldn't care how you got your cards. I mean I know how you got them, of course. But we play the hand we're dealt, don't we? I wouldn't ask someone else to give me their cards because I didn't like my hand. If I don't like it I can fold or I can bluff. I love bluffing. It's the thrill of winning when you have a much weaker hand. It doesn't even matter about the winnings. It makes the other players look stupid, weak, and that's just as important. You get that don't you? I might borrow some money to play on from time to time, but that's just normal business. I mean, you can't possibly win every hand, can you? You just need to be the winner at the end of the game. You understand what I'm saying, don't you, Pike?"

"Yes, very clear."

"I thought so. You're a strong man. A winner. Like me. We're very similar, I think. I don't know if it's because she's a woman. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love women. But they have their place. I can see you understand that. Take Geranium. You're a lucky man, Pike. She's a real gem. A diamond. Absolutely. She's very like my wife in fact. But you don't expect her to be making the decisions, do you? I can see you've got men in all your key roles. Tough men, hard men, just like I have. I mean, the ladies can offer suggestions, and we listen politely, don't we. But in the end it's us, the strong men, who make all the big calls.

"Well I can see how weak her hand is and how strong yours is. She could bluff but you'd just call. Her only option is to fold and try the next hand. So she's asked if you would be prepared to sell some of your recently acquired land back to them, if they were prepared to convert to rape and join your Association."

"Bull Island? *Impossible*," said Pike forcefully. "I've already invested

heavily in it and made commitments. Not even up for discussion. But the tenant farmer land?" said Pike reflectively studying the ceiling and thinking for several seconds. "Perhaps. For a fair price. But they would also have to cut all ties with the Alliance. What would you get out of it, may I ask?"

"I'd get whatever I make from on-selling the oil. And in return for my assistance in negotiating the deal with the Gratefords, I've asked them for a sweetener. I'm not at liberty to divulge what that is."

"O.K., ask Greenfield what they are prepared to pay. But I warn them now, it's not going cheap. If they can't afford the price, they can always sell their farm. I'll rent it back to them at a reasonable price. As for the oil, ninety five per cent and you've got a deal."

"Ninety two per cent."

"You strike a hard bargain, Cowboy. I can see why you're so successful. I wouldn't like to be your opponent at poker. O.K., ninety two it is."

"Great. I'll get the papers drawn up right away and give Grateford a call." The Cowboy reached across the table and shook Pike's hand. Pike called out to Bos and asked him to bring in the chilled vodka and two glasses. Pike poured two drinks and toasted the Cowboy then they both downed the vodka in one gulp. The Cowboy said he'd better be going, rose and walked to the door, joined by Pike.

"You know, Pike, I like you. I want to reciprocate your hospitality," said the Cowboy putting his arm round Pike's shoulders, Pike reluctantly and uncomfortably accepting the embrace. "I'd like you to visit my ranch. I can see you like bull riding. We have our annual rodeo coming up soon, why not come then? You'll love it!"

Pike thanked the Cowboy for the offer, asked the Cowboy to send him the dates for the rodeo and said he would check his diary.

"Good work, Bostultus," said Pike while waving goodbye to the departing convoy alongside Gemariah. "Your sources were right: vain, arrogant, conceited, easily flattered, average intelligence at best but thinks he's a genius. He was showing us all his cards without even knowing he was doing it!" he scoffed. Bos smiled and nodded.

Chapter 7 - The Rodeo

Bishop Cyril paused in his sermon to wipe some spittle from his lips with a handkerchief, having theatrically delivered another fiery quotation from the Scripture; he was coming to the climax and a short breather immediately before the final stretch, then re-starting quietly before finishing with a flourish would help for emphasis, a favoured oratory technique of his much as a long distance runner paces himself leaving some energy for a final spurt. He slowly turned a page in his notes then continued:

"There is conflict all around us on earth, just as there was conflict once in heaven. Revelation 12: 7-9:

'Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called Satan. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.'

"So the Lord tells us the serpent and his followers still live among us now, in our towns, in our markets, in our farms, in our houses, yea even in this house of God," said Cyril raising his eyes from his notes and slowly scrutinising his flock, his gaze alighting and lingering on the wheat farmers amongst them. "Throughout the Bible, but Revelation in particular, we see described the continual struggle on earth between believers on the one hand and the serpent, his false prophets and his followers on the other. And believe me there are many followers of the serpent, armies of them the bible says, many of our neighbours counted amongst them. We must be wary, but more importantly we must be ready, we must be prepared. So I say to the faithful, take up arms against the sinners. Joel 3:9 and Ephesians 6:11:

'Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack'. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.'

"For the righteous few, the rape farmers, allied with 'the armies which were in heaven' will defeat Lucifer, his fallen angels, his false prophets and all his followers; no unbeliever will be spared. Revelation 19: 20 and 20:15:

"And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet ... And the

remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse'. 'And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire'.

"It is not too late, but time is running out before the wrath of God is visited upon you. There is still time for the unbeliever, yea even the unrepentant sinner, to join us, join on the side of the Lord in this holy war. Replace all wheat crops with rape, purify the soil, unite the land in His name," he said rapturously both hands raised high in supplication, raised eyes bulging with the energy required to deliver the words with sufficient zest. Cyril finished quietly with 'Amen', then crossed himself and bowed slightly with a half-smile of smug satisfaction, another firebrand addition to the anthology of his works.

At the end of the service, the Forket portion of the congregation gathered separately outside the front of the church as was customary, a chance to meet others they may not have seen during the week and to discuss the latest diatribal instalment from Cyril. "Wow! That was some sermon," said Greenfield reverentially after general greetings all round. "I reckon Cyril's got 666 on speed dial."

"It doesn't warm the ears any more, it just burns like hell," said Pommer impassionedly.

"Too scary!" agreed Raine's wife. "I've stopped bringing the kids, they'd have nightmares!"

"I left Olivia at home today," said Constance. "Jorah's still too young to understand."

"Repetitive, increasingly strident, but I still don't get it," said Feldland. "Why does he still love rape farmers so much but appear to hate everyone else. It seems merely to be a recruitment drive for Pike, to me."

"Who is Cyril really talking to anyway?" said Raine looking around at the others.

"It's us boys, I'm afraid; the wheat farmers," said Bartel. "He just wants to frighten us into joining Pike's arse bandits."

"We need to stick together," said Greenfield conspiratorially.

"I agree. After what happened to you, Greenfield, who's next?" said Feldland. "And what do you think, Mrs Greenfield?"

"I don't know why we bother," said Greenfield's mother. "I mean we humiliate ourselves even coming to Marvod, and why? In the vain hope

that spiritual neighbourliness will engender mutual respect? No, it's mainly out of tradition like Dad's said before. I've come to a decision. I'm not coming here any more. From now on I'm going to Forket for the Sunday service. It's only a small church, nowhere near as grand as Marvod, but I'd rather be force fed rape seeds than sit through another sermon by that demented fiend. I'll speak to Bishop Sovremon today; perhaps we can use a temporary gazebo if we run out of room. What about the rest of you?"

"I agree, Mum," said Constance forthrightly.

"I'm all for it. I warned you all ages ago," said Pommer stuffily.

"All right, Pommer, no-one likes a know-it-all," said Feldland.

"Speaking of Pike: how did he take your rejection, Mrs G," said Bartel.

"How do you think?" said Mrs Greenfield.

"Where was he today, by the way?" said Pommer.

"I heard he's visiting the Cowboy," said Feldland with a slightly pompous air.

"Kindred spirits, if I can use the word 'spirit' to describe Pike!" said Greenfield.

"Lucifer and his fallen angels, they're spirits too, aren't they?" said Greenfield's mother.

"Yes they are, but Cyril was referring to us, not Pike!" said Constance.

Pike, dressed in jeans and chaps but bare-chested, gripped the bronc rein tightly with his right hand, raised his left arm above his head and leant back. "O.K., Bostultus. No spin switch on. Speed dial to one. Let's go!"

Pike had for many years harboured an ambition to master bull riding; he had watched highlights on television, admired the courage, the strength, the athleticism, the machismo; all traits he felt he exemplified. This had finally led to him purchasing a mechanical bull that he set up in his home gym. He had been practising riding over the previous long cold winter months, then providentially, just this last spring, he had been contacted by the Cowboy and had received an invitation to attend a rodeo on his ranch. The invitation was too tempting to resist, the chance to show his physical prowess, particularly with a new business partner who appeared to share his world view, and the timing was perfect: late autumn, the rape would by then be sown, the farm equipment prepared for next year's harvest. Pike had accepted the offer and intensified his training.

Bos, standing at the control console, moved the joystick control up and the bull started gently rocking back and forth. After a minute of greenhorn rodeo role play Pike signalled to stop and Bos released the joystick. Pike held his position in the saddle for several seconds admiring himself in full length mirrors on his left and right and comparing his pose to a large poster of a mounted bull rider on the wall to his front, the bull frozen mid-air at a forty five degree angle to the ground, back legs kicked out aggressively, wild eyed with spittle captured streaming from its mouth, and adjusted his posture and facial expression to match, nodding his head in self-satisfaction, Bos turning his head away from Pike to camouflage a grin and stifling a chuckle.

"That poster, Bostultus," said Pike as he removed his deerskin bull riding gloves after dismounting, "I want a new one made. I still have to squint hard to believe I'm riding the bull. Get the photographer back."

"After we get home?"

"Of course, Bostultus," scolded Pike. "But maybe I'll have some real life action shots soon anyway. When do we leave?"

"Flight's at ten in the morning tomorrow. We need to leave here at seven."

"O.K. Do a final check of all my gear with Gemariah."

Pike arrived at the Cowboy's private airstrip adjoining his ranch the evening of the following day, after a long international flight crossing the Date Line, a domestic plane transfer the last leg in the Cowboy's private jet. Pike's security team disembarked first followed by Pike and Gemariah. "Nice to see you again, Cowboy," said Pike greeting his host after crossing to meet him, shaking his hand briefly then quickly releasing his grip precluding an arm wrestling bout on the Cowboy's home turf, followed by cross-greetings between the two of them, the Cowboy's wife, Caligo, and Gemariah.

"I see you've brought your full entourage," said the Cowboy, nodding in the direction of Bos, Si and Armit in matching tight ill-fitting black suits standing next to the plane.

"No. Just the main team. Bos's youngest brother is managing my Marvod operations and Ivor the farm while I'm away." Pike signalled to Bos to start offloading the plane, who in turn directed Si and Armit. "You've done well for yourself, Cowboy. I could see how big the ranch is from the air. Is this

your only ranch?"

"No, just one of them," said the Cowboy proudly, "but it is the largest and it's where I live."

Si and Armit continued to shuttle back and forth, placing suitcases in a trailer behind the rear of two utility vehicles. "I'm keen to see your bull riding school, your animals, right away," said Pike.

"Well it's late and you've had a long trip. You must be tired," said the Cowboy. "Why don't you and your team get freshened up. Quick dinner. Then we'll take a look around the ranch after an early breakfast tomorrow." Pike nodded slightly. "You can take this truck," said the Cowboy indicating the rear vehicle to Pike.

All the luggage having now been loaded Bos motioned to Si and Armit to get in the rear seats of the seven-seater, the others waiting while they attempted the difficult feat. After lifting the middle seats forward a false start by Armit with a leading leg was abandoned after it became clear it could only be effected headless, followed by a semi-successful head first entry requiring a jacket creaking half twist half somersault, ending with his knees nearly touching his chin and both arms stretched straight before him as if waiting for handcuffs to be placed. Si followed, learning from Armit's struggles, the final stage of the entry manoeuvre requiring his head to be held uncomfortably close to Armit's armpit while he rotated the bottom half of his body into position, ending with matching knees and arms to Armit. There followed several futile attempts to reach seatbelt buckles, Bos finally saying, 'Let's go Boss, they're not going anywhere', folded down the middle seats allowing Gemariah and Pike to enter followed by Bos in the front opposite the Cowboy's nominated driver.

Arriving at the ranch house, the two vehicles drove anti-clockwise round the wide circular driveway stopping at the bottom of stairs leading to the front entrance. Two young apprentice ranch hands walked down the steps from the ostentatious front entrance adorned with several animal skulls above and to the sides of large double wooden doors and opened the lead vehicle's rear doors.

"Open their doors, you imbeciles," said the Cowboy immediately on emerging. "Make sure you take our guests straight to their rooms and show them where the facilities are located."

"Shall we say thirty minutes for dinner?" the Cowboy said to Pike.

Pike nodded and looking in the direction of the skulls said admiringly, "I like what you've done with the wildlife," then walked briskly up the steps followed leisurely by Gemariah and hurriedly by one of the ranch hands, leaving his host with a puzzled expression on his face and his security detail to get their bags.

After breakfast the following morning, Pike and his team assembled inside the front entrance. The Cowboy appeared shortly afterwards and counting his guests said, "We're missing one, aren't we?"

"I've assigned Armit to secure our rooms," said Pike nonchalantly.

"That's hardly necessary, Mister Pike," said the Cowboy uneasily.

"My security always protect my belongings," added Pike phlegmatically.

"O.K.," said the Cowboy enunciating both letters slowly. "If that's the way you want it, fair enough. The tracks are a bit rugged in places so I thought it would be easier to travel together in one truck. You and I can sit in the back, Pike, and one of your security up front. You'd have to leave the others behind, but I thought my wife could show Geranium around the farmhouse. No need to get such beautiful clothes dirty," said the Cowboy giving Gemariah's long white lace, split leg dress the once over.

Somewhat perturbed, Pike glared at the Cowboy saying, "It's Gemariah," then turned to Bos and said brusquely, "You come with me, Bostultus. Send your brother, Siko, over to their head of security."

Caligo sidled up to Gemariah and put her arm through hers. "Come on Gemariah. I want to show you some outfits I just bought in Tokyo." Gemariah's face lit up.

The pared down group went outside where a vehicle was already waiting with engine running in the drive. The Cowboy gave the driver brief instructions then took Pike on an abbreviated hour long tour of the ranch covering the nearby paddocks where scattered groups of cattle could be seen grazing, across the river and up to the hills, finishing back at the bull riding school and rodeo arena to the rear of the ranch house. Pike showed only polite interest until they arrived at the arena and the adjacent pens where bulls selected for the rodeo were corralled. Immediately they stopped, he left the others behind and walked over to the arena, rested his foot on the panel's bottom rail and gazed in longingly, the Cowboy and Bos joining him.

"I've been looking forward to this moment for a long time," said Pike. "I

hope it won't be a letdown."

Somewhat confused, the Cowboy said, "I'm not sure I—"

"I hope all the animals are well trained," interrupted Pike. "I've heard great things about this place. I wouldn't want to return empty handed."

"What do you mean trained? Empty handed?" said the Cowboy flustered. "There must be some misunderstanding. I invited you here as a spectator not as a competitor."

"Don't worry, Cowboy. I'm in peak condition. I've been training for months. Just ask Bostultus," Bos acknowledging this with a small nod.

"But I ..." stumbled the Cowboy.

"The rodeo next week: with all the training I've already put in, I just need your best trainer to put the finishing polish on my technique," said Pike with an unblinking penetrating stare at the Cowboy.

An extended pause followed, the Cowboy staring mutely with knitted brow at Pike. "Boss, you're late for your training," said Bos to break the stalemate.

"You're right, Bostultus. I need to be in peak condition. Let's go back. You have a gym I presume?" said Pike, the Cowboy nodding. "Good. Lead the way, Cowboy."

The Cowboy exchanged a perplexed glance with Bos, to which Bos responded with a small shake of his head. Still bemused, the Cowboy signalled to his driver to start the car and they headed back to the nearby ranch house, on the way the Cowboy searching for a solution to politely dissuade his guest from what appeared to him to be certain serious injury at the least.

On arriving at the ranch house, the Cowboy showed Pike to the gym then went straight to his study and called his head trainer, Kwarz, to meet him there. The Cowboy told Kwarz Pike's history as he knew it. Kwarz was incredulous that a middle-aged man who, even though he may be fit for his age, had only previously trained on mechanical bulls for a few months expected he could enter a rodeo competition in one week's time. 'What can I possibly do in one week?' he asked. 'You know our riders honed their skills for years after starting as young as eight, or even younger, and they started out on calves!' he added. Initially Kwarz was insistent he would not be responsible for 'this insanity', as he termed it, but the Cowboy said there was a lot riding on his business deals for Pike, he didn't want to upset

him and he thought he had a plan and explained it to him, which after long and increasingly calm discussion was sufficient to persuade a reluctant Kwarz to concur.

Lunch was conducted with restrained cordiality by Pike and the Cowboy, the Cowboy enquiring after Pike's rape association and the progression of talks with 'the Guildfords', Pike electing to keep the details of discussions to himself for the moment wanting the focus to remain on the rodeo, 'Just say the word, and I'll step in,' said the Cowboy. Pike thanked him but politely dismissed the idea and responded with respectful examination of the Cowboy's oil interests. Meanwhile Gemariah and Caligo conducted parallel excited chatter on the Paris spring-summer fashion show in early autumn, a conversation they picked up as if there had been no break since breakfast, 'I loved Thom's unicorn, that white tulle dress,' 'Were you there?' 'Really!' 'I couldn't make it this year, but I'm going in March for autumn-winter. But those other things of Thom's, they looked like female versions of Tweedledum and Tweedledee with astronaut helmets and saggy, you know, with button nipples,' 'I know, but ...'

After they had finished a light dessert, the Cowboy stood and announced, "Pike, I'd like to introduce you to my head trainer. I hope you won't mind my presumption, but he's here now. Let's go into the drawing room and meet him."

Pike rose, the Cowboy putting his arm around him and directing him towards the drawing room, Pike uncomfortably shrugging the Cowboy's arm from his shoulder as he walked.

On entering the drawing room, the Cowboy walked directly towards a compact and muscled balding man of late middle-age appearance, who was standing next to the fireplace and directing an examinative gaze at the Cowboy's guest. "My head trainer, Kwarz," said the Cowboy. "Mr Pike." Kwarz performed a shallow bow, but kept his eyes on Pike the whole time. "A real gem we call him. He's trained most of my champion bull riders and many others around the world before I hired him. He wants to check you out and see if you're as ready as you say you are."

Pike extended his hand and shook Kwarz's with a vigour intended to display his physical prowess. "So you're the man who's going to polish off my rough edges?"

"One thing at a time," Kwarz responded after a deliberate pause. "Let me

have a look at you." He then made a show of walking round Pike with his hand to his lips and an inquisitive look on his face, murmuring to himself and occasionally nodding approvingly. Once finishing his inspection he paused for a theatrically extended period then said in a loud and clear voice, "I can see you've been training; you're plainly in very good condition for a man of your age." Pike made eye contact with the Cowboy and threw him a quizzical expression, but the Cowboy just puckered his lips and gave an expression suggesting Pike hold his peace and let Kwarz finish. "But I understand you've only trained on mechanical bulls to date," Kwarz continued, "and it's a big step up to a live bull. So let's get you in the arena on one of our young bulls—That's O.K., let me finish," said Kwarz as Pike appeared agitated—"With the right starter bull—"

"I didn't come here just to ride round the ring a few times on an old nag. Like a kid at a country fair!" said Pike unable to conceal his annoyance any longer.

"With the right bull," continued Kwarz calmly and deliberately with a knowing smile, "on which all my champions have started, and I've trained many champions, and a specifically tailored training schedule we're in with a chance. I'll assess your progress and if I think you're ready you can trust me to make the right decision about entering competition. If I can't get you ready no-one can." Pike seeming at least partially appeased by this, the Cowboy nodded imperceptibly to Kwarz. "We can start training this afternoon, if you wish."

"I do wish," said Pike peevishly.

Kwarz then described his proposed training schedule for Pike's edification, Pike listening intently and nodding occasionally, at the conclusion of which, a few minutes later, Kwarz invited Pike to follow him to the bull riding school.

On passing through the dining room, Gemariah and Caligo still seated there in animated discussion, Pike beckoned Bos with crooked index finger then had a brief discussion, after which Bos directed Armit to collect Pike's rodeo gear and follow them, leaving Si on sentry duty in front of their rooms.

Pike, flanked by his security team, found Kwarz waiting next to the pen watching an old bull amble around the straw coated enclosure. Pike walked over to Kwarz and stood next to him, "Is that him? He seems a bit long in

the tooth," said Pike drily. "Will he need a jump start?"

"That's experience you're seeing," said Kwarz slowly and carefully, locking eyes with Pike. "He's as strong as the proverbial and fighting fit. Even champions start on an older more experienced bull like this. But as I explained to you earlier you won't be getting near any bull until you've successfully completed training on the equipment and done a range of specific training exercises under my supervision, certainly nowhere near the raging beast we'll hand-pick for the rodeo, *if you make it that far*," he said emphatically emphasising the conditional, Bos watching on in open-mouthed amazement.

Pike eyeballed Kwarz, his whole deportment screaming indignation at being spoken to like this and said with menace after composing himself, "O.K. We'll do it *your* way. But I expect the other bull to be in *far* better shape than that!" he said jabbing his finger between the panel rails at where the bull had been standing, but the bull having spied Kwarz had in the meantime casually ambled unnoticed to the edge of the pen and now licked Pike's protruding finger, Pike rapidly withdrawing his hand in surprise and wiping it on his jeans.

Kwarz conducted Pike to the training facilities, a large converted shed, leading him directly to the changing rooms. Pike emerged ten minutes later striding stiffly in a crisp new outfit: black slim fit denim jeans with wide leather belt and large resplendent trophy buckle, burgundy red long sleeve snap-down cotton shirt, black protective vest, oatmeal and black deerskin gloves, black felt cowboy hat, matching red custom leather chaps, black cowboy boots and spurs, holding a black protective helmet in one gloved hand, Bos and Kwarz both witnessing the parade, a quiet simpering snigger escaping from Bos's lips and an almost imperceptible shake of Kwarz's head.

"O.K., that's all fine for competition, Mister Pike, but we're gonna need to lose most of that for training," said Kwarz, who then proceeded to instruct Pike what items of clothing to remove.

After Pike had been re-clothed in the essentials, training commenced under Kwarz's critical scrutiny and the vigilant eye of Pike's security team, Bos being entrusted with the video camera to record for later consideration. The first day started with stationary barrel drills on the drop barrel: preparing to ride, riding technique, practising holding the bull with

legs and heels, toes out, dismount, the drills repeated over and over to develop muscle memory. Having done this for about two hours, Kwarz took Pike through to an adjoining gym and handing him a strength and conditioning schedule, explained the daily exercises he would need to do for the next week, including resistance, aerobic and Pilates. Two half hour sessions with a break between them followed before Kwarz said that was enough for the first day, Pike had done well and to come back same time each day, the intensity and length of the sessions to be gradually increased. Pike, sweating profusely, wiped his brow and bare pate with a handtowel and standing as proudly and tall as he was able thanked him, then stumbled to the changing room almost collapsing on the bench inside. Exhausted, he sat stationary for a few minutes, gently flexing his back and shoulders, pondering his decision to enter the tournament. Perhaps he should just use doctored photos he could easily get made, and live with distance shots or squinting that the visual discontinuities would require. But he knew he couldn't back out now, he would appear weak, he had no choice but to persevere, he would follow the schedule, there would be plenty of time afterwards to recover, he had the whole winter to look forward to.

After showering and changing he met Gemariah for lunch, sitting patiently while he listened to a breathless monologue summary of the morning's news, 'Before they went to Paris, they just had to go to Milan first, everyone did it on the way, Kelly (as she now called the Cowboy's wife) said', 'Could Kelly come over to stay this winter? Please darling', Kelly this, Kelly that. Towards the end of lunch, the Cowboy invited them all to come rabbit shooting; the hills were full of them he said. Pike accepted the offer on their behalf, but Gemariah declined saying the boys could do what they wanted but she would rather stay with Kelly again.

Pike and Bos accompanied the Cowboy to his armoury, where the Cowboy proffered his favourite twenty eight gauge shotgun for Pike's use, Pike taking it with thanks, Bos and Si declining similar saying they would prefer to use the hunt as live target practice with the semi-automatic pistols they always carried.

They split into two vehicles, Bos and Si in one while Pike, the Cowboy and his head of security driver in the other. Bos was the first to spot a victim and told Si to stop, firing at the stationary animal from his window.

He followed up his kill with multiple head shots at close range to the great merriment of himself and his brother, quickly suppressed by Pike when he joined them with their horrified host, the latter reminding them while standing over the matted bloody remnants there ought to be something left for the dinner table. The hunt thereafter proceeded in relative peace, rabbits being collected and brought back for the cook to prepare.

When they arrived back at the ranch house Kwarz was waiting for them with a man whom he introduced as the rodeo's medical officer. He told Pike that all competitors had to undergo a medical under the rules of the Rodeo Alliance of which they were members. The doctor led Pike to a private room at the training facility where he conducted the examination and informed Pike and Kwarz he would have the report ready the day before the rodeo.

That night at dinner, the intact rabbits making top billing, the Cowboy enquired of Kwarz, in earshot of all at the table, how training was progressing. Kwarz announced that significant progress had been made that day and they were on track for mounting a live bull shortly. On Pike enquiring when, Kwarz said, 'let's see how you go tomorrow,' to mild frustration from Pike, frustration only exacerbated when after dinner Pike reviewed Bos's videos and stills from the day's training, and, in disgust, ordered him to discard them all.

The second day, Kwarz put Pike on a Buckrite and repeated the previous days drills on the powered drop barrel, this time adding riding and jump and kick; again two hours of repetitions, a longer and more energetic gym session held in the afternoon. The third and fourth days were similar only on a bucking mechanical bull, adding techniques for spinning into or away from your hand and handling hang-ups for dismount.

Each night at dinner Kwarz would say 'let's see how you go tomorrow,' when asked about progress, and each day that passed Pike got increasingly more frustrated that he had not yet mounted a live bull. After finishing the fourth day's training, Pike vowed to himself to challenge Kwarz and his host if necessary at dinner that night. As they were all seating themselves for dinner Pike remained standing and was preparing to make an announcement when Kwarz stood up and glancing sideways at Pike announced dramatically, "We are there! Tomorrow we will start the next phase of training, mounting a live bull," then sat down accompanied by

expressions of congratulations to Pike from all, Pike accepting them with gentle nodding and gradually sank back into his chair.

The following day at training Pike approached the arena with his team expecting the bull to be prepared for mounting in the chute, but instead found Kwarz standing in the middle of the arena holding onto a lead attached to a bull's nose ring, the bull standing next to a mounting block quietly dripping mucus from its snout.

Pike approached the arena. "Why is the bull not in the chute?" he said with surprise to Kwarz from the outside.

"Later," replied Kwarz. "You need to get to know the bull first, get familiar with its movements." Kwarz urged Pike to enter the arena. "All riders start off this way."

Pike looked quizzically at Kwarz, but at that moment caught sight of a young rider on the far side of the arena mounting in the proposed manner. He watched the rider for a few seconds as he rose on the bull's back, then after a moment's thought, entered through the access gate and leaving his security team outside the arena walked up to the the bull.

On hearing Pike approach the bull half turned its head and eyed him with apparent disinterest out of the corner of one bloodshot eye. Kwarz gestured to Pike to climb the steps of the mounting block, Pike apprehensively ascending, the bull watching him the whole way. On reaching the top Pike paused to gather himself, then at Kwarz's direction he slid his hand under the handle and circumspectly pulled himself onto the bull's back. The bull snorted gently and took a few uncertain half-steps, Kwarz all the while holding onto the nose ring. After the bull had settled, Kwarz released the nose ring and slowly walked several paces away from the bull, then tugging gently on the lead, Kwarz led the bull and Pike in a circle around the rodeo arena, captured on video by a broadly grinning Bos.

After half an hour of gentle taurine circumambulation, bull and rider gradually familiarising themselves with each other, Kwarz encouraged Pike to start practising the riding techniques he had learnt over the last few days, at least those he was able to on the placid beast. A further two hours later, Kwarz told Pike he was ready to mount the bull properly and asked him to dismount, instructing one of the ranch hands to bring the bull round to the chute. Kwarz proceeded to demonstrate the technique for mounting the

bull, then having finished summoned Pike to approach and invited him to take his place, the remainder of the morning spent practising chute procedure.

As Pike approached the arena on the morning of the sixth day of training, Kwarz announced, "Today we will release the bull, if you are ready, but—"

"Finally!" Pike interrupted and went straight to the chute, ignoring Kwarz's attempts at further conversation. He mounted the bull methodically going through the sequence he had been taught, braced himself with his heels and right hand, raised his left arm above his head and nodded to the gateman who glanced at Kwarz for direction; Kwarz shrugged and nodded.

On opening the gate, the bull moseyed out languidly, plodding towards the centre of the ring, Pike remaining in pose the whole time still vainly anticipating explosive action from the released bull. "What the hell is going on?" he shouted at Kwarz over his shoulder after a few seconds.

"As I was trying to tell you earlier," Kwarz replied greeting the bull when it arrived at his side, placing his hand affectionately round the bull's muzzle, "this is still the training bull. Your other bull won't be available until the day of the competition."

After completing the morning training Kwarz told Pike to meet him after lunch in the ranch house gym, where Pike later found him sitting by himself cross legged on a mat.

Kwarz motioned to Pike to join him on another mat he had placed to his side and encouraged him to emulate his posture. "Right," said Kwarz after Pike was in position, "you need to be mentally ready, so I'm going to demonstrate mindfulness techniques. I'll introduce breathing methods into your Pilates session then teach you visualisation, then you can practise them for yourself afterwards. So follow me, using what's called the four seven eight method." Kwarz started a sequence of movements. "Now breathe in for four seconds. O.K., now hold for seven seconds. Then exhale for eight seconds. That's right, now repeat." Kwarz continued through the rest of the sequence, Pike copying his every move, occasionally adding in the rest break between exercises, 'Mindful breathing is a cornerstone of the rodeo mindset', 'Mindfulness is a tool for staying calm under pressure', 'Paying attention to your breath can help you stay centred

and calm', 'Mindfulness can help manage stress and build resilience', and other similar motivational statements.

"O.K., now for visualisation," said Kwarz after finishing a thirty minute routine. "Close your eyes. Visualise yourself seated on the bull in—"

"That's enough," said Pike suddenly standing up, "I already know how to succeed. I don't need any new age mumbo jumbo to do that, thank you, Mr Kwarz."

"It's your funeral, Pike, all my boys do it now. O.K., we'll leave it there for now," said Kwarz rising. "Don't forget to try it by yourself," he said to Pike as Pike was walking from the room.

The final day before the start of competition was spent practising on the mechanical bull, Pike refusing to re-mount what he called 'that giant geriatric hamburger'. The atmosphere was tense at dinner, the night before the start of the rodeo, everyone knowing Kwarz was due to announce whether Pike was ready to enter competition. After everyone sat down at the table and drew in their chair, there was an apprehensive pause and all eyes turned to Kwarz. Kwarz rose slowly to his feet and recited what was clearly a well-rehearsed speech:

"Tomorrow is the day of our training school's annual rodeo. Competitors will be coming from long distances to compete for The Cowboy Gold Buckle, including all our school champions. However, as you all know, this year we had the privilege of receiving an overseas guest who has been training hard in readiness. I have been watching over Mister Pike's progress carefully, he has done all I have asked of him. His efforts over the course of this week have been exemplary and ... I am happy to announce Mr Pike has successfully completed the training."

There was a general smattering of applause and congratulations from around the table, most enthusiastically from Gemariah who beamed and said, 'Well done darling', the waiting staff taking the opportunity to serve dinner. Pike smiled and nodded and was starting to rise his feet, but stopped when Kwarz continued, "However, I have here the results of the medical," Kwarz paused and picked up a letter sitting on the table and continued while appearing to read from the letter, "which indicate that Mr Pike has an underlying heart condition that renders him ineligible to attend tomorrow's rodeo based on Rodeo Alliance standard entrance criteria." Kwarz then passed the letter across the table to Pike, who placed it on the

table next to him without even glancing at its contents. The whole table glanced furtively sideways at Pike amidst some uneasy shuffling in chairs.

Pike having briefly returned to his chair while Kwarz completed his speech, rose to his feet as Kwarz sat and said in a calm and measured tone, "Thank you for those kind words, Mr Kwarz. And I appreciate your candour. However, I cannot agree with the conclusions of your Doctor. I have here," he said signalling irritatedly to Bos, who handed him a folded sheet of paper, Pike opening it out, "a letter from our esteemed Chief Medical Officer in Marvod, Dr Sarlat, which states, 'Mr Pike suffers from a benign heart arrhythmia. This will not prevent him from undertaking vigorous physical activities provided standard precautions are undertaken'."

Pike handed the letter back to Bos who at Pike's direction walked round the table and handed it to Kwarz, Kwarz reading the letter with a shocked expression on his face then meeting the gaze of the stony-faced Cowboy with implorative eyes. Pike had by now started his dinner, the Cowboy realising that he couldn't force the issue without as a minimum cause offence, threaten their business relationship, and at worst cause a diplomatic incident. After a brief futile attempt to change Pike's mind, Pike remaining resolute, he discontinued any further attempt with an exasperated air and after dinner, as Pike and the other guests retired to their room, the Cowboy and Kwarz could be seen in animated conversation.

The morning of the rodeo finally arrived; Pike dressed in his finest bull riding attire, a second matching set to that he had first worn but since discarded as used, posed in front of his mirror to appreciative words from his security team and Gemariah, then walked across to the arena accompanied by Gemariah and Kwarz, his security team forming a vanguard to scout ahead. Arriving at the competitors' entrance Pike read the draw posted on the noticeboard: Pike was listed second last in the last event, the bull riding, on a bull called Bronko Bill.

There was by this time a light dusting of spectators around the arena seating; Kwarz showed Pike and Gemariah to the segregated guest area within it whereupon Pike's security team, in an ostentatious manner, inspected the area. Having secured it, Armit sat next to Pike, Bos and Si positioning themselves strategically at the single entrance to the guest area where they set up an impromptu screening booth. The event sound system

screeched as it was turned on and the rodeo announcer said "Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the 30th annual The Cowboy Rodeo," enunciating each syllable of the event name slowly and loudly in a higher pitch, then pausing to allow muted and barely audible applause and cheering. "As you can see, ladies and gentlemen," the announcer went on, "we have a small crowd this year. I have been informed that the main access road is closed, but I am assured by the local authorities it will be open again before evening. Ladies and gentlemen, all your competitors are here and raring to give you all a great show. So first up we have the bareback riding ..."

Kwarz excused himself to Pike, telling him he was part of the rodeo organising committee and left, passing the Cowboy who came and sat down next to Pike having successfully passed through the security gauntlet where he had been subjected to frisking by metal detector and by hand.

"Looking smart," said the Cowboy.

"Where are all the spectators?" said Pike. "I thought this was a well known event."

"The bridge on the road leading to the ranch was damaged by flooding," the Cowboy replied.

"I didn't hear any rain last night," expressed Pike with surprise.

"There was a heavy downpour in the mountains to the north and a flash flood damaged several bridges. They're working on the main bridge now, but I doubt it will be open to vehicles before the end of the day." Satisfied, Pike settled in to watch the day's events.

The Cowboy stayed about ten minutes, answering several questions from Gemariah about the competitors' clothing, the food for the animals and spectators, the running of the event by Pike, then excused himself on the pretext of some business discussions, saying he would return later in the afternoon ahead of the bull riding, but instead headed straight to the rodeo committee room where he met Kwarz.

"Did he buy it?" asked Kwarz.

"Yes. How is it going at the road block?"

"No problems. Only a few want the hassle anyway so they're happy with a refund."

"Remember, the inspector clears the bridge early evening. Understood?" Kwarz nodded. "Is Pike's bull ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Kwarz. "Pike's got Bronko Bill. I've spoken to the

announcer. The only thing he's going to buck is tradition!"

The bull riding commenced late in the afternoon, Pike heading to the rider area when his event was announced, frowning as he left at a concerned expression of good luck from Gemariah saying that luck had nothing to do with it, Bos leaving at the same time to find a good vantage point for his video recording duties.

After five riders had attempted their eight seconds of fame, only two making it that far, the rodeo announcer said over the loudspeaker, "Next up is Mister Pike; a first-time rider at this event," "Pike will be on Bronco; a challenging ride for a greenhorn. That's real courage there, ladies and gentlemen, let's hear it for Mister Pike," followed by scattered clapping. Pike put on his helmet and mouthguard and climbed into the chute, lowering himself uneasily onto the bull's heaving back. With the assistance of the gateman, Pike circled the rope around the bull's fore flank and tightened it as he had learned, then gripped the handle tightly, the bull snorting and flexing his immense body against the enclosure.

At this point the Cowboy arrived breathlessly, apologised for his late arrival and asked Pike if he was ready. "This bull is lively. Nothing like the one I trained on, but I'm ready to go!" said Pike positively.

The Cowboy unconsciously glanced at the bull's ear tag and saw immediately the number didn't match Bronko Bill; he quickly checked with one of the nearby rodeo officials and found with horror Pike had inadvertently been given Bronco, but before the Cowboy had a chance to intervene, Pike had nodded to the gateman who opened the gate. In that instant, a look of abject terror swept across Pike's face replacing all his previous bravado, belatedly realising he had no control of what was about to happen. The bull immediately leapt out and bucked violently throwing Pike off its back, Pike doing a backwards twisting somersault and landing inside the chute banging his head on the rails on the way down, one of the bull fighters quickly stepping between the bull and Pike. Bronco carried on buckling violently for several seconds, twisting his hind quarters from side to side, then evidently taking a dislike to another bull fighter ran towards him, the clown clambering high onto the panel to escape its attention, Bronco stopping in his tracks within touching distance of the clown, steam blowing from his nostrils.

"Look at the size of that big buckling bull," said the announcer, "and what

about our bull fighting clowns, put your hands together for them, ladies and gentlemen."

Bronco stared at the impudent intruder for several seconds, then head held high turned and pranced majestically round to the side gate and out the arena, the stock hand closing the gate behind him. The rodeo clown helped a dazed and heavily winded Pike to his feet, checking his condition.

"That bull really likes his work," proclaimed the rodeo announcer with a laconic drawl. "Yes, he's all right, ladies and gentlemen," after the clown waved to him, "just wounded pride. Let's hear it for Pike and Bronco."

The Cowboy joined Pike and with the clown's assistance half-walked-half-carried Pike through the rider access gate. Once outside the arena, they sat Pike down until he had regained his breath. "I don't think I will be able to take any further part in this tournament," he said, gingerly feeling his ribs.

While Pike had been receiving attention, the final rider was announced and entered an adjacent chute, then after the bull was released it sauntered to the centre of the arena with its rider futilely kicking it with his spurs on both flanks. "That bull's forgotten how to earn his wage, ladies and gentlemen," declared the announcer drily. "The Judges have confirmed that'll be a re-rarrrd." The Cowboy and Kwarz exchanged mute glances.

Gemariah now joined Pike and together with his security team, dusted him off and removed his helmet. Pike tentatively prodded at a rapidly swelling eye then set off towards the ranch house, Gemariah on his left, her arms around his waist, Bos on his right being used by Pike as a crutch and the rest of security team flanking the three.

"Make sure the team has the right recollection," Pike whispered to Bos wincing as they walked. "I got a score of 85."

"Yes, Boss".

"Give the rodeo reporter that photo of me bull riding. You know the one. Make sure he understands."

"Yes, Boss. No problem."

"And call the airline. We leave tomorrow. Leave the Cowboy to me."

Chapter 8 - Hand-over

Pike was on his way to Marvod to meet Maslyan, Bos driving as usual but this time a semi-automatic in a recently fitted holster mount under the steering wheel and with a Marvod Police escort ahead and to the rear. Since recent events, his occupation of Bull Island and the tenant farmers blockade, whenever he travelled outside the high security of his farm he did so in the protection of a convoy, sometimes a heavily armed Si sitting alongside him as well. He had received a call yesterday from Maslyan about a court summons he had received by courier, but as was increasingly the case with all his business calls now, wouldn't discuss it over the phone, believing he could be subject to electronic eavesdropping by the State Police or others. As he had other council business in Marvod he agreed to meet Maslyan in his chambers the next morning.

They sped past a broken down truck at the side of the road, three farmers dressed in tenant farmer traditional garb gathered around the engine under the raised bonnet. "I heard old man Lupee wasn't very happy with the truck we gave him," said Bos grinning at Pike in the rear view mirror. "And the repairs we did on his house."

"That's gratitude for you, Bostultus. They get free houses and a truck then they complain about the paintwork! Do they want to go back to donkey and cart?"

"Do you want me to visit the old man, Boss?"

"No need. He won't be around much longer. And we need the tenant farmers onside a little longer."

Arriving at Temny Inn, one of the police vehicles left to patrol the area the other remaining parked in front. Pike entered via the back door and found Maslyan waiting outside his chamber door telling Bos to enter and enter and lock the door behind Maslyan.

"Mister Pike," said Maslyan following Pike into his chambers and sitting down at the far end of the table, Bos looming over him, "I have received this court hearing notice from the State Court." Maslyan brandished the offending paperwork and held it up for Bos who took it from him and transferred it the length of the table to Pike. "They allege they were denied entry to your property to serve an arrest warrant. You are charged with ...

errr ...". He took a copy from his pocket and read from it, "one count of unlawful appropriation of property under Section 46 of the Crimes Act—that's in relation to Bull Island—one count of providing material support to the commission of a crime by others and one count of counselling the commission of an offence by others, both the latter under Section 11.2 of the Criminal Code Act, and that relates to the unlawful appropriation of Greenfield's land to the east of Bogrich River. The other parties are listed here with all their particulars, but to summarise, they are the tenant farmers: Lupee—"

"Denied entry, you say," said Pike interrupting. "But my home is always open to legitimate visitors."

"Yes. There are other charges listed here as well, trespass—"

"Trespass? On my own land! An interesting concept, don't you think, Maslyan. I've never been on the tenant farmers' land anyway! Bos has, but he was invited by the tenant farmers. In the capacity of farming advisor, isn't that right, Bostultus?" said Pike without looking at Bos who was standing behind him. Bos nodded. "And I was happy to help our neighbours."

"I was getting to Bos, I have a separate court notice for him also. Do you wish to hear the rest of the charges?" said Maslyan, Pike dismissively waved his hand. "Fine," sighed Maslyan. "I assume you both wish to plead not guilty to all charges."

"Of course."

"And how do you propose to answer the charges?"

"*You* will do that, Maslyan. Both Bostultus and I refuse to attend court in Forket and you are already fully acquainted with the proceedings in Marvod."

"But Mister Pike, how—" Pike held up one hand and waved Maslyan away with the other, Bos moving to escort Maslyan to the door. Maslyan left, knowing there was little point in protesting further.

"Open wide, O earth, and receive her that was fashioned from Thee by the hand of God aforetime, and who returneth again unto Thee that gave her birth. That which was made according to His image the Creator hath received unto Himself; do Thou receive back that which is Thine own," recited Bishop Sovremon then stepped forward and sprinkled a handful of

dirt on the coffin followed by Greenfield, Constance, Olivia, Jorah, Greenfield's grandfather supported on one arm by a garishly dressed young woman and a cane in the other, then quietly so did each of the dozens of mourners present in mournful but orderly sequence.

After all had placed soil, Greenfield bent down and took a few bunches of white roses from a box at his feet, handing most to his family then stepped forward and delicately dropped a bunch onto the dirt covered coffin, followed in turn by his family and many others until the coffin was hidden in a blanket of white lilies, carnations, roses and sprigs of apple blossom, each of the mourners departing as they did so until only Greenfield, Constance and his two children remained.

"I'm sure she'll be happier at rest here rather than in Marvod," said Constance.

Greenfield nodded. "It's what she wanted. A new start," then turned and with Constance's arm through his led his family from the graveside at the rear of Forket church.

They arrived home about thirty minutes later and found the caterers had already set up a large white P.V.C. marquee on the grass lawn behind the farmhouse, in front of a sea of ripening wheat. A steady stream of white coated workers was transferring plastic chairs into the tent from a large truck parked in the farmyard, others were carrying trays of food and vases of white flowers from the farmhouse onto large set tables.

A car pulled up, Angela getting out and helping Greenfield's grandfather from the car.

"Did Angela have to come to the reception as well?" said Greenfield.

"No. But your Mum would have wanted Grandad here and he wouldn't have come without her," said Constance.

"She could at least have worn something more appropriate than a bright orange miniskirt," said Greenfield scornfully.

"I know, but don't cause a scene, darling," said Constance soothingly. She probably won't stay long anyway."

Greenfield checked his watch, "They'll all be arriving soon, Connie. I'd better get the extra home-brew out of the cellar. From the turn-out today I think we may run out of drink otherwise."

By the end of the morning, the farmyard and adjacent land were packed with vehicles, a motley collection of assorted vintage and roadworthiness

parked along the road, nearby tracks, in the sheds and barn, unused patches of grass, any apparently available space. All Greenfield's neighbours were there; Greenfield greeted each of them at the front door as they arrived and directed them to the marquee through the back door: 'Very sorry, Greenfield', 'Such a shame, such a lovely woman', 'Six months since her operation. I thought she had got over the worst of it, the first three months after a bypass is supposed to be the worst', 'We'll miss her cool head at the Alliance meetings', 'What did the post mortem say?', 'Recurrent ventricular fibrillation and reactory heart failure, or something, rare but likely caused by ongoing acute stress', 'I wasn't sure what to bring, you never are to these ahh ... So here's a bottle of premium vodka anyway', 'Where's the bathroom again?', 'I need a drink!'

"Where do you want me to put these?" said Nadia handing a long thin bundle of flowers wrapped in clear cellophane to Greenfield that a bike messenger had just handed before racing away. There was a blank tag on the package, no message, so he checked the courier box Nadia was still holding with the sender's details, Pike. Greenfield took them and placed them on the table next to him behind the front door.

A car pulled in and was met by Constance before reversing and driving away. "That was Mrs Pyklit, honey," said Constance. "She dropped off some brandy and flowers and apologised for not attending the funeral. She says she can't stay. She was forbidden from attending, but she snuck out, her husband doesn't even know she's here!"

The flood of neighbours and friends having now clearly abated, Greenfield retired to the marquee and joined a group of his friends. The conversation started respectfully with shared stories about Greenfield's mother, her well-known pharmacy in Forket, her safe pair of hands running the farm when her father was unwell, then drifted to the inevitable, the upcoming wheat harvest.

The appointed time for lunch arrived shortly afterwards, the head caterer first checking with Greenfield then all the covers were taken off the food: the main dish was sole fillet in aioli sauce, accompanied by rice pilaf, green beans in tomato sauce, several salads, bread supplied by Pain de Forket, fresh fruit and generous amounts of home-made brandy.

"Now you're in charge, what are you going to do about Pike?" said Feldland as the others drifted towards the buffet.

"Can we not talk about him just for today?" said an exasperated Greenfield.

"There's a phone call for you, Mr Greenfield," said Rev after answering the landline that had been ringing unnoticed for some time.

"Who can it be? Everyone's here?" said Constance joining Greenfield from the wives' group.

"It's Pike," said Rev.

A hush fell over those who heard accompanied by glances in the direction of Greenfield.

"What can he want?" said Greenfield then followed Rev inside. "Greenfield," he said into the phone.

"Pike. You got the flowers?"

"Yes."

"Commiserations on your loss," said Pike coldly.

"Thank you."

"You're running the farm now, I assume?"

"Yes."

There was a short pause during which Greenfield could hear muffled conversation at the other end of the line and laughter. "Was there something else, Pike? Greenfield said. " I'm at the reception. People are waiting for me."

"Good. Then it's the perfect time to warn you to be more cooperative than your mother was. If I don't hear you've withdrawn your court challenges, the tariffs, the sanctions. By the end of the week. You'll be receiving more of the same from me." Pike rang off.

PART 4

Chapter 1 - An Article of Faith

"Gem, did you bring the article? You said you'd bring it today; you know the one that got me a bit flustered," Constance said apologetically, her cheeks reddening slightly at the recollection.

"I've got it here somewhere," said Gemariah opening a bright green crocodile skin satchel she had bought for the occasion, the flimsy designer handbags she normally carried being too small for the purpose, and carefully extracted a large orange manila envelope with fingers embellished by long tapered bright red nails. "Tell you what, I'll read it out and you can ask me what I know about it afterwards," she said as she pulled from the envelope a thick wad of paper.

"That *is* the original unabridged version you told me about, isn't it?" said Constance, affirmed by a nod from Gemariah. Gemariah then read from the article Pike sent to the Marvod Gazette:

"I have been asked why relations between me and Greenfield have deteriorated. To understand why, I need to explain the history of my farm. As you all know, my great-uncle died childless and in his will left his farm not just to his siblings but also to several of his cousins, most of whom were only distantly related. Now why did he do that? Am I not the direct descendant of my great grandparents who begat my great-uncle? Do I not also proudly bear the Pike family name? Who can deny that I have not been wronged? However, parties who shall remain nameless, were whispering in his ear. These other beneficiaries of my great-uncle's largesse must have felt it was Christmas. So, in the spirit of Christmas, I say to them that we were once all one family. I am willing to let bygones be bygones if you submit to the will of God, but His patience, like mine, is not infinite.

"I referred to one family. For you to fully understand what this means I would have to go back to the dawn of civilization, but let me here merely cover the last two and a half thousand years, starting from the last of our ancestors who were hunter gatherers, searching for berries and fallen nuts in the snow, and occasionally stumbling across a rotting animal corpse. Did we not all share the spoils? Did we not support one another through harsh

times? For these, our ancestors, were the first who started permanent settlements, the first to herd animals and tend crops. They developed a direct and lasting association with the land, the land that is now my farm.

"Over the next thousand years, vast armies occasionally formed and swept over the land, first one way then the other, but our ancestors remained. Kingdoms and empires rose and fell, but our ancestors remained, they maintained a strong continuous traceable connection to the land.

"Around fifteen hundred years ago, large parts of what are now Greenfield's, Raine's, Pyklit's, my farm and many others besides were united as a single large farm under our common ancestor, a man called Grubbe. The Lord blessed the wise and venerated Grubbe and his many wives, concubines and other women of the village, those willing and those not, with many children, for let us be frank, Grubbe was an active and fertile man but he merely did his Lord and Master's bidding, just as do I, following in the noble tradition established by our illustrious ancestor.

"Fourteen hundred and ninety years ago, Grubbe died and his farm was split between his nine surviving children. And did the farm boundaries thereafter not change often due to marriage, divorce, children, wars, pestilence, intemperance, wealth and penury? Yes they did. One of Grubbe's sons married to a family living to the north in what is now Raine's farm. Three of Grubbe's sons died childless in the great pestilence and their farms merged with one of their brothers who had several children of his own. One of Grubbe's other sons was intemperate and sold part of his farm to an unrelated neighbour, a man called Bartelle, to avoid destitution. And did this not cause great conflict amongst the family? Yes it did, not to be resolved until centuries later with a reconsolidation of the farm. These and many other squabbles, as occur in any great and powerful family, continued. Occasionally a family fall-out would occur and one member would detach themself from the rest, only to be brought back into the fold years or sometimes generations later.

"In a new stage of historical development, one of Grubbe's daughters married a man called Feldelande and they formed for a short time a common farm, then about ten years later they divorced; farm boundaries were revised as part of the divorce settlement and did not follow the original boundaries. Another of Grubbe's sons married the daughter of a

cousin and from their children are directly descended the Pike and Greenfield family lines.

"About fourteen hundred and eighty seven years ago other processes were unfolding: a daughter of Bartelle married the son of a man called Anoemya and ..."

Gemariah glanced at Constance and saw her drooping eyelids and sagging head. "I don't think I'll read all of this bit actually, Connie," she said loudly while rustling through the bundle of sheets.

"What was that, Gem," said Constance bolting awake. "All that talk of ancient history, I was dreaming about King Arthur and his knights defending Camelot against a dragon."

"Pay attention Connie. You wanted to talk about this. I was saying I'm going to skip the boring bit. Well, bit, it goes on for about fifty pages with mumbo jumbo like that, so I'll jump to near the end," to which Constance nodded. Gemariah found her new place and read on:

"and for hundreds of years have we not defended our land against a common foreign foe? Have we not fought alongside one another to defend our farm, to cast off the foreign yoke?

"I have been asked why relations between me and Greenfield have deteriorated. I do not intend to dwell on the condition of the tenant farmers. It is self-evident that since they have re-joined my farm and conduct their business in Marvod their lives are now replete with happiness and contentment and they no longer suffer the prejudice they were subjected to in Forket and on Greenfield's farm. Nor will I dwell on the return of Bull Island to its rightful place in my estate. Suffice to say that historical errors have been corrected. The fence was misaligned but it has now been moved and it can be moved again if necessary to correct other historical errors.

"Of course, the family farm was so large that it was made up of several parts and we did not all farm rape as the good Lord did bid us. Who can deny anyone to choose whatever crop they want? Not me. I say let everyone farm what they want, but those who do not want to grow rape remember there is a price to pay. Consider the reason why Greenfield started farming wheat. You will recall that his grandfather ran a successful rape farm and my uncle had very cordial relations with him. In fact he often lent Greenfield's grandfather farming equipment on very generous

terms. But after Greenfield's mother moved to the farm it is well documented that he was visited by many members of that so-called farmer's alliance. Who spread malicious rumours about my farmworkers and farm management practices? Who threatened him if he did not change crops? It is self-evidently no coincidence that he chose to start farming wheat. What choice did he have but to sell his soul?

"But I say to you, I do not have any enmity towards those who work on Greenfield's farm. They are our friends. They are from the same original stock, only tainted by recent wrong-minded decisions. Let all workers unite under my common banner of friendship. There is no fence between us. I emphasise again: we all speak the same language; we all share the same church. Ignore those who would sow division amongst us for they are poisoning your mind with lies.

"It is apposite at this point to reflect on the etymology of the family names. The records are clear that the name 'Greenfield' referred to a farmer who cultivated a small plot of farming land owned by a feudal lord. On the other hand, 'Pike' is derived from the local dialect meaning lord of the manor, or estate in modern terminology. So in the mediaeval period when surnames were gaining their permanency, the Greenfields worked on land owned by the Pikes. That is clear. So yet again we see that the ownership of farmland by Greenfields is, historically speaking, an anomaly, and in view of the way their farm has been run, perhaps better consigned to the dustbin of history.

"I wish here, in the spirit of full disclosure, to acknowledge my sources. I emphasise that for my research I have drawn on information publically available in Marvod: the Library, the Public Records Office, the Town Council, the Court, and lastly, but most importantly, Marvod Church, for which I here gratefully acknowledge access to its extensive archives afforded me by Bishop Cyril; all reputable and trustworthy sources of information, no secret records as have been used by others to weave their own distorted alternative fantasy history, I have merely compiled these well-known facts into a cohesive whole, the sources for which are freely available to anyone who chooses to conduct similar historical enquiry.

"I have mentioned Bishop Cyril, so it is pertinent to also remind the reader of the recent abandonment of the Marvod church by our brethren in Forket. My friends, we all belong to one faith, and for generations

Marvod church was the fulcrum about which our religious community revolved, the spiritual leader of that faith. Unfortunately, I tend to agree with the prevailing view that under the previous bishop Marvod Church had lost its way, tried to *modernise* cherished and long-established traditions. However, since Bishop Cyril was appointed, those old beloved practices have returned. Bishop Cyril's adherence to and expounding of his beliefs—beliefs, need I add, that correspond closely with those of the church's founders—have been welcomed in many quarters, including mine. But instead of welcoming this spiritual reinvigoration, the so-called worshippers of Forket have chosen to abandon their faith and attend a pretender church in Forket, with no ecclesiastical basis or support; a naked act of apostasy. So not only is our physical solidarity under attack, but our spiritual unity is being threatened!

"I have been asked why relations between me and Greenfield have deteriorated. I answer: ask of those who ask that question, 'Who asked you to ask that question?' I think the answer would be instructive.

"Now my words may be perceived by some with hostility, yet many will hear me and understand. I end with one message: I have never been and never will be anti-Greenfield. The fate of Greenfield's farm is up to Greenfield to decide."

Gemariah paused. "That's the end, Connie, apart from a list of references I mean, but I assume you don't want me to read those out?"

"No thanks, Gem. Can I have the letter? Thanks," said Constance placing the thick wad of paper on the café table in front of her and pressing down to smooth the central fold. "Let's get a drink before we go any further. You must be thirsty after reading all that?"

Gemariah instinctively licked her lips then took a long swig from a glass of water in front of her. Constance raised her arm and waved her hand at the nearest bar staff, who in the hubbub didn't notice for several seconds. Gemariah hadn't been able to make their usual morning rendezvous time and had met up with Constance in the late afternoon just as the café was seamlessly transmuting to a bar, as beach-side cafés do; happy hour was minutes away and the café was filling fast with beautiful young people coming straight from the beach, towels wrapped around them. "So what did you make of it at the time?" said Constance after she had finally got his attention. "It seems half-crazed nonsense to me!"

"I didn't know anything about it at the time until I overheard Barton talking excitedly to Ivor. Barton was saying when he went to Forket at the weekend he had been surrounded by farmworkers wanting to know if Pike was going to take over their farm as well. And when he asked them what they were talking about they referred him to Pike's article."

"Oh, that's right, Barton still used to some to Forket sometimes didn't he?"

"I asked Pike about it," continued Gemariah ignoring the question, "and he just said he was setting the record straight. He was sick of all the nonsense the Alliance was spouting, or so he said. When he asked me how I knew about it, I said I saw it in the Marvod Chronicle. I lied of course, because I didn't want to get Barton in trouble. I hardly ever read that rubbish."

The waiter arrived at the table, 'What would madam like?' 'I'll have a Margarita please', 'Gemma?' 'Oh, I don't know. Something to match my outfit maybe?', 'Would Madam care for a Tequila Sunrise or a Malibu Sunset?' 'Oh, Yes! Tequila Sunrise. Perfect!'

Constance scanned quickly through the letter while they waited for their drinks. "I can see why they didn't print the whole article. It's long, really long, and tedious: like reading Genesis chapters ten and eleven on Mescaline."

"Mescaline? What's that? Is that the little white ones?"

"No, that's Haloperidol. Mescaline causes time dilation, Gem. But there's some bits here I haven't seen before. 'Suffice to say that historical errors have been corrected. The fence was misaligned but it has now been moved and it can be moved again if necessary to correct other historical errors'. They conveniently left that second sentence out. No wonder the other farmers were so worried he might come after them next. It just proves that Pike was happy to re-engineer history in any way it suited him. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when the Editor explained to Pike he had to trim the article," said Constance laughing.

"He didn't actually say he was claiming your farm, Constance," rejoined Gemariah a little tartly, "or anyone else's for that matter."

"True, not directly, Gem, but you don't need to be a genius to see that's what he meant. God, there's over forty pages here just about the history of Pike's farm and the land on which it sits!"

"I know. That's why I skipped that bit," said Gemariah dryly.

"But why so much focus on ancient history?" said Constance. "I mean, this interminable chronicle may or may not be true, but if you follow the same logic with countries then France should now be part of Germany, Italy and Germany part of France, Portugal part of Spain, France part of England or is that England part of France? Or you could equally argue many European countries should actually be part of Macedonia or Mongolia! And that's just a few random examples. And yes, I accept Greenfield is related to Pike and his farm was originally part of the same farm as Pike's relatives, but we have legal ownership of our farm, recognised in every court except Marvod that is—and what a corrupt, self-serving fiefdom that is!—and we would never want, in any shape or form, to work *or* live on a farm owned by Pike anyway. I suppose if Pike did not have such execrable farm management practices, we could have worked more closely with him, but in the end it's up to us to determine how we manage our farm, what crops we grow, isn't it? Just because Cyril's got Pike's ear and he's got such a hard-on about rape—"

"That's not very nice, Connie. Cyril is very devout. He believes very strongly in the Bible's words."

"Well that's true, I'll give you that. It's unlikely you'd find anyone with stronger beliefs. But it's only his interpretation he believes; no-one else seems to see what *he* sees in the words. And as for the people of Forket abandoning Marvod church: we abandoned Cyril. It's only so often you can be told you're the devil just for being a wheat farmer!"

Their drinks arrived and both sipped on them. "And Pike says here we all speak the same language, but we don't, do we? We Forks can hardly understand you Marmites sometimes; the dialect and accent is so different!" Gemariah smiled and nodded. "Doubtless a thousand years ago we would have all used the same dialect, but then a thousand years ago I could have been speaking Anglo-Saxon, Danish, French, Welsh or Cornish if I was in England, but not English as we know it now. And even if we did all speak the same dialect, languages do not have borders as Pike seems to suggest: if they did then the USA would be part of England, pockets of New York would be part of Lithuania, suburbs in Australia would be part of Greece, every Polish worker living in England would have border control at their front door! Pike says we were sowing division,"

continued Constance after turning over the page and landing on a new paragraph. "Wow! That's just brilliant! A classic Goebbelsian deflection technique that seems to be deployed increasingly often by right wing politicians in particular these days: try to obscure your authoritarian proclivities by criticising someone else for something of which you are already the pre-eminent exemplar, or if not, aspire to be."

"What do you mean, Connie?"

"Well, he was talking here about the farmworkers. Did you feel that we ever tried to force, even encourage, any of your workers to leave? I mean, apart from Ivor and Barton, they were all illegal migrants with no farming skills weren't they, so why would we want them anyway?"

"I suppose so," said Gemariah sheepishly, "but I didn't really know any of them that well, except for Ivor of course," she said starting to blush.

"How many were there?"

"I don't know exactly, you'd have to ask—"

"Ivor. I know. Roughly?"

"Most of the time less than ten, but then suddenly dozens. They seemed to breed like rodents in summer and autumn," she said with an uncomprehending expression.

"Meanwhile," said Constance dwelling on the word, "Pike was plotting with our tenant farmers, stirring things up. Not even for their benefit, mind you, but just so he could steal our land. And I bet it was him that was behind false rumours about working conditions on our farm. But the workers voted with their feet in the end, didn't they? I didn't see any rushing across to your farm to join Pike's merry men!"

"Yes, but none of our workers rushed to join you either, did they?" retorted Gemariah wryly.

"They couldn't leave, Gem," said Constance slowly but emphatically. "Pike would have had them deported. He had them all by the ... you know what ..."

"Balls?"

"Exactly!" said Constance then self-consciously scanned the room a little embarrassed, having perceived they were both talking increasingly loudly. She saw several groups each standing around a table, large plates of food arranged at the centre, chatting loudly, raucous laughter fuelled by the approaching end of happy hour and realised, unnoticed by the two of

them, that the level of background noise had increased markedly since they arrived. "I'm hungry. Do you want to get something to eat here?"

"Good idea," said Gemariah grateful of the change in subject. "They do really good platters here."

"I was thinking something better than cocktail frankfurts, mini burgers and desiccated meatballs, Gem. Let's order from the table menu not the bar," said Constance reaching over and taking a menu from a card holder on a neighbouring table.

"Gem," said Constance gently after the waiter had left with their orders, lightly gripping Gemariah's forearm across the table. "Why did Ivor and Barton really stay on your farm? Was it because of you?"

"No. Ivor told me he had made a promise to Uncle Coniva when he got his job. No-one else had given him a chance apart from Uncle Coniva—You know he'd had trouble with the police, right? But he's never told me all the details, he just says it was just a bad phase—and Barton, well, Ivor's his best friend. He's much younger than Ivor and had similar issues, but Ivor helped him a lot when he first started and he's always been loyal to Ivor ever since. Back then, he'd do whatever Ivor told him to do. Anyway, that's enough about the old days for now, isn't it, Con?" she said imploringly.

Recognising the subject of particular present concern to her had been dominating the conversation, Constance smiled wanly and nodded, telling Gemariah to take over on her own chosen topic. Gemariah proceeded to babble happily about her recent trip to London with Kelly for its Fashion Week, only slightly spoiled, she said, when one of Hashish's models had held up a placard while a male model pranced down the catwalk stride-less alongside her sporting a plain coloured and politically sloganised tee-shirt topped with a feeble imitation of a Sid Vicious scowl, but apparently the most heinous sin was that he was still wearing shoes and socks.

The waiter arrived with the drinks and Gemariah carried on, through the arrival of their meal as well. Some good news, she said, one of her bank accounts had been unfrozen. 'One of my offshore accounts on Crayman Island. Apparently it's on some island in the Indian Ocean, or so my lawyer says.' She said this meant she could now redecorate her apartment and went on to detail all the work she was having done. Constance couldn't understand why this was needed, 'she'd only just had it done six months

ago,' she said. But, so Gemariah's new friends told her, 'You're supposed to do it at least once a year. I mean, you change all your clothes every year, don't you, Connie?' she said without waiting for an answer. 'So why not your home's interior?'

By the time they'd finished their meal, happy hour was long over and the rambunctious rabble had left, replaced with a more restrained older crowd in evening wear for the café's final transition to exclusive cocktail lounge.

"Any news about Greenfield, Connie?"

"No, no change. But anything I can get from you and Ivor in the next few weeks could still be useful. You know, I still can't understand why you keep defending him, Gem."

"I'm not defending him, Con. Just putting his view across because he's not here to defend himself. The way things happened he was maybe like a cornered rat. He felt he had no choice to do what he did."

"You mean all the lies, the threats, the illegal occupation of our land, all of that?" said Constance leaning back to allow room for the waiter to take the plates away and taking the opportunity afforded to order more drinks. "As you know, Gem," she continued after the waiter had departed, "I've been conducting research of my own over the last few months. I couldn't visit Marvod, of course, so I had to do it all on the internet, but all the Marvod records are available online now anyway, for a fee. You could say I've been following Pike's helpful advice. Anyway, it didn't take me long to find out that the registers of births, deaths and marriages only go back about two hundred years. Pike's family history for that period stacks up O.K. ... mostly ... but before that you're reliant on incomplete church records and books, history novels really. There are so many holes just filled by inference, supposition, and conjecture, circumstantial evidence that in any legitimate court would not be considered conclusive proof, outside Marvod of course. You could make up almost any story you wanted, but the authors of the books clearly had an agenda and selectively chose what best suited their pre-formed view, and that view matched Pike's. You could say they were very like the so-called scientists who were employed by the tobacco industry to produce evidence to demonstrate that smoking is not harmful to health then touted the published research as independent proof."

"You don't have to look for long on the internet to find someone who

will tell you exactly what you want to hear, especially if you're prepared to pay for it. And these days, you've got so-called A.I. People don't realise it's got no intelligence at all. If you ask it a question, all it does is trawl the internet for anything related, regardless of its source and accuracy, and then its interpretation of the detritus it's gathered is sometimes pure fantasy, or total nonsense. It seems to me it bases its answers on a majority view using a voting principle, so all that is going to do is expand conspiracy theories. No wonder some governments, absolutely obsessed with information control, are so keen to control the development of A.I., 'control the narrative' as they like to say. This must seem like a heaven sent opportunity to flood the internet with their misinformation and nonsense to manipulate the responses A.I. gives. I mean, soon no-one will remember the invasion and occupation of countries in Asia and Europe, rulings by The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, or that apart from a few masochists and corrupt cronies, the people of another independent country could never possibly welcome being taken over by a repressive and brutal autocracy. Everything will be smothered in A.I reinforced slime. It's complete anathema to democracy, but disguised as free speech. It's 1984. It's anti-democratic!"

"All right, calm down, Connie," said Gemariah seeing her friend was winding herself up potentially to some kind of outburst. "But what I don't get, Con, is you keep saying someone saying this or that is undemocratic or anti-democratic, but how can it be? Isn't it just expressing an opinion? I thought free speech was supposed to be a fundamental part of that fabulous democratic system that you go on about?"

"To paraphrase Winston Churchill," said Constance, "democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried'—"

"Not that again!" said Gemariah rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

"Well, would you really want to see a system like Pike ran on his farm introduced more widely, and against the people's wishes and will?"

"I didn't see any problems with the way Pike ran our farm! Although I admit Bos wasn't very nice to the workers sometimes ..."

"Well you wouldn't see it all, Gem, you're part of the owner's team. Every other form of government than democracy exclusively benefits the owners, the rich, the elite, a small group of some kind, it's part of the

D.N.A. of the system. It may not start that way, like in an aristocracy in its truest sense, but it ends up like that. So as long as you are part of that small group, you do very nicely, thank you. But in the end they always collapse, usually suddenly and violently, because too many people have got too little and they decide enough is enough. Just look at your workers! Anyway, Gem, it's not the original words that are the problem, it's the lack of intelligent thoughtful debate about what they mean that is the problem. These days, debate is often shut down quickly by little more than childish name-calling: 'communist', 'woke', 'pet-eaters'—"

"Undemocratic?" suggested Gemariah archly taking a loud sip through her cocktail straw.

"O.K., I'll give you that, Gem. Or worse, debate is just suppressed or prevented. Then, by design, the lack of informed debate is taken as a sign that action is effectively condoned. That is not democracy. The whole aim of democracy is to benefit the majority, as much as possible, so anything that prevents that is likely undemocratic by definition. There's inherent altruism in the intent because it's saying I accept that decisions are made by the majority, because the majority should invariably select something that benefits the majority. And even if I'm not in the majority I'll still reap the rewards of the majority decision anyway as a member of a democratic society. So there should rarely, if ever, unless under extreme circumstances visible to the majority, be a case where only a small group of people benefit. I mean, in ancient Greece, a proposal was put forward for open debate in their assembly, then they all voted on it. So we've gone backwards. Two and a half thousand years gone in a puff of vapour, proudly sponsored by the tobacco industry and others of their ilk." Constance nonchalantly sipped her pineapple juice.

"But democracy is not immune from these pressures either. To re-engineer what an American abolitionist said a long time ago, 'eternal vigilance is the price of democracy', after all a democratic system equates with a higher degree of freedom, the other systems of government all eliminating various freedoms in one way or another. To me, democracy seems to function best with an educated, informed, inclusive, involved, small electorate: an improved version of the Athenian model, if you like. But large modern democracies seem to tend towards an ill-educated, ill-informed, mix of antagonistic minority and uninformed majority, and

various hybrid representative systems have evolved with an inner undemocratic corporate-like system comprised of elected representatives; such a system tends to cronyism, nepotism and corruption while still maintaining a sheen of democracy. The disquiet with modern democracies we see around the world mostly centres on this inner core, which in itself is not an undemocratic position to take, but some minority groups in some countries are also unhappy with the whole process of majority decision making, which is fundamentally undemocratic. The combination is inherently anarchic and such people, while hiding behind democracy are actually authoritarian, even oligarchic, in spite of their protestations of support for democratic liberties. Poor education and an increasing lack of reliable objective information create a closed loop reinforcement of such views, a feedback loop, along with racism, sexism, other isms as well. The counter to this, of course, is better education and wider availability of unbiased accurate information, but another way to cut the loop would be to remove some, many even, decisions from politicians and give them instead to independent directly elected people's committees with open election and decision making processes, ensure all decisions made by governments are fully open except in exceptional circumstances that must be approved by an independent committee and ensure all representatives of the judiciary are elected by independent directly elected bodies.

Gemariah sighed loudly and smiled over Constance's shoulder at a group of young men at the bar who were gazing in her direction. Constance continued unabated.

And I'm only defending the principle of democracy, not some of the flavours of democracy, failed democracies, which have evolved, I'm not defending them. Some have become so distorted, particularly by the negative aspects of globalisation, that global corporations and some individuals have become larger and more powerful than the countries in which they operate. And some large countries that already had powerful corporations embedded in their systems of governance have now grown so close to them that for all intents and purposes they are plutocracies or corporatocracies or some hybrid, with just a facade of democracy sufficient to keep the masses happy. No company, or the people that run them, have the faintest interest in democracy or even any understanding of what it is; democracy to them is just an impediment to hoarding more money, like

some woke environmental regulation to be ignored, they would probably say. They are inherently antipathetic to the principle of democracy. So you can forget free speech and a fully functioning democracy if you're foolish enough to elect a company director to run the country! And woe betide anyone that thinks electing a narcissist will solve anything, history has proven that conclusively over and over again, yet we still continue to make that mistake: marvel at a candidate's or leader's self belief and apparent strength of purpose, however illusory, delude ourselves in its purpose and intent, gloss over the glaring faults, the flashing warning signs. And if you choose both, don't be surprised when it all falls apart in front of you!"

Having grown increasingly loud during this monologue, Constance noticed that the rest of the café had gone quiet and several were eyeing their table, so she paused went on in a whisper, "Anyway, that's what I think."

"But if democracy is so great, Con, wouldn't everyone be saying it's great rather than criticising it and seemingly happy to get rid of it? And more and more countries should be full democracies not increasing numbers of ... err ..."

"Flawed democracies or hybrid regimes according to the Democracy Index?" suggested Constance, Gemariah nodded. "I think it's several reasons: we seem to have an education system, and this seems to be engrained in the ethos of some countries, that emphasises personal rights without any equally strong emphasis on the rights of the majority of society when we aren't necessarily always part of the majority."

"Yeah. I heard that kids in Western countries lose interest in school in their first year and can't even be bothered to learn the alphabet," said Gemariah with an expression of wonder.

"Not all, Gem. Anyway, I'm not talking about the three Rs, I'm talking about teaching societal responsibility. And then we have an election process in most democracies that has evolved to reward minorities to the exclusion of the majority, and that is a strong incentive for the corrupt. You know, let's build a huge sports facility in a small town with a handful of people just to bribe a few voters who, purely coincidentally, lie in a marginal electorate. And if you can get away with it once, why not do it in several?"

"But that's not corruption. No-one made any money from it."

"It doesn't matter, Gemariah. The proper definition of corruption is the altering or perversion of rules or processes such that the outcome is changed from its intended purpose, making money directly from that is just the most venal form. Winning an election is retaining power and power is just as tangible as money; accepting a narrow re-definition of the word's meaning by politicians just benefits the corrupt. Now every project awarded by a government is viewed through that lens, so no wonder people are so cynical. And many people have become so dissatisfied with the electoral process they choose not to vote if they have that choice, and if they do they often register an anarchic protest vote even for a profoundly odious, ignorant, arrogant, narcissistic, flagrantly incompetent candidate of below average intelligence, who has made all sorts of appealing but unfulfillable promises to permanently rid the system of what he says is evil, but is in reality a major financial benefactor of the system and whose primary goal is to directly benefitting themself and their cronies. The protest voters think they're blowing a raspberry at society, but in reality it's like the system has developed artificial intelligence and is blowing a collective raspberry back at them!"

"Got anyone in mind?" enquired Gemariah.

"You could pick many countries at various stages along the Aristotelian path to tyranny or oligarchy, but they'd all have a lead character who has one or more of those qualities."

"But I thought Aristotle wasn't a big fan of democracy?" replied Gemariah, Constance considering her with an expression of mild surprise. "I heard that on a T.V. game show, Connie," she said by way of explanation.

"Not Athenian style, no. He preferred timocracy, a modified form of democracy. Modern democracies are not really like either of those Athenian models, as they have significantly better enfranchisement than both. His favourites were actually monarchy and aristocracy, but I'm sure he would change his mind if he had the benefit of the following two thousand years and more, saw all the abusive and dysfunctional monarchies and aristocracies, as for example Swift did and exposed in Gulliver's Travels. His main concerns with democracy, still relevant today, seemed to be they are too prone to being toppled by a demagogue or corruptive electioneering: over two thousand years ago Aristotle warned us

and just look around now for plain examples of both!"

"But surely in a democracy if you don't like the government you just vote it out?"

"In theory, yes, but what if the only realistic options are two ice creams with the same flavour just different topping. Of course, there's always a smattering of other parties, like the Slightly Silly Party or the Ginormously Ridiculous Party, promoting an assemblage of hare-brained and ill-considered policies, often not even detailed in a comprehensive manifesto, just spouted on social media. In many ways, it seems to me some so-called democracies are just promotions on endless repeat for all those other forms of government."

"I didn't realise you were so passionate about democracy, Connie."

"I suppose that's the only positive thing to come out of living next door to Pike. Was I going on a bit?" said Constance apologetically.

"Just like my two *favourite* parts of a rock concert, but combined: a bass guitar solo followed immediately by a drum solo!"

"That bad!" said Constance cringing and covering her mouth with one hand in mock horror. "Sorry, Gem. O.K., that's enough pontificating for now. I'll read the letter later, analyse it in more detail." She folded the letter and put it in her purse. "I'm sure there'll be something useful in there. Thanks Gem."

"Oh, I almost forgot! Did you hear what happened to the Cowboy?" said Gemariah excitedly.

"Yes; that was hilarious, wasn't it!" said Constance animatedly. "Indicted for animal cruelty and illegal feed supplements. The irony! When you think of all the dodgy deals he was supposed to have done."

"You know we visited the Cowboy's ranch, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And Pike tried bull riding?"

"Yes, of course. I saw the photos in the paper. I assumed they were doctored, they looked so fake. And, I mean, who rides for fifteen seconds anyway! Ludicrous! So what really happened?"

"He got thrown off instantly," said Gemariah quietly, leaning forward closer to Constance, who matched her in conspiratorial consort. "He almost got killed, banged his head and chest really bad. We were all sworn to secrecy and had to tell everyone a story how he'd ridden the bull then

just hopped off and got a black eye in a fight with Barton."

"Ha! So that was how he *really* got that massive black eye," said Constance sitting back and laughing.

"Gosh. If he knew I was telling you, he'd kill me," said Gemariah giggling surprised at her courage.

"Bit hard now, Gem, from where he is. But why did the Cowboy let him get on the bull in the first place? I knew he was a clown, but that takes the biscuit!"

"Pike insisted. He gave the Cowboy no choice, said their deal wouldn't have gone ahead otherwise. And Kelly said they had intended to put Pike on a ringer, but there was a mix-up with the bulls," to which a burst of laughter exploded from Constance, who then covered her mouth with one hand. "Doesn't surprise me," said Constance. "Another piss-up in a brewery. That was actually Pike's biggest mistake, I think, getting into bed with that incompetent narcissist!"

"Pike didn't like him that much!" said Gemariah with a pained and hurt expression. "He may have had his faults, Connie, but one of them wasn't bisinfidelity," she said proudly.

"Just a figure of speech, Gem," said Constance stifling a laugh and shaking her head pityingly.

Chapter 2 - The Trial

"Where are your clients ... errr ...", said the frail elderly judge, peering over his half eye reading spectacles.

"Maslyan, Ronner," said Maslyan rising.

"Maslyan, yes. Well?"

"Yes, thank you for asking, Ronner."

"I meant, Counsel Maslyan," said the Judge loudly and slowly enunciating the last two words, "where are your clients?"

"Beg pardon, Ronner. My clients, Messrs Pike and Bostultus Hood, are unfortunately unable to attend today's proceedings."

"And why is that, may I ask?"

"You may, Ronner."

"That wasn't a request, Counsel. Are we going to proceed like this from now on? I know the people of Marvod have a different dialect, but I thought we could generally understand each other well enough, Counsel?"

"Yes, I mean no, Ronner," said Maslyan then coughed a few times into his hand. "They feel their lives are threatened in Forket, Ronner."

"They must both be cats!" muttered the Prosecution Counsel under his breath, laughing to his colleague.

"What was that, Counsel?" said the Judge, Maslyan sitting and Prosecution Counsel rising.

"I was just commenting, Your Honour, how fortunate it is for the court that both Defendants have more than one life," said the Prosecution Counsel sitting, the Judge shaking his head and rolling his eyes then nodding to Maslyan.

"I mean, their life is threatened, Ronner," said Maslyan rising.

"What nonsense!" said the Judge assertively. "They would be protected by the Forket Police, just as any other defendant who attends my court," he went on with peeved tone.

"But it's by the Forket Police they feel threatened. The recent incident, the 'Bogrich Bungle', as the press have so delicately labelled it," he said with rhetorical flourish turning towards the jury box.

"Address me, Counsel. There is no jury present."

"This is going well," Defence Counsel sniggered facetiously to Maslyan.

"Where innocent members of the public, including Mr Hood," he continued, "who was invited there I might add, and even members of the Marvod Police, were viciously assaulted by the heavily armed Forket Police—"

"Careful, Counsel, alleged."

"Yes, that is what we will allege, Ronner. And Mr Pike has been maliciously held responsible for this by the Forket Police. And then there is the general history of enmity and prejudice of the Forket Police towards residents of Marvod ..."

"That is why we are here, Counsel for the Defence, is it not?"

"Yes, Ronner. Nevertheless ..."

"All right. Have you submitted the requisite application for leave to appear by proxy."

"I have it here, Ronner," said Maslyan handing a folder to the court clerk who handed it to the Judge.

"I see you will be the proxy," said the Judge as he scanned the documents contained within the folder.

"Of course, Ronner," the Judge glared at Maslyan.

"Enter it in the record, Clerk. A little late, Counsel," said the Judge after a short further perusal. "I would have preferred, and so I am sure would Prosecution Counsel—Yes, please be seated, Counsel for the Prosecution—if you had submitted this in advance of proceedings. The jury may be tempted to conclude that you were trying to unfairly disadvantage the Prosecution, would they not?"

"Certainly not, Ronner. I can assure the court we hold it and all its esteemed office holders in the highest regard," he said with feigned offence. "No, the reason is somewhat more prosaic, Ronner, it was merely because the supporting documents took some time to assemble. I trust the application is in order?" he said sycophantically.

"Yes, it all seems to be in order," said the Judge about thirty seconds later. "Whilst this is most annoying, in order not to prolong proceedings yet again, I am prepared to proceed on this basis. Do you have any objection, Counsel for the Prosecution?"

"This is highly irregular, Your Honour," said Counsel for the Prosecution after rising to his feet, "but, likewise, we do not want to see any further delay and expense to the court, but we would like it to be noted for

the record learned counsel's ongoing flagrant attempts to delay proceedings—"

"Objection!" said Maslyan.

"Sustained," said the Judge.

"Let me re-phrase: ongoing flagrant attempts to *prolong* proceedings."

"Duly noted, Counsel," said the Judge. "Now to your earlier application for a judge-alone trial, Counsel for the Defence: I note that the Prosecution has agreed—Do *sit* down Counsel for the Prosecution!—that it is in the best interests of justice, and the public purse, to proceed that way. The court has considered your application at length and has under the circumstances granted your request. Counsel for the Prosecution, you may proceed."

Chapter 3 - The Threat

"Come on, Joe, eat up or you'll be late for school," said Greenfield standing and leaning over the top of Jorah at the breakfast table and hurriedly chopping his eggs and toast into smaller pieces.

"Daadd! That's too big. I don't have a mouth like, like ..."

"A hippopotamus?" said Olivia sitting opposite in her secondary school uniform, opening her mouth as wide as she could.

"Like a hypermouse," agreed Jorah.

Constance turned from the bench where she was packing Jorah's lunch and smiled at Greenfield, who cut the pieces in half again then spiked one on the fork and handed it to Jorah.

Greenfield's phone rang. "Can you get that, Livvie? It's just behind you."

Olivia picked up the phone from the dresser and walked over to Greenfield with it.

"Who is it?"

"Unknown caller," said Olivia handing the phone to Greenfield.

"Another scam call, no doubt," said Constance.

"Hello," said Greenfield uncertainly. There was a short delay and Greenfield, expecting a recorded message, was about to end the call when a foreign voice said, "Good evening. Have I got Mister Grassfound?"

"Mister Greenfield, yes. Who is this?"

"The Cowboy."

"Sorry, it's not a good time," said Greenfield in surprise and walked over to his study shutting the door behind him. "I'm just about to take the kids to school."

"That's all right, Grandfriend. This won't take long. I just wanted to offer my commiserations. I heard about your mother. Terrible thing death. So tragic. So final."

"Thank you, Mr Cowboy."

"Just Cowboy, no need for the Mister. We're all friends here, right Groundfiend? So you must be running the farm now?"

"That's right."

"Good. Good. I just got off the phone to Pike. He tells me you haven't stopped his trial and all the sanctions still stand. Very disappointing. Very disappointing."

"It's a criminal trial so it's not up to me. And the sanctions; they were an Alliance decision not mine."

"Don't worry, I'll be talking to all the other farmers too. But you're the ringleader. The troublemaker."

"I thought we were all friends?"

"So did I. So let me make it real clear. If you want to *stay* friends then end this ridiculous trial and all the sanctions."

"It's out of my hands."

"Well then, you can expect more of the same from Pike. You know, *friend*, you or your mother should have made a deal with Pike when you had the chance. Whatever happens from here on in, it's your fault," and hung up abruptly.

Greenfield stood stunned for a few seconds then opened the door and walked back into the kitchen.

"Who was that?" said Constance as she bent down to adjust Jorah's uniform and schoolbag on his back. "Honey, what is it?" she continued with concern after getting no reply and seeing a blank look on Greenfield's pale face.

"Oh, that was just the Cowboy."

"Really, the Cowboy! What could he possibly want with you?"

"Umm," said Greenfield slowly turning his head and focussing on Constance, as if noticing her for the first time. "I'll tell you later. I better get the kids to the school bus first."

Chapter 4 - The Conditions

"It doesn't seem like Pike is going to stop with Greenfield's farm, guys," said Feldland to the rest of the huddled group, heads bowed and facing inwards like at a pre-game address by the captain.

"Why do you say that?" said Bartel.

"Get real, Bartel," said Pommer derisively. "What else can 'correcting historical errors' mean?"

"I thought he was just talking about Bull Island. The ownership of Bull Island has always been a little disputed anyway, hasn't it?" said Bartel hopefully.

"He's talking about his great-uncle's will, man!"

"Really? You mean—"

"Yes, I mean. Your farm was part of his great-uncle's farm as well, wasn't it, just like all of us?"

"Yes, it was. Shit!"

"And that article was just an abridged version too!"

"How do you know that?"

"It said right at the start of the article, you idiot! Didn't you read it?"

"Must of missed that."

"What are you guys all muttering about? The meeting's about to start," said Greenfield squeezing between Pommer and Eastman.

"Pike's article, what else?"

"Really, Mr Grubby?" said Greenfield.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're all grubs according to Pike, aren't we?" said Greenfield.

"Come on, be serious for once, Greenfield," said Feldland solemnly, Greenfield putting on an expression of mock reproach. "Look, someone's got to talk to Pike," continued Feldland.

"Well, don't expect me to do it," said Greenfield after they all quietly considered the unspoken request for a volunteer for several seconds. "He won't talk to me. His mate, the Lone Ranger, even called me this morning and threatened me. It's unlikely he'll talk to any Alliance representative or any of you other wheat farmers for that matter, except ... Anomia," he said

his eyes landing on Anomia who hadn't spoken a word since initial greetings.

"Why me?" said Anomia.

"You're not a neighbour *and* you're best mates," said Eastman.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" said Anomia frustratedly through gritted teeth, "we're not mates; I just don't like to needle him like you guys do."

"I'd say it's gone way past needling now, wouldn't you?" said Greenfield.
"Looks to me like he's already got himself a full body tattoo."

After several minutes of cajoling by everyone else, Anomia finally admitted that he was the most likely Pike would meet and reluctantly agreed to visit him under the pretext of discussing a motion Pike had flagged he was going to raise at the next Federation meeting, a motion to have steep punitive fines introduced for any jurisdiction that imposes restrictions or controls on the use and sale of G.M. rapeseed and oil.

The Alliance chairman announced over the P.A., "All right ladies and gentlemen, can you all take your places now please. We're a little late but let's get started."

"So, can I count on your vote then?" said Pike sitting back in the high-backed leather padded chair of his chambers.

"Of course; as always, Mr Pike," said Anomia obsequiously, awkwardly squinting at Pike across the length of the table in the dim light. Anomia was very uncomfortable meeting Pike in his chambers; he had asked Pike if he could meet at his home and Pike had refused, saying that wheat farmers were no longer welcome there, they could meet in his chambers instead.

"By the way, I'm also going to be tabling a research report. Prepared by some associates who worked in the tobacco industry," said Pike patting a small bundle of paper on the table next to him, "that clearly demonstrates the wide-ranging health benefits of erucic acid. Improved heart function, reduction in cholesterol, a treatment for arthritis, rheumatism, a variety of common skin diseases, sore throat, catarrh, hay fever, cramps and even deafness. I'll expect your support on that too." Anomia nodded vigorously. "You know, I'm sure if we continued the research we would find it's also a cure for cancer," said Pike deadpan.

"Oh right, nice one," said Anomia grinning and sniggering, quickly

turning it into a throat clear when Pike continued his icy stare.

"Was there something else, Anomia? I haven't got all day!"

"Yes there was, Mr Pike. It's a bit delicate ... ah ..."

"Spit it out, Anomia. You're mumbling. I can hardly hear you."

"It's about your article, Mister Pike. The other wheat farmers ... they're ... ummm ... a little worried you may try and take their farms."

"Take, Anomia? I don't *take* anything. You mean *receive* what I'm entitled to, I presume?"

"Yes, of course. But do you think you're entitled to be given our ... their farms?" added Anomia nervously.

"They took their time. And the cowards sent you to do their dirty work?" Pike asked rhetorically.

Pike sat motionless for a few seconds, Anomia nervously inspecting both sides of the room as if looking for an escape tunnel, then leant forward and opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a sheet of paper. "I've been waiting for this, so I've already prepared my list of demands," and placed the sheet on the table in front of him. Anomia half rose until Pike held up his hand and motioned to Bos with the other to come and take it to Anomia.

Anomia started reading the notice as Pike continued, "My principal grievance is with Greenfield. But those who maintain good relations with me having nothing to fear, even Greenfield," he said snorting derisively.

"What does 'good relations' mean, Mr Pike?" said Anomia peering above the notice at Pike.

"It's all there in front of your nose. Do you need reading glasses?" said Pike curtly.

Anomia read aloud some text highlighted in bold text: "Withdraw from the Farmers' Alliance ... Join the Association of Rape Seed Enterprises ... Re-plant with rape ... Halt the court case ... Withdraw all sanctions ... Eliminate tariffs ... Preferential rates for farming equipment', eck cetera, eck cetera. I think I can convince the others on half of these," said Anomia breezily, "but the other half—"

"What *exactly* do you mean by half, Anomia?" said Pike angrily suddenly sitting forward. "Do you want to be just half-friends, is that it?"

"I'm—"

"I don't have half-friends, Anomia," said Pike bellicosely. "You're all in or you're all out. You're with me or you're against me. Black or white. You

understand? Is that the problem with you, Anomia. Are you grey? Some wishy-washy, pastel shade of nothing?"

Anomia turned to see Bos standing at the door grinning, heavily tattooed arms folded across his chest, and started to rise from his chair. Bos's grin instantly disappeared, both arms falling to his sides, hands held ready away from this body, Anomia slumped back down again dejectedly.

"You've got a decision to make, Anomia, haven't you? And as you've decided to play messenger boy. You can deliver the message to your friends in the Alliance. Now run away!" said Pike waving the fingers of one hand at Anomia.

Anomia folded the notice and put it in his jacket pocket, Bos opened the door for Anomia, a grin still on his face and allowed just enough room for Anomia to squeeze past sideways, Anomia then driving to the bar in Forket where he had arranged to meet up with the other wheat farmers.

Chapter 5 - Verdict

"Before we proceed to the court's verdict," said the Judge, "I'd like to say a few words. Firstly, to the Forket town and court officials who I'd like to thank for making this venue available for the trial and who supported us throughout, including providing a delicious breakfast and lunch each day. It isn't often that we get to Forket, but our visit will be long remembered, in particular for Mr Pecker's daily supply of exquisite croissants and baguettes, which I must say were without doubt the best I have had outside France. To quote John 6:50: 'This is the bread that comes down from heaven'; it was much appreciated by the court.

"To the public gallery," the Judge said addressing the first floor balcony at the rear of the court, overflowing with reporters and interested onlookers, "I expect you will be delighted to hear that I promise that will be the only scripture quotation you hear coming from my lips in this case, having had the misfortune of being subjected by Defence Counsel to an otic bombing of scriptural quotations of London Blitz proportions, to such an extent that it is hard to believe you won't have heard the whole bible piece by disjointed piece by the end of proceedings. We can only hope the authors' descendants no longer retain copyright or Defence Counsel will be

bankrupted.

"To any of those in attendance who may be surprised at the speed at which this case has concluded—in fact three weeks to a verdict is almost unheard of in a case such as this—I point to the fact that the Defendants did not appear either in person or on video, leaving Counsel to conduct a defence by proxy, assisted only by occasional written statements. And whilst I note that the court approved the Defendant's application for representation in this manner, this was under the expectation that the Defendants would utilise the time wisely to vigorously defend the charges. This does, in the view of the court, demonstrate a barely concealed contempt by the Defendants for these proceedings that has been duly noted. In fact, the court believes that the only reason the trial has lasted even as long as this was the aforementioned copious biblical quotations, often imperceptibly relevant to proceedings, presumably supplied by someone with an intimate and encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible and how to manipulate its meaning to their own end.

"To Prosecution Counsel, I'd like to congratulate you on your patience and perseverance. Large portions of the trial must have had you believing you had been transported to a mediaeval farmyard. Unlike your learned colleague your evidence was succinct and persuasive, but most importantly relevant, for which the court offers you its thanks.

"Finally, I'd like to address some closing remarks to Defence Counsel," said the Judge turning to face Maslyan directly. "Mr Maslyan, the court sympathises with you in view of the difficulties you confronted in presenting a coherent defence in the absence of your client from court, however, that cannot be allowed to influence the court's verdict. In saying that, the court must commend you on your tenacity and inventiveness. Some of your evidence and your legal tactics, were ... umm ... novel, certainly this court has not encountered their like before—I can't speak on behalf of others, but the unpleasant taste of the rapeseed oil lingered long into that night, demonstrating conclusively that it is not indeed nectar from heaven, as you would have us believe—and if this is the way that cases are conducted in Marvod it must make for very entertaining proceedings. Whilst your pertinacity in presenting the views of your clients was laudable, in spite of the pervading and perpetual atmosphere of unreality your evidence engendered, the purpose of the court is to get to the truth not

offer an opportunity for the concoction of a fantasy world based on your clients' world views. Your claim, for example, that the Greenfields had not developed and maintained Bull Island for the benefit of the wider community, as apparently required by old Marvod customary laws pertaining to Lake Cordiomar, thus forfeiting their claim over it, was erroneous on several counts, one of the most striking being that the only evidence you produced for these laws appears to be lyrics from an old folk song. By way of advice for your next appearance, the court suggests that you take advantage of other more recognised, believable and reputable sources of information for your arguments than those on which you seemed to exclusively rely."

The Judge paused while he poured some aerated spring water from a bottle into a glass and took a sip. "In your capacity as proxy, stand please Counsel. On the charge of trespass of Parcel One, the land known as Bull Island, Mr Hood is found guilty," read the Judge, causing a murmur to arise from the court. "On the charge of..."

The Judge then read out the verdict for each of the other charges for Bos followed by Pike, the gentle murmur in the public gallery slowly becoming louder with each successive pronouncement of guilty. "Finally, on the charge of unlawful occupation of Parcel Two, Mr Pike is found guilty. Now, in view of the conclusiveness of the verdict, I propose to proceed directly to sentencing."

"Before we proceed, Ronner, might I request an adjournment to prepare a plea in mitigation," said Maslyan half-way through sitting down.

"Does that mean you won't be appealing the verdict?"

"I will need to consult with my clients, Ronner."

"How long will you need?" said the Judge.

"At least six months, Ronner," said Maslyan imploringly, "for such a complex case."

The prosecution lawyers snorted derisively and the Judge shook his head and sighed. "You have one week, Counsel. I suggest you use that time with your clients wisely. The court is adjourned for sentencing in-Clerk? ... Yes, thank you—one week from today."

Chapter 6 - Attempted Eviction

"So what were the sentences, honey?" said Constance on speakerphone while she dried Jorah after his bath.

"Five years suspended and big fines for both," said Greenfield.

"You're joking!"

"No. Our lawyer explained that the court realised it would be unable to execute arrest warrants so sending a strong message should be sufficient."

"Is Pike going to appeal?"

"No. Apparently not. I thought it was strange too, but the lawyer said Pike probably didn't want to keep paying Maslyan to turn up for months on end with little chance of success."

"Or more likely that he knows how toothless the court is," said Constance pulling Jorah's tee shirt over his upstretched arms. "I still can't get over how strange it is that the upper court has such little power! I know it's because of the way the federal constitution was established, the local authorities were deemed to be direct representatives of the people and given greater power and all that."

"Yeah, but I bet they didn't figure back then how easy it would be for a small number of powerful people to manipulate the system," said Greenfield, "and now the constitution can only be changed by unanimous agreement between all the town councils. And why would they do that? Lose all their power, perks and prestige voluntarily? They should have made sure all the town councils were similar size first, now neighbours can be easily bullied. It's more like the Wild West now. Thank God for the Alliance!"

"What about our land?"

"Mr Pike's claims to ownership of Parcels One and Two'," read Greenfield, "are not recognised by the court. Mr Pike is hereby ordered to return the land immediately to Mr Greenfield'. That's what the court order says anyway."

"Well at least it's finally over. When will you be home?"

"After lunch: I'm going to visit Feldland first. I think I'll go and have a look at the footbridge tomorrow to see if it's still being blockaded by the tenant farmers."

"Nadia. Nadia. Over," said Mitson urgently over the hand held radio in his cab.

"Copy," replied Nadia.

"Convoy of vehicles just passed me headed down the entrance road," said Mitson after being alerted by a trail of ballooning dust while harvesting barley in one of the top fields. "Looks like trouble. Over."

"Roger. Rev, come in."

"Copy."

"Cut them off before the farmhouse, Rev," said Nadia. "Both of you meet me there. Over."

Rev shouted at the chaser bin driver and motioned to him to stop the combine, jumped down from the cabin, ran over to the truck and got in the passenger seat then directed the young farmhand towards the road.

Meanwhile Mitson had taken pillion position behind his chaser bin driver on the latter's motorbike and was now speeding between rows of barley and across wheat fields towards the farmhouse.

Greenfield was in the equipment shed checking his farm bike and had been listening in on the radio. At Rev's final words he called in to Nadia and said he would meet them there then left the shed and jogged across the farmyard. Constance came out of the farmhouse as he passed and he told her to go back inside. 'There could be trouble', he said. He continued up the road a short distance until he reached the first T-junction and waited there. A short time later a truck approached rapidly along the side track and after it had reached his position he directed it into a blocking position in the middle of the road then was joined by Rev, another farmworker and Nadia, whom they had picked up along the way.

"Where's Mitto?" said Rev then before anyone could answer the faint high pitched puttering of a low cc engine intervened rising quickly to a crescendo, Rev joining them about twenty seconds later in a cloud of dust.

"Who's coming?" asked Greenfield.

"There's three armoured vehicles," said Mitson after removing his helmet, he and the driver dismounting. "Too far to be sure, but I thought I saw Bos in the lead vehicle."

"How long till they get here?"

"Probably another ten minutes."

"Call the police, Mitson," said Greenfield. "Tell them we've got armed

trespassers," then he dialled Feldland's number and told him to bring all the other farmers and block them in at the top of the drive.

"O.K., gather all the farmworkers, Nadia. Call them on the radio and tell them to meet us here."

"What if they've got guns?"

"We should be fine, we'll outnumber them."

Mitson finished his conversation with the police. "The police'll be here in about thirty minutes, Mr Greenfield," he said. Greenfield acknowledged him then turned and walked up the dusty track a few paces keeping his eyes on the road ahead then stopped and waited, Nadia re-joining him a minute later.

"Nadia, you don't need to stay here."

"I'm not going anywhere, Mr Greenfield. I've been on this farm longer than you have."

"O.K., fair enough, but we need someone to disable the truck. Pick someone else to take the ignition leads out, then tell them to take a bike and hide somewhere down near the lake and turn their phone off. We'll come and get them later." Nadia nodded.

Over the next few minutes workers arrived in twos and threes until there were about twenty five gathered chatting nervously in a group between Greenfield and Nadia and the now immobilised truck.

Several vehicles approached down the road, the lead vehicle stopping a short distance from Greenfield. A bulky figure in balaclava, army camouflage fatigues and shoulder holster under his right armpit got down from the passenger side and stood just in front of him, other individuals similarly attired with a range of semi-automatic rifles and machine pistols got out of the vehicles and formed a line across the road two deep standing somewhat at ease.

"I have here a court order from Marvod," said the lead figure loudly, holding up a document for everyone to see and waving it.

"You're not in Marvod now, Bos," said Greenfield. "What are you talking about about anyway? The State Court just ruled against you! Or didn't you hear?"

"Or didn't *you* hear?" ridiculed Bos mimicking Greenfield's voice before resuming his own gruff, guttural, heavily accented drawl. "Mr Pike received no response to his generous offer, so while you were wasting your time at

that circus in Forket, Greenfield, Mr Pike was submitting the newly discovered will—"

"New will discovered where? In Wonderland, or behind the looking glass?"

"to Marvod Court," continued Bos. "The court has ruled in favour of Mr Pike and—"

"What a surprise," interrupted Nadia.

"and this farm is now the property of Mr Pike," said Bos shoving the court order into Greenfield's chest. "I have been appointed bailiff on behalf of the court," he continued more loudly for the benefit of all present. "I am here to secure Mr Pike's property and remove all trespassers."

"Bos," said Greenfield calmly, "more farmworkers and armed Forket Police are on their way and will be here soon. If you don't get off our land now, you'll be surrounded and arrested."

"Only Mr Greenfield and his family will be evicted," said Bos addressing the group over Greenfield's shoulder. "The rest of you—Mr Pike has no gripe with you. You'll all keep your jobs. You just need to accompany us in our convoy back to Mr Pike's farm for registration and processing."

"Go *fuck* yourself, Marvod convoy," retorted Nadia deliberately. Almost in concert Bos's shoulder microphone speaker crackled along with a few others scattered amongst the group, some undecipherable words coming from them all. Bos leant his mouth towards his microphone, turned and walked away a few paces speaking quietly as he went. After a rapid exchange of short muffled sentences Bos went to one of his group and spoke in his ear briefly, then briskly returned to the front of the ranks facing them and executed a flurry of military hand signals finishing by raising his hand to shoulder height, fist closed, then piston-like thrust his fist upward to the full extent of his arm and back down rapidly.

The assembled armed men immediately fell out in confused hasty departure heading simultaneously in a multitude of directions, several colliding and falling in a heap before eventually boarding the waiting vehicles. The vehicle at the rear then first backed up slightly and attempted a three point turn, which degenerated into seven, hampered as it was by its poor turning circle and narrow lane. The second vehicle replicated the first, the third seeing the preceding shambles instead turned and drove straight through the drainage ditch and fence and through the field behind

before re-joining the road having crossed the fence again. All three then retreated back up the road followed by a jumbled throng of Greenfields farmworkers shouting loud abuse, fists pumping and hugging.

Greenfield and Nadia didn't move until the vehicles were out of sight after which Greenfield breathed a loud sigh of relief. "We're going to have to improve our security, aren't we?"

Chapter 7 - Moving Boundaries

Bos was hesitant to call Pike, knowing the failed take-over venture would not be received well, and decided to wait until he returned to the farmhouse to break the news. When he arrived with his dispirited assault force he went directly to Pike's study, sitting down opposite him, and proceeded to give a detailed account of events.

Pike received Bos with surprise, unaccompanied as he was by anyone from Greenfield's farm, but most particularly Greenfield himself, which had been a direct order. He listened to Bos with growing anger: he hadn't even sent all his troops, and those that went were not even fully armed, having fully expected to apprehend the Greenfields with ease and virtually unopposed. And to be shown up by a woman! Nadia had exposed all his men as the useless cowards they were. "This was a failure of your leadership, Bostultus," he testily interrupted Bos's account.

"You weren't there, Mr Pike," said Bos defiantly. "If we haven't left then, we would of been surrounded. We only *just* managed to get out in time!"

"You had plenty of men."

"I had plenty of unmotivated migrants, you mean."

"That hasn't been a problem until now."

"We hadn't confronted any serious resistance until now. They didn't just capitulate like you said they would."

Both men's voices had been rising and Pike had by now got to his feet, as had Bos, both with protruding pulsating neck veins. Pike stared at Bos for a few seconds then sat down slowly and said, "O.K., you can leave now."

Alone, Pike initially pondered Bos's growing recalcitrance but then quickly shifted to consideration of the more pressing issue at hand: what would be his next move against Greenfield. Having failed in the first

attempt, a daylight frontal assault that if successful would have resulted in a swift appropriation of Greenfield's whole farm, Pike realised that approach could not be repeated, even with all his troops: Greenfield would be prepared now, it would be too risky. Henceforward he would need to adopt a longer term approach, use a variety of measures, attack on several fronts, consolidate the gains made then shift focus to another area. He could start with a night-time assault on the south-eastern corner of Greenfield's farm, immediately to the west of the Bogrich River and north of Lake Cordiomar. It would likely be poorly defended there as the road bridge was still in a state of disrepair and he could use the adjacent low lying land to his advantage. Pike's great-uncle had excavated drainage ditches throughout this area that drained into Lake Cordiomar, however, after taking over the farm, Greenfield's grandfather, under pressure from the Alliance to meet their environmental standards, had blocked the ditches and allowed the drains to fill naturally, so it was now a patchwork of discrete rectangular islands surrounded by expanding strips of marshland. But every spring, after the winter melt and heavy rain, all this land would flood so he would have to act soon: take control of the land, reinstate the ditches, matching what he had recently done himself on his side of the river, and drain the land again leaving just a perimeter moat along a new temporary western border. Pike called Bos back in and told him to reconnoitre Greenfield's farm with drones. Bos reported back later that day that it appeared to be undefended and reviewing the video footage together there did not even appear to be any security at all on Greenfield's side of the bridge. It was better even than Pike could have hoped for. Pike told Bos his plan.

The next morning Greenfield was sitting at the breakfast table with the Chronicle open, its front page facing Constance screaming, 'THE GREAT GREENFIELD GRAB GOOF-UP', reading about what was, allegedly, the attempted abduction of Greenfield and his family by masked men, including the transcript of a long interview with the Forket Police Commissioner.

"Can I have the paper when you're finished, darling?" said Constance.

"Sure, Con."

"What does it say about a roadblock?" said Constance seeing a

secondary headline.

"I'll read it out," said Greenfield: "As a consequence of Mister Pike's actions and in view of the perceived threat posed to the public in Forket, we will be setting up a temporary manned roadblock on the main road connecting to Marvod: all vehicles coming from Marvod will be inspected and any containing Pike, his known associates or weapons will be turned back. I also strongly discourage anyone from travelling to Marvod for the foreseeable future."

"Why can't they just arrest them all?" said Constance exasperated.

"You know the answer to that, Con," said Greenfield soothingly.

"I know. Just wishful thinking out loud," she said disconsolately.

"Anyway, the Police Commissioner says he spoke to Iskaz and formally requested the arrest and extradition of Pike, Bos and several others to Forket, but the request was denied. Not only that, it says here Marvod Police are going to set up their own roadblock as well!"

"All these roadblocks are not going to affect us at all, or anyone else round here for that matter. I mean who goes to Marvod these days anyway? But what about the poor truck drivers?"

"I don't know. I reckon they'll probably start going via Minar or other towns further to the north. It's a much longer way round but it's better than waiting in long queues."

Constance stood up with her plate, then stacked Jorah's, Olivia's and Greenfield's on top as she passed the rest of the family on the way to the sink. "When do you expect the contractor?"

"Any minute now; they said they'd call when they got to the top of the road and started setting up."

"Don't forget, Mitson needs to go with you when you visit either of the bridges."

"Sure, Hon, but main gate first, remember?" Greenfield's phone started buzzing as if on cue, "That must be them now," checked his phone, kissed Constance and left.

Two white panel vans, both towing small trailers with a mini excavator and miscellaneous equipment, were waiting when he arrived at the end of the road on his motorbike. He shook the supervisor's hand then after discussing what would be done that day left one of the vans there with two of the crew, the new gate, security camera and lights and accompanied the

other van to the farmhouse where the contractor started unloading boxes of equipment for the new security command centre via a side sliding door.

Mitson arrived in his car and greeted Greenfield at the van. While they were chatting, one of the contractors came out of the house and handed them both a portable personal alarm that he said he had just programmed, but they would need to check network coverage when they went out on the farm.

"Only two?" said Greenfield.

"I've left four others in the command centre—in your study, that's right, isn't it? That's where your wife showed me." Greenfield nodded. "—and the chargers as well. If you need more that's no problem, just let the boss know. And any issues with coverage around the farm as well," then carried on unloading.

"I'll go and get the guns," said Greenfield surreptitiously to Mitson and went inside the house, returning with two revolvers from the gun cabinet, ammunition and shoulder holsters. While they were arming themselves the supervisor approached Greenfield, "Where to now, Mister Greenfield?" the supervisor said rubbing his hands together enthusiastically.

"The pedestrian bridge," said Greenfield. "Follow us, we'll show you the way."

Greenfield proceeded carefully as he approached the look-out above the pedestrian bridge over the Bogrich River. He stopped and scanned the way ahead; it appeared to be the same as his last visit, apart from a small ramshackle sentry hut that had been built next to the bridge on the far side of the river, even the 'NO AXES' sign was still in place. He led the way down to the bridge where one of the contractors started unloading the mini excavator while his supervisor scouted the area for the best place to install the poles for the motion detectors, lights and solar panels. Someone across the river came out of the hut, waved and shouted, "Hello again, Detan," laughing and pointing, another man joining him from the hut with some binoculars.

"Looks like there's no issue here," said Greenfield to Mitson. "Why don't you stay back here while I go to the road bridge."

"Not by yourself, Boss," said Mitson with concern. "Remember what we agreed."

"I know, I know. I'll call Rev in a minute and tell him to meet me at the

junction. Oh yes, before I forget. Alarm check," at which he examined the pendant round his neck, saw it had a good signal, but sent it a location command from his phone anyway to get a GPS fix, Mitson doing likewise. Greenfield then called Rev and arranged their rendezvous and by the time he left the first screw pile was already being installed.

Greenfield arrived at the place where the track from the farmhouse to the road bridge met another he had just taken headed towards the pedestrian bridge and waited the few minutes until Rev arrived. After checking Rev had brought his gun and personal alarm he rode with him to the copse just short of the bridge where they both dismounted to observe the road ahead. The flooded land started not far ahead of them and in the distance beyond it they could see the tenant farmers' hut on the far river bank. A few minutes passed and Greenfield seeing no-one else whispered to Mitson that he felt it was safe to proceed. They advanced together in a low walk along the road, flooded ditches skirting both sides, until they arrived just short of the bridge where they waited and listened.

"What do you reckon?" whispered Greenfield after a lengthy period of quiet.

"There's no-one here. The bridge is still down and some of the timbers look rotten to me; looks like they haven't been here for years."

"I agree. I can't see them coming across here. Let's head back."

Constance was unconvinced when Greenfield told her he didn't see the need to install another expensive security system at the road bridge. "Are you sure?" she said.

"Well, the bridge is still exactly the way it's been for years now. If anything, it's gotten worse."

"But they could just repair it, couldn't they?"

"Maybe, but it's a lot of work. The thing is, Con, all this security stuff is costing us a fortune, our income is down, we haven't had money coming in the from the tenant farmers for years as well—I know it wasn't a lot but at least it was something—"

"Is it really worth the risk though?"

"O.K., how about this instead? ... We make sure anyone down in the fields in the south-east corner from spring to autumn checks daily and reports back. And, we do regular winter patrols—"

"Daily winter patrols ..."

"... daily winter patrols as well. I mean, they can't do anything overnight, can they?"

Two hours before sunset that evening, Pike's newly assembled expeditionary force set out in a convoy of three flatbed trucks from the farmhouse headed towards the tenant farmers' hamlet. They stopped there just long enough to let a group of farmers climb onto the back of each vehicle then drove down south and parked up just to the north of the bridge, out of sight of it, and waited for nightfall.

Half an hour after sunset, under cover of moonless darkness, Bos led the vehicles down to the road bridge where the platoon, by now all having blackened faces, gloves and kitted out with night vision goggles, secured the bridge. Three bobcat excavators were unloaded, one lifting a small bundle of thick timber planks off a truck and crawling over to the edge of the bridge where it dropped it across the vacant span. The ropes holding the bundle together were then cut and the bobcat knocked the planks into alignment, the process repeated with another excavator. Once the temporary crossing was secure, all crossed the new bridge and split into groups headed for several corners of the flooded farmland where the drone footage had shown the ditches had been dammed and set about digging out the blockages by hand assisted by two of the excavators. The largest team headed straight along the road to the westernmost ditch where some of them set about destroying the small bridge over what would be the new moat assisted by the third excavator, while the rest of the platoon fanned out and started installing a concertina razor wire fence along the raised edge of the adjacent ditch, vigorously banging stakes deep into the soft ground at regular intervals to secure it. As ditches were progressively cleared and water started draining back into the lake, the excavators were re-deployed to install small bridges between each of the raised sections of land allowing access to all of Pike's newly expanded realm.

Just before two a.m., roughly coinciding with low tide, the last section of barbed wire was installed down into the lake. The majority of the work now being complete, Bos dismissed the tenant farmers and ordered one of the migrants to drive them back to their hamlet in one of the trucks then instructed half of the remainder to set up a small tent village next to the road, the other half he posted on perimeter sentry duty. Calm quickly

descended over the makeshift camp as one by one the workers collapsed in their tent exhausted and fully clothed. Bos rang Pike to inform him the first stage was complete, Pike in turn sending Si to spell him.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning, Nadia joined Greenfield in the brand new command centre set up on a desk in the corner of Greenfield's study. It had been late the previous evening when the contractor left and they'd not yet had time to fully try out their new toys. Greenfield invited Nadia to sit in the swivel chair and was leaning over Nadia's shoulder to point out something on one of the three angled monitors as Constance entered the room. "Just let me have a play by myself, will you, Boss," said Nadia a little frustrated.

Greenfield glanced at Constance and playfully grimaced holding both hands up in mock surrender then stepped back a couple of paces. "O.K., you're driving."

"Show me what we've got then," said Constance in a businesslike manner.

"The headset is for the intercom and the phone," he explained. "These two screens show all the camera views. You can toggle between each camera with the mouse or freeze on a view otherwise it just scrolls between them after a few seconds anyway. You can pan the cameras up-down and side-to-side using the keyboard or mouse. And this screen shows the status indicators for every alarm in a map view, or you can toggle to a list, as well as the G.P.S. coordinates including the personal alarms. And once you understand all the abbreviations and lingo, all the relevant info is overlaid in the bottom corner of each camera view and the left hand side of each screen view as well."

"And the main gate?"

"The main gate unlock switch is under the table. All clear?"

"Yes. You know what stands out to me?"

"What?"

"There's a camera covering every road and track to the north and east apart from ..."

"Apart from the south-east," admitted Greenfield.

"Pike will know by now we've installed a new security system, the tenant farmers will have reported back to him. I bet you he's already working out all the weak spots. We need to go and check," insisted Constance.

"All right, all right. I'll go back there again with Nadia this morning."

Greenfield and Nadia were approaching the copse on the way to the road bridge about thirty minutes later, Nadia leading the way, when Nadia suddenly stopped. Greenfield drew alongside her and asked what had happened. "What's that?" Is that smoke?" said Nadia quietly, pointing to the sky above the trees. Greenfield agreed it certainly looked like thin wisps of smoke and not far away too, just on the other side of the copse, then said they better leave their bikes here and proceed off-track on foot. In a crouch they cautiously made their way through the dense undergrowth, pistols in hand, until they reached its margin, the way ahead now opening out all the way to the lake. In the distance at the foot of the gentle incline leading from their position and at the start of the marshland a few figures in military uniform were milling about a small group of tents, others sitting around small fires.

"What the hell!" said Greenfield, "Mitson and I were just here yesterday!"

Nadia scanned from left to right, then said, "I can see a barbed wire fence all the way along the top of the ditch."

"And they've cut the road too, see there," said Greenfield pointing to it.

They both remained silent for a while deep in thought as they surveyed the scene before them then retreated through the woods and returned to the farmhouse, where Greenfield called everyone together for a meeting.

"How soon can you get here, Commander?" said Constance at the end of the meeting to the phone on the table in front of her, the rest of the leadership team gathered round her in Greenfield's command centre, other farmers on speakerphone.

"Thirty minutes."

"OK. See you then," said Constance, then addressing the others, "We need to act quickly while the River's low and before they strengthen their position. I think I know what to do."

Later that afternoon, a large armed group assembled on Greenfield's farm. The Commander split them into three teams: one was ordered to go to the copse, another to the pedestrian bridge, and a third containing the biggest and strongest of the farmers and Forket Police force was despatched to the bank of the Bogrich River on the border with Pyklit's farm to the north of the bridge. They waited until the order was given to

proceed, then one of the latter group fired a grappling hook attached to a rope across the river and retracted it until it caught in the branches of a large tree on the opposite bank. After checking the attachment was secure, the rope was tensioned and tied off then each member went in turn to the water's edge, clipped onto the rope with a carabiner and gingerly waded through the still powerful current, automatic rifle held high above their head, water up to their armpit and washing occasionally over their head. All having safely crossed, they gathered in a small huddle for an equipment check then made their way down the river bank towards the bridge, calling in by radio when they were in position. At a signal, they snuck noiselessly up to the rear of the sentry post and ordered the surrender of the two young tenant farmers on duty there, in full view of a security camera on a post above them. Their leader then scratched around in the ground around the post, all the while followed by the panning camera, until he found the power lead, looked up at the camera, smiled and cut the wire. The teams on both sides of the bridge then set about clearing the obstructions on it while others spread out to set up defensive positions, reinforced by the rest when access across the bridge was restored.

Greenfield was waiting with the team in the copse when their team leader received a radio call notifying him the pedestrian bridge was secure. Almost simultaneously he noticed a sudden increase in activity in the marshland before them: troops rushed to pick up weapons and fall in, instructions were barked and most then boarded two vans parked alongside the road and departed leaving only what appeared to be two on duty. The copse team leader sent a contingent to the northern edge of the copse then after waiting until calm had again descended over the enemy camp he ordered them to proceed. The men crawled slowly one behind the other across the open ground through the knee-high wheat to the ditch, waited until the sentries' attention was focussed elsewhere and slid silently into the muddy ditch water and up the bank on the far side. After cutting the wire they slithered across the open ground heading east to a ditch and followed it in a crouching run through small puddles of water until they came to the road, from where some of them could cover the tents while the others approached the sentries undetected from behind.

At a signal from the leader, several men at the front edge of the copse rose and ran down the road shouting at the top of their voice, firing their

weapon in the general direction of the sentries, who both fell to the ground and started returning fire. The attacking force likewise fell to the ground and rolled over into the wheat fields on both sides of the road from where they continued to advance in fire and movement, suppressing fire provided alternately from one side of the road then the other. Seeing that the sentries were now distracted by the commotion, and no-one having appeared from the tents, their comrades behind enemy lines ran along the ditch beside the road, trained their weapons on the enemy soldiers and barked at them to surrender. With the sentries standing both hands raised, the others quickly covered the remaining distance to the ditch and took over prisoner duty leaving the others to search through the tents for any stragglers.

A few minutes elapsed before the team leader declared it was safe and called for the truck to be driven from its secluded spot in the copse. All gathered round it when it arrived at what was now the end of the road opposite the sentry post, including Greenfield and the reserves who had left the shelter of the copse. Three of the men unloaded rucksacks and jogged over to the road bridge with a small team accompanied by Greenfield leaving behind some to guard the bound captives, a drone operator tasked with surveying the area, three to install a temporary bridge, and others to disperse across the recovered farmland, check and report back.

The team who had gone to the road bridge arrived at their destination a short time later. Finding it unattended, most of them crossed over and took covering positions while three remained at the bridge. Working quickly and efficiently two technicians took plastic explosives out of their rucksacks, dropped into the water, secured a charge to each bridge pier, inserted a detonator in each and ran wires back to a shot ranger. Once all the charges were confirmed set, the designated shotblaster who had positioned himself about twenty paces from the bridge turned on the tagger and ranger, checked the wireless connection between them and shouted out loudly, 'Clear the area!' He tapped his blast card on the ranger then stepped back ten paces to join the others who were lying pressed close to the ground hands covering their head, entered a pin number into the tagger, started a countdown, '5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Blast!' at which point he pressed both fire keys on the tagger.

Several seconds later, all the debris having plummeted back to earth, the whole team rose to their feet to view the result. "What happened to the old plunger?" said Greenfield.

"I know," said the shotblaster, "I prefer the old way too; much more satisfying than just tapping on a screen."

Just at that moment the quiet whump of a distant explosion was heard followed by a rising column of smoke far to the north, signalling the demise of the pedestrian bridge. "Well that should spoil their party," said Greenfield then called Constance.

"Con. You can send the contractor to install the security system at the bridge."

"So now will you believe me?" said Constance. "You know, I wonder if Pike told our dear friend, the Cowboy, about all this beforehand. He warned us to expect more of the same, didn't he?"

"Maybe, but I don't see how it could have made any difference."

"Well I think we have to assume they're working together from now on," said Constance. "We can't afford to consider it any other way."

Chapter 8 - The Blockade

An uneasy calm had settled in by early spring: all the routes of easiest direct access to Greenfield's farm had been cut off and Greenfield was conducting daily patrols, in any case Pike didn't have enough troops to mount further action for now; apart from the four recent casualties who were detained in Forket awaiting trial they were being kept busy around Marvod. Not only that but it was expensive to keep diverting the migrants to the farm out of season. Before long summer would be upon them and most of the focus would have to be on the rape harvest.

Pike and Bos were accompanying Ivor and Barton on a crop inspection. Ivor and Barton had done a random check late the day before and had been concerned to find that much of the rape foliage in every field they checked was again blighted by black spot. They had reported to Bos who had told them to accompany him and Pike first thing in the morning. Ivor stopped the vehicle and all four got out entering the nearest adjacent field.

"You see, Mr Pike," said Ivor bending down, plucking a young plant out

of the ground and showing it to Pike. "We've got black spot again."

"But we've already sprayed twice," said Bos with surprise. "This must be Greenfield's work," he continued venomously. "He's poisoned our crop!"

"How could he poison the whole crop?" said Ivor shaking his head. "This is the risk we take if we don't rotate crops, Mr Pike. The previous crop debris infects the new."

"But we already dusted," said Bos forcefully.

"The chemicals have helped prevent a complete wipe out at least," said Ivor, "but I reckon we'll be down about twenty per cent on yield again."

"What a load of crap, Boss. This was Greenfield, I know it. We need to pay him back." Pike regarded Bos blankly followed by Ivor then without saying a word got back into the car.

Pike sat in his study with the door shut, sipping another cup of coffee and contemplated his options. He knew Ivor was right, even though he had already told Bos to go ahead with a retaliatory strike on Greenfield, but he wanted to keep the pressure on all the wheat farmers; he needed a broader attack front. He thought through the whole wheat sale process searching for a weak point: all the wheat from the farms around Forket ended up at the storage elevator and bunkers at Forket South train station from where freight trains collected the grain, most going to a massive grain elevator at the southern end of Lake Cordiomar, the rest to other storage facilities to the north and west. At the Lake Cordiomar reception facility, some was transferred by conveyor belt to a large modern mill located just to the north in which the wheat was processed into a variety of products for local consumption, predominantly flour, but the majority was exported from the adjacent wharf situated on a wide navigable channel leading to the ocean. The current mill was on the site of a string of earlier water-powered flour mills dating back hundreds of years whose owners had banded together as a collective to build the original wharf. But when the mills fell into disrepair many years ago the land had been bought by a new owner who sold the wharf, demolished the mills and built the much larger mill. The new owner of the wharf had subsequently repaired and substantially lengthened it then sold off most of the adjoining land on which various new buildings had since been erected, including the grain elevator, a rape processing facility, and numerous other export businesses besides. His own rapeseed, along with that from most of the farms around Marvod, was still sent by rail from

Marvod to the same grain elevator as the wheat then transferred via a separate conveyor belt to an adjacent rape processing facility; in spite of the Alliance's tariffs, this was still cheaper for him than sending it to other processors further away.

One of the outcomes of the Cowboy's recent dabbling in oil production had been to land a twenty five per cent stake in the rape processing facility and similar in the adjacent wharf, giving him the ability to influence major decisions at shareholder meetings. The Cowboy's first action, in conjunction with a few like-minded investors such as Pyklit, had been to ensure that rapeseed oil from the processing facility was mixed in bulk tankers at the wharf with no questions asked about source, paperwork suitably amended, then transported to a friendly fuel distributor to blend biodiesel. He had also not long after pushed through a wharf upgrade such that it could accept large tankers. He had remained in regular contact with the Cowboy since his mishap at the rodeo—He had brushed this off as an unavoidable part of men's games, and in any case, as he told the Cowboy, he wasn't really naturally suited to rural entertainment, he was at heart a town boy, more at home in the ring: boxing, wrestling and other such sports—in regular contact until a few months ago at least when the Cowboy had decided to run for mayor. But he knew the Cowboy had a long memory for those who rejected his proposals or had the temerity to disagree with him, like Greenfield had, so he decided to call him.

"Mr Cowboy," said Pike.

"Pike? Gosh, haven't heard from you for a while. How the devil are you?"

"Fine, thank you. How's your campaign going?"

"Cakewalk. Good as over. I've learnt how to say a whole lot about nothing just to keep those journalist hacks off my back. New skill I've developed. But I'm beginning to see what you meant. I wish we had the same control over the press here as you do."

"Well, you could try passing a law that allows you to control journalist accreditation on grounds of your choosing: national security, immigration status, party affiliation, sexual orientation, tattoos, fake gender, you can make anything up really. It worked for me."

"That's very interesting, Pike. Good advice. I may need to talk to you more about that later. After I'm mayor. But I presume that's not why you

called. How can I help?"

"I have a proposal for you."

"O.K., fire away."

"As you know, our mutual friend, Greenfield—"

"Oh him. Almost forgotten about him."

"Failed to have my trial stopped—"

"Oh yes, your trial. Ridiculous that was. What a farce! The nerve ... You got a suspended sentence, didn't you?" said the Cowboy chortling. "And fines? I assume you didn't pay them."

"Of course not."

"And he's still blocking the return to you of your family land as well, isn't he? You know, I've a good mind to come over there and bang a few heads together!"

"I think we can hurt Greenfield and his friends just as much without you needing to do that, Mr Cowboy. Without any need for boots on the ground at all, actually."

"Really? Go on."

"Harvest is coming up in a couple of months. Most of their wheat goes to Port Cordiomar. The facilities you partly own ..."

"O.K. ..."

"If you were to increase your holding. And I was able to convince some of the other shareholders, like Anomia, to use their shareholder vote. We could at the last moment prohibit receipt and export of wheat. Then the wheat farmers would be forced at short notice to revert to grain trucks to transport to the mill. And export from elsewhere. All at significantly greater cost." Pike waited a few seconds for a response, none forthcoming he went on. "I can't buy any shares in those firms myself, of course. The sanctions ... but you could."

"I see. I'd be more than happy to help, Pike, but that's not going to be cheap. We would need to come to come to some suitable arrangement."

"I agree, but let's talk about that later. This needs to happen quickly."

Chapter 9 - Tit for Tat

By a few weeks into spring all Greenfield's spring crops had been sown

and he was touring the farm on motorbike with Nadia inspecting them. They started in the north-eastern corner of the farm close to Bogrich River, Mitson and Rev doing likewise in the south-east. Greenfield had parked his bike while he recorded some measurements and notes on a sample area of sugar beet: plant height, leaf area, growth stage on the Feekes scale, Nadia doing the same in the adjacent wheat field which had been planted last autumn and was now growing strongly after its winter dormancy. He was walking over to meet her and compare results from earlier fields when the hum of a light plane became apparent over the gentle noise of the westerly wind rustling through the newly formed crops and the leaves of the bushes lining the boundary trenches. Greenfield ignored it assuming Pike was doing some work on the other side of Bogrich River, but the sound became progressively louder until just as he reached Nadia the plane roared overhead at tree level, a flash of red and blue, forcing them both to duck involuntarily, followed almost immediately afterwards by a brief stinging light hail.

"What the hell was that?" said Nadia.

As they both slowly stood up Greenfield noticed some black detritus dusting Nadia's hair, reached over to take a piece and held it out to her. "Fishy!" she said with a confused expression at first after spinning it between her thumb and finger and sniffing it, which then slowly changed to one of recognition. "It must be a piece of ergot. Pike's trying to contaminate our wheat!"

"Call Mitson and warn him," said Greenfield. "I'll call Constance and tell her to get the plane out here as soon as possible."

Constance called back as Pike's plane flew past again, its livery clearly visible this time, but in the opposite direction and slightly further to the west. She told him that the pilot, Bartel's brother, had been spraying fungicide on Anomia's farm but would be there shortly. Greenfield and Nadia scanned the horizon to the north-west from where the plane would likely come and after twenty seconds Nadia pointed to a flash of light, sun glinting off an aircraft fuselage in the distance. The plane banked to intercept Pike's then flew alongside it just beyond its wingtip as they both came past, its contrasting yellow and blue colours now apparent, Bartel's brother gesturing vigorously to the other pilot who appeared to be ignoring him. They watched the planes disappear to the south, then one minute

later both planes reappeared, the yellow and blue just above and ahead of the other with spray coming from its booms and covering the other's cockpit. The trailing plane suddenly broke off to the east just before it reached them tailed closely by the leader. A couple of minutes later the yellow and blue plane returned, the pilot waving to Greenfield and Nadia who both smiled broadly and waved back demonstratively in appreciation, the pilot then heading back to the airfield.

Bos ushered the journalist from the Gazette to the customary visitor seat in Pike's chambers at the opposite end of the long mahogany refectory table before taking guard at the door. The hastily arranged interview had come about after the pilot had given an account of his only partially successful mission; Pike had immediately called the Gazette and arranged for a journalist to visit him in his chambers later that day. Pike started by denying what he termed 'libellous accusations', that the plane had been flying over Greenfield's farm dropping material, and stated that in fact it was merely conducting a survey. He explained that the tenant farmers had reported to him a strong fishy smell and many had developed severe coughs and flu symptoms, both likely due to spores blown eastwards due to the prevailing spring winds. As Greenfield could not be trusted to report fully and honestly and out of a concern for public health, he had commissioned his own low level aerial photography under the terms of his agreement with the farmers. A detailed report was being prepared and would be made available free of charge to the Marvod town council in due course, from which he provided one photo, whose source the journalist knew not to dare to question. However, continued Pike, as suspected preliminary indications were that Greenfield's wheat crop was heavily contaminated with ergot. Unfortunately time and budget constraints had meant only a partial survey could be performed, he said, but it was likely the whole of Greenfield's crop was infected, so until a detailed inspection was conducted he recommended no-one buy any wheat products from the Cordiomar mill.

The interview was published in the paper the following morning, and while it was still simmering on wheat farmers' breakfast tables, Pike visited Pyklit's farmhouse unannounced to proceed with the next phase of his plan. He arrived mid-morning with his security team and walked straight

through the front door into Pyklit's office and stood at his desk, Bos shutting the door behind him and standing guard outside. "Mr Pike!" said Pyklit in surprise, "I wasn't expecting you, was I?" rummaging through some scattered sheets of paper on his desk.

"Friends don't need an invite, do they?" said Pike.

"No, of course not, but—"

"Good. I thought not. I just wanted to take you up on your kind offer."

"What offer?" said Pyklit uncertainly.

"Your offer to prove your friendship to me, what else? Well I have come up with an ideal way for you to do that," said Pike sitting down. "I have some waste material that needs suitable processing. And I thought rather than taking up valuable space in Marvod tip what better place than Greenfield's farm. Of course, I can't get to Greenfield's farm down the main road because of the road block. So I'll be bringing some rubbish trucks across your farm in the next few days. And using your bridge over the Bogrich River. I'll need to temporarily remove a short section of your fence, of course. But it'll be reinstated."

Pyklit sat in silence with mouth slightly ajar and bewildered expression on his face for several seconds, then managed to mouth the word 'Sure'.

"Good. That's settled. I told Bos you were a good neighbour, didn't I Bos," said Pike turning to Bos who nodded.

"Actually, Mr Pike, as you're here ... There is something I've been wanting to tell you. I've been waiting for the right time. Something you should know concerning some of your employees, he said quietly. "But it's delicate. Very private," he whispered looking up at the door and motioning at it with his head.

"Bos!" shouted Pike. Bos opened the door and came in. "Take one of Pyklit's men and inspect the bridge to make sure it will take the truck loads. I still have a few details to sort out with Pyklit here." Bos nodded and left.

Pyklit waited until he heard the front door shut. "Have you heard of Kitty's?" he said unsurely.

"Kitty's?" said Pike reflectively. "Yes. It's a club along the main road to Minar, not far from your farm. Bos tells me the truck drivers use it for entertainment. Why?"

"Is it one of yours?"

"No."

"No, I didn't think it was. Well I overheard our farmworkers a few weeks back talking about it. That truck driver that was found in the swamps recently, they were whispering he had been seen him in the bar in Kitty's arguing with Si the night before. Something about a young girl that he liked in the back room, as they call it, that had suddenly disappeared and none of the other girls would speak about it. He was making a big fuss in the bar one day then he ended up dead the next, and they were saying Bos and his brothers run the club. There were other disappearances that were linked to the club as well and it wouldn't be long until outsiders, you know like the feds, started taking an interest." Pike sat silently. "Anyway, I thought you should know, Mr Pike."

Pike thought over the news for several seconds. In some ways it didn't surprise him: Bos had seemed less focussed on the farm than he used to be, spending more time on the phone talking to his brothers in farm season and more in Marvod out; it would certainly explain some of the recent failures. He had long suspected Bos was the one responsible for divulging details of his deal with the tenant farmers. His private investigations had come up inconclusive but, if it was true, and he had no reason to doubt it, Bos had finally crossed the line. He rose without speaking and left the study. When he got back to the farmhouse he called Zakulis and got a name of a discreet Minar P.I., someone that Bos wouldn't know, and arranged a clandestine meeting.

Greenfield was sitting in his study reviewing the invoice from Forket Aerial Application keeping an occasional eye on the security cameras: two days flying time at eight hours per day at the pre-agreed hourly rate; it all seemed OK and he authorised payment. After he had arrived back at the farmhouse following the bombing incident of three days ago, he had held a farm meeting with the others. Feelings were running high: Nadia, supported by Mitson and Rev, said they needed to retaliate in kind, but Constance had argued the ergot contamination was unlikely to be effective anyway. They had discussed the risk to the crops and decided that as a precaution they had better spray the affected wheat fields with fungicide. He had called Bartel's brother's crop dusting company and arranged for him to return when he had finished at Anomia's property. But when the next morning Pike's interview was published in the Gazette, as a precaution

Greenfield had immediately decided to call an independent crop health inspector based in Forket and asked them to conduct a crop inspection on the ground as well. Greenfield was reviewing an email from them recommending they attend one week after the spray when an alarm sounded. He glanced at the monitors and saw a flashing indicator at one of the motion detectors along the northern boundary they had installed recently after Constance had reminded him Pike could easily attack from Pyklit's land, 'He is Pike's *lapdog* after all,' she had said. There were no cameras in the immediate vicinity, it having been much cheaper to install them at wider intervals than the motion detectors, so he panned the nearest camera to the east in its direction but could see nothing through the undergrowth. He checked the G.P.S. coordinates of all the workers on the farm and saw that no-one was located there, but Rev was not far away with Mitson doing some track maintenance.

"Rev. Greenfield. Come back."

"Rev. Over."

"Can you and Mitson check out one of the motion detectors. Over."

"Which one? Over."

"I've sent the coordinates. Over."

"Roger. Received. Over."

Less than two minutes later Greenfield received a call from Revedir. "Greenfield," he said in a hushed voice, "there's a huge mound of steaming, stinking rubbish covering the track. And I can hear a truck nearby. Wait! Here it comes!" Greenfield could hear in the background the reverse beeping of an approaching vehicle, the crunch of greenery under tyres, followed by the distinctive mechanical grind as a rear tray was lifted, a long high pitched screech then a thud. "Can you see the driver?" said Mitson. "Looks like one of Pike's workers to me," a diesel engine was revved then got gradually quieter. "They're coming from the direction of Pyklit's farm, Greenfield. You need to get over here now!" said Rev.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," replied Greenfield. "Stay out of sight until then."

Greenfield took the keys for one of the trucks from a rack in the hall behind the front door then went to the equipment shed. He interrupted Nadia, who was in discussion with a group of farmworkers, telling her to get a loudhailer and attach a siren to the roof of the cab while he called the

Forket Police. He, Nadia and two of the farmworkers were soon on their way, arriving, siren blaring, at Revedir and Mitson's location about fifteen minutes later where they found them both standing in the middle of the track chatting, heaped rubbish strewn along the track behind them. Mitson walked up to the cab with his hands over his ears, Nadia turning off the siren.

"Where are they?" said Greenfield.

"They buggered off about ten minutes ago as soon as they heard your siren," said Mitson.

All four of them got down from the truck and joined the other two on the track quietly contemplating the new detrital landscape. "Does he expect us to just take this shit!" asserted Nadia earnestly, the others glancing sideways at her.

"Tomorrow, we'll borrow Feldland's bulldozer," said Greenfield after a long pause, "and return Pike's gift. " Then turning to Nadia, "I'll organise it with him. And we need to fortify the northern border, Nadia. Dig a trench along the length of it. I'll get the security guys back to install some tripwires as well."

"And the moral of the story is ...?" Greenfield waited for a reply, Olivia frowned and shook her head. "When is a kettle if it's hot?"

"Oh gawwd, again," said Olivia, rolling her eyes. "The more you rub it the faster," said Jorah brightly, joined unenthusiastically and asynchronously by Olivia.

"Exactly!" Greenfield confirmed. "I think you're starting to get the hang of it now, Joe," said Greenfield, "but, I'm very worried about your Mum," he said tickling Jorah who giggled madly and squirmed in his pyjamas, Constance shook her head. "O.K., bed time now for both of you."

"Awww, come on Dad! I'm almost eighteen now, I'm not a kid any more," moaned Olivia.

"I know, but you've got mock exams this week and you need to be fresh. Do you want to get into uni or not, madam?"

Greenfield re-joined Constance on the sofa about ten minutes later, after tucking Jorah into bed and ignoring the light coming from under Olivia's bedroom door as he walked past it. "This is getting really expensive, honey," said Constance leaning her head on his shoulder. "How much

longer can we afford to keep this up? It's O.K. for Pike. He's got all that extra income from his dodgy businesses in Marvod that he denies owning and the authorities do nothing about. We've got nothing apart from the farm!" she said her voice breaking.

"I know, but what's the alternative? Just give in to him? And you've seen Nadia and the others, how passionate they are. They would never forgive us if we didn't fight back."

Constance was quiet for a minute staring unfocussed at the opposite wall. "We keep up the pretence that everything's fine for Joe's sake, but he's nine now. He must hear things at school and I know he can sense something's wrong. And I don't think I can take it much longer," said Constance bursting into muffled sobs, hugging Greenfield round the neck.

Greenfield was silent for several seconds. "What are you going to do?" Constance eventually managed to get out in a broken whisper.

"I don't know. Nobody's died—"

"Are you kidding me?" said Constance suddenly letting go of Greenfield's neck and sitting upright facing him. "That's just pure luck! If the cops hadn't been wearing armoured vests there would have been, and what about when they came through the main gate? That could have turned out very differently if our friends hadn't turned up so quickly. "

"I know," said Greenfield melancholically. "I know."

"Bos!" shouted Pike.

Bos left his office and opened Pike's door, standing in the doorway.
"Yes, Boss."

"I need you to go and see Pyklit today. I've offered to lend him some equipment to bury the rubbish. At a very reasonable rate. Just calm him down. Remind him who his friends are. Standard drill."

"Sure thing, Boss."

"And I need to go to Marvod now. Send Armit over, he can drive me today."

Pike unlocked his chamber door after arriving at Temny's about an hour later. "Armit," he said, "Go and get our visitor from that car parked out front and escort him here."

Armit returned accompanied by a small wiry, balding man in nondescript shabby clothes, Pike telling Armit to take sentry position

outside the door.

"Let me remind you why I'm using your services," said Pike to his visitor after he had sat down, the man scanning the dimly lit corners of the room nervously. "Zakulis tells me you're discreet, and Bostultus and his brothers don't know you."

"As I told you before, Mr Pike," he said shifting uneasily in his chair, "I know of them and I'm sure they know of me, but we've never done business."

"No-one, except Armit and me, is to know you've been here. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely clear, Mr Pike."

"O.K., then tell me all about Kitty's."

An hour later the private investigator left the same way he had come in and as he had arrived, with the exception of an envelope bulging with cash he had placed in his inside jacket pocket, and vanished head down collar up into the morning drizzle.

"Armit, come in and sit down over here next to me," said Pike when Armit reappeared directing him with his right hand to a seat near him at the head of the table. "Armit, you've impressed me from the moment you joined us. You've done everything asked of you. Most important of all, you've been loyal," Pike paused while he examined Armit for a response, his gaze returned impassively.

"I know you've been working at Kitty's for Bostultus. That's OK," said Pike holding out his hand reassuringly as Armit frowned. "You report to Bos. You just followed instructions. The problem is, Armit, Bostultus has been doing things behind my back. Not showing me due respect. Now, as the boss, I can't have that, can I?" Armit shook his head. "There will soon come a time when I need you to step up. Take a more senior position in the organisation. You'll be suitably rewarded ... Your house, it's in the Levels, isn't it?" Armit nodded again. "Well it's about time you had a better one. There's a vacant one coming free in the Heights. How would you like that?" Armit smiled. "And your pay now, I'll double it. Are you up for it?"

"Yez, Bozz. When?"

"I'll let you know. Soon. In the meantime, keep doing whatever Bostultus asks you to do. But report back to me from now on. Understood?"

"Yez, Bozz."

"Can we trust any of the other migrants?"

"Yez, I tink so."

"How many?"

"About ten," said Armit holding up both his enormous hands, thick fingers spread.

"O.K. Tell them, discreetly, you have a special job for them. Very well paid. But you and they must keep it quiet. Don't mention my name. And don't speak to anyone else about it, understood?"

"Yez, Bozz."

"Now, here's a key to the gun safe. Keep it on you at all times. Make sure you're armed from now on. Keep it hidden from the others. Now go and get the accountant. He'll be waiting at the front door."

It was early summer and the wheat harvest was just getting underway on Greenfield's farm, the health inspector having weeks before given the crop a clean bill of health, no evidence of ergot contamination having been found. Greenfield turned off the harvester's engine and was about to get down from the cab to do another spot check of the wheat in the chaser bin when he heard his phone ring.

"Hi, Feldland."

"I've been trying to get you for ages! Left a message with Connie as well."

"Sorry. Had to fill in for Mitson," said Greenfield reaching behind for his shoulder-bag with his lunch inside. "I'm out and about."

"Out and about where?"

"On the harvester."

"You need to stop the harvest now!"

"What on earth for?"

"Have you not heard about the blockade?"

"No. What blockade?"

"At Port Cordiomar."

"Uh. What are you taking about?"

"They're refusing to take our wheat at Port Cordiomar! This morning's train is on its way back to Forket still fully loaded."

"What the hell's happened?"

"The Cowboy's taken control of the grain elevator and the wharf and he's

said no wheat will be accepted until all the sanctions and tariffs on Pike's rapeseed are removed. And get this. There's a rumour that the casting vote was with Anomia and he backed Pike!" There was silence for a few seconds. "I know, crazy, right? Now there's a jam-up and anyone without on-farm storage, like you and me, is going to have to delay harvest for a couple of days until the back-log at the storage facilities clears."

"What's everybody saying?"

"There's going to be an emergency meeting of the Alliance at six tonight in the town hall to discuss our response. I assume you will be there?"

"Of course."

Feldland was driving the car, Greenfield in the passenger seat, Constance and Mrs Feldland in the back. There was no talk; all four were looking in a different direction, each thinking about what they might say to Anomia, and how they would say it, when they arrived at his farmhouse.

The emergency Alliance meeting the previous evening had been brief, but raucous and animated; all the wheat farmers and their partners had attended, apart from Anomia who had wisely chosen to stay away, but his ears would have been burning. It was unanimously agreed to keep all the sanctions on Pike and impose higher fees on their own members until Port Cordiomar was re-opened to cover the additional cost of getting the grain to alternative more distant export facilities as well as the likely longer storage. Raine, whose brother was known to be a rail engineer, was asked to find out what could be done to prevent rail traffic from Marvod transiting through Forket to Port Cordiomar, Raine relaying his brother's recommendations to the gathering: the signals on the bypass line from Marvod to Port Cordiomar, where they passed through South Forket, should immediately be locked at stop; a notification should be sent to the Marvod Rail Operating Centre notifying them of the commencement of lengthy works knowing full well that the only alternative route, which bypassed Forket to the north, had already been blocked as part of the earlier sanctions; and bogus repair works to the line should be commenced, starting by parking a maintenance wagon on the track then every few days sending a team in gaudy orange high visibility clothing and safety helmets to stand in a group around a section of track for an hour, have a smoke and chat then depart. Bartel, whose own cousin did road

repair work for the council, was seen nodding knowingly and appreciatively. Pecker had been invited as a guest by Greenfield and at his request they agreed to send an emergency grain delivery by truck direct to the mill before they ran out of flour in Forket. Finally, it had been determined to send a delegation to Anomia, Greenfield and Feldland being chosen by show of hands, but Mrs Feldland demanded she also come, 'To make sure there is no mischief between you boys,' she had said and insisted Constance come with her, 'As peacemaker'.

"O.K., I'll do all the talking, as we agreed," said Feldland after he had stopped the car in Anomia's farmyard. "As long as you talk sense, *as we agreed*," Mrs Feldland retorted haughtily.

Feldland knocked on the door, which was opened by Mrs Anomia. She led the group through to the lounge where Anomia was seated waiting nervously. "Tea, anyone?" she said brightly, greeted by a round of 'no thanks'. "I'll have a Scotch though, if you've got anything decent, Anomia," said Greenfield sarcastically, Constance flashing reproof at him with her eyes.

Anomia got some glasses and handed them round, Mrs Feldland and Constance declining with a wave of their hand, then poured out an undersized shot in each, Greenfield shaking his head gently when he saw the cheap bourbon label but switched to a fake smile and 'thanks' when the bottle reached him.

"Thanks for agreeing to see us," said Feldland after Anomia's wife had brought tea and sat down. "It's always better to discuss these things in person, don't you agree?" Anomia nodded uneasily.

"I noticed you weren't at the emergency Alliance meeting last night, I assume you got the invite?" Anomia nodded again and sipped his bourbon without offering any explanation for his absence. "So I'll summarise for you what was agreed." Feldland then recounted all the motions that had been carried at the meeting, leaving the blocking of the Marvod rail line until last but omitting details of the actions that had been taken.

"You can't do that!" said Anomia. "Mr Pike will be furious!"

"It's gone way past the point where we care about Pike's mood," said Feldland. "No, we've been forced into this by Pike's actions in blocking Port Cordiomar."

"That was the Cowboy, not Mr Pike," Anomia insisted angrily.

"At Pike's behest, no doubt! Why else would it be linked by the Cowboy to the Alliance's sanctions and tariffs? Anyway, I digress. We heard from the Port shareholders in the Alliance that you cast your lot in with the Cowboy, in spite of the fact that you're going to be affected just as much as the rest of us! Do you really like Pike that much?" said Feldland bemusedly, then winced as his wife kicked his shin under the table. "So to get to where you come in: if you were to sell your stake in the Port facilities to another Alliance member, I am sure the Marvod rail line repairs could be expedited. It doesn't really matter who you sell to, you can choose if you want, but I was nominated."

"They can just send their rapeseed somewhere else," said Anomia defiantly.

"That's true, just as we can send our wheat elsewhere. But you know as well as I do, that will cost Pike a lot more until those other ports that aren't off limits because of the sanctions are upgraded, if ever. And who knows, the sanctions could be extended to those ports as well, in time. And I must also inform you that your ongoing membership of the Alliance is going to be re-assessed "

"I'll need to think about it," said Anomia.

"Well, let us know as soon as Pike has agreed," said Greenfield getting up and downing his bourbon, wincing, then headed for the door.

"And don't take too long to think about it," said Feldland rising along with his wife and Constance.

"How'd I do?" Feldland asked his wife after he sat down in the passenger seat, seeking validation.

"Pretty well, mostly, but only because Constance and I were there," she said snootily then started the ignition.

"So what do you want me to do, Mr Pike?" said Anomia during breakfast the following morning after briefing Pike on yesterday's meeting.

"Nothing for now. I'll tell you when I'm ready," said Pike and hung up. Pike realised there were a lot of phone calls he needed to make: the Mayor, he'd get someone in the council to talk to all the ports, the other members of his Association, the Cowboy—

Pike's thoughts were interrupted by Ivor running through the front door, "Drones! Lots of them!" Ivor shouted breathlessly.

Pike and Bos turned to each other, then Bos got up and ran out of the kitchen, followed at a more leisurely pace by Pike. By the time Pike had got to the front door, Bos was already standing in the middle of the yard scanning the sky alongside Ivor, both holding a hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the sun, the buzz of multiple drone blades clearly discernible. After a few seconds, Ivor pointed directly overhead then ran across to the cover of the equipment shed leaving Bos by himself. Almost immediately a bag landed on Bos's head exploding on impact, its contents spilling over his shoulders, others landing with a splat around him spattering a chocolate tinted shower accompanied by a strong smell of faeces dispersing through the warm summer air.

Bos wiped the effluent out of his eyes with one hand and with the other pulled his semi-automatic from his shoulder holster and fired two rapid bursts at the offending drone which at first backed off and dodged to one side until the magazine was empty then defiantly returned closer than its former position directly over Bos's head, hovering for several seconds before flying off with the others in formation.

"Ewww!" said Gemariah joining Pike in the front doorway. "What's that smell?"

"Holy fuck, Bro! What happened to you?" said Si who ran out of the barn across to him.

"Fucking Greenfield! I'm going to kill him!" said Bos furiously.

"Get this mess cleaned up, Bostultus," said Pike then turned and went back inside.

Chapter 10 - Mutiny

Pike was sitting in his study on a balmy evening. It was late summer, the harvest was almost complete and he was reflecting on the events over summer as he waited for Bos to come in from the fields for a meeting.

After the recently described drone incident, Bos had hurriedly washed himself off and changed, burst into his study and still in a rage demanded they immediately attack Greenfield, an all-out assault. Gemariah was with him at the time spraying the room with cheap perfume, she was adamant it must be done in every room in the farmhouse because of the still lingering

odour, then insisted she also apply copious amounts to Bos's clothes. After Gemariah left, he had told Bos now was not the right time, they needed all their workers for the harvest, but promised once the harvest was over they would get proper revenge. In the meantime, more as a distraction, he had authorised Bos to procure a large number of drones and respond in kind.

Each night thereafter they had to suffer the indignity of Greenfield's bombing raids, apart from Gemariah, who after a few days of this had come to him and said in disgust she couldn't stay on the farm any longer, 'the horrible smell!' She would stay in her apartment in Marvod for the next few weeks then leave early for the summer fashion season, stay with Kelly for a while, 'until all this mess was over', as she put it. He had reluctantly agreed. While they waited for the new drones Bos and his brothers used the opportunity for target practice, but following a couple of kills, Greenfield's drones started flying at higher elevation, out of range, although this didn't stop them from trying.

When their drones were finally delivered, about one week later, Bos had two of the migrants fill up plastic bags at the cesspit, then after some trial and error, including accidentally crashing a fully loaded drone into the barn, they worked out how to pilot them. From then on each day after the farm work was completed a flight of drones would pass each other travelling in opposite directions in the twilight.

At around this time, he finally heard back from Mayor Grayson: the other storage facilities were almost full, there were no other ports that could in the short term accommodate the additional load. Until the Cowboy could get the other ports upgraded he had no choice but to give in to the Alliance's demands and he had told Anomia to sell his shares. After the Alliance members had regained majority control, they had re-opened Cordiomar elevator and port to wheat and completed the bogus repairs on the line to Marvod, but they had imposed additional tariffs on rapeseed, saying they were associated with the costs of cleaning all the storage and handling facilities after every load of rapeseed to remove G.M. contamination, a new customer-driven requirement they had informed him. What utter rubbish! But what could he do? Until the other port upgrades were completed it had to be borne, grudgingly.

While the summer harvest progressed, he had continued gathering information from his Minar P.I. and accountant about all of Bos's

businesses, gradually building a picture of a substantial operation, rivalling his own in size but with none of the profits flowing to him. It was clear to him now that not only had Bos abused the protective umbrella he had provided for so many years, but he was now a threat to him as well and he would have to act soon to eliminate that threat. He knew his best opportunity would be towards the end of harvest, while all the workers were still on the farm. He had met again with Armit in Marvod last night where he gave him instructions, getting Armit to repeat everything back to him as a precaution.

Just then there was a knock at the study door and it was opened. "You wanted to see me, Boss?"

"Yes, I did. Come in, Bostultus," Bos sat opposite Pike. "Thanks for stopping by. It's been a long day and I know you want to get freshened up before dinner's delivered. So I'll be brief. If you recall, I promised you weeks ago, after the 'shit bombing'—I think that's what you called it—started, that we would take the offensive back to Greenfield. After the harvest. And it's almost that time now. So I was wondering if you'd given any thought to how we should proceed."

"Me?" said Bos taken aback. "You do all the planning, Boss. I hadn't really prepared anything."

"But you've worked for me long enough now. Think of it as a test. What do you think I should do?"

"I don't know," said Bos rubbing his chin and staring at the wall for several seconds.

"Take your time. There's no rush," said Pike good naturedly.

"We could try a naval assault," said Bos after a long pause. "We haven't tried that yet. Yeah! I bet the fucker wouldn't be expecting that."

"No, he wouldn't. Interesting, I like the sound of that, Bostultus. Leave it with me. I'll let you know."

Bos waited for a few seconds then was half-way through rising assuming the meeting was over. "Oh, I almost forgot," said Pike. "There was another thing I wanted to talk to you about," Bos slowly sat back down in his chair.

"Armit has been with us for—how long now?" said Pike.

"I don't know. Three, four years, maybe," said Bos hesitantly.

"Nine years, actually," said Pike before pausing. "I feel he's been neglected a bit. And you just proved that. He just gets on with the job."

Never complains. I think he deserves more. What do you think?"

"I hadn't given it much thought, we don't normally—"

"Well I have and it's time he was promoted. I want him to take a role as your deputy. With that will come a pay rise and a move to a better apartment. Away from all the other migrants. What do you say to that?"

"Well I suppose ... nine years, eh! ..."

"Good. That's agreed. And I thought as his manager it would be better coming from you. So I've invited him here. You can tell him personally. Come in, Armit," he added more loudly. Armit entered and left the door slightly ajar. "Stand over there, would you, Armit. Where we can both see you."

"So, Bostultus, you had something to tell Armit?"

"Yeah, Armit," he said turning towards him. "I think you've been really great. Real good job. Yeah. Well done," said Bos coughing into his hand, Armit smiling broadly keeping his gaze directed at Pike.

"And ..." said Pike.

"And ... I want to promote you to Departee Manager." Armit's smile broadened sufficiently to expose two rows of yellowing teeth.

"Very nicely done, Bostultus," said Pike slowly swivelling from Bos to Armit and back to Bos.

"Is that it?" said Bos turning back to Pike.

"No," said Pike, "there *was* something else," he said with a small nod at Armit, who dropped his smile and drew his gun from the back of his pants then stepped forward shouting something incomprehensible and held it to the back of Bos's head. Bos's hand started towards his shoulder holster but withdrew when he saw out of the corner of his eye two armed migrants enter the room, their weapon trained on him.

"What's this about, Pike?" said Bos calmly, holding both hands above his head.

"That's three to one, Bostultus. I prefer those odds, don't you? Stand up! Frisk him," said Pike to one of the migrants. Bos's pistol was taken from his shoulder holster, his radio from his hip and phone from his pocket. "Now, sit! You can put your hands down now. 'What's this about?', you asked. Well why don't you start by telling me about Kitty's," said Pike smiling weakly.

A brief look of surprise flashed across Bos's face before the impassivity

returned. "Kilty's?" he said feigning puzzlement.

"Kitty's. You know, the whore house you've been running with your brothers up near Minar. Where you take all the wayward migrants. That's the place, isn't it, Armit?"

"Yez. Dat ze one," said Armit.

"Oh, Kitty's! I was going to tell—"

Pike held up his hand demonstratively. "First you abuse my trust and now you insult my intelligence! And that's not the only place is it!" shouted Pike picking up a sheet of paper and hurling it across the table then got up from his chair and paced back and forth slowly behind his desk, remaining silent for several seconds. "We used to have a good relationship, didn't we? I financed the operations. You did all the work I asked that needed to be done. We shared the profits. A partnership. But we're not on the same page any more. So this is where we part ways."

Bos lunged forward at Pike as he passed closest to him, but Pike stepped back dexterously, Armit simultaneously stepping forward and thumping Bos on the head with his gun. Bos, stunned, lay slumped on the desk for a few seconds, then slipped back into his chair and held his head with one hand, blood seeping between his fingers down his left cheek.

"You see, Bostultus," said Pike. "Might is always right." Pike sat back down in his chair facing Bos.

"I've been loyal to you for all these years. Put up with your *shit* for all these years. And this is how you thank me?" said Bos vehemently, taking his hand off his head and viewing his bloody fingers. "Yes. It wasn't hard to fool you about Kitty's. Nor all the other schemes I've got running. In fact, my operations are probably bigger than yours by now. I should have taken over years ago. I'm wondering why I don't take over this farm now," said Bos rising to his feet slightly groggily and wincing, the other three stepping towards him in unison.

"You seem to be forgetting your situation," said Pike, one of the migrants forcing Bos by his shoulder back into his chair. "Do you really think I didn't know about the other farms? The ones you took over after starting as security consultant? You got too greedy, Bostultus. That was your biggest mistake. Well today's your last day on my farm. But I'm feeling generous. Call it an acknowledgment of your years of service. You can keep Kitty's. But I get all the rest. White's, the hotel, the bar, and so on. By

the way, some of my associates are taking them over as we speak. I should be getting a call any minute now." Bos's phone started ringing. "And you as well, I see," he sniggered.

"You'll regret this, Pike."

"Armit, tie him up. Throw him and all his stuff in the back of one of the trucks then dump the whole sorry lot at Kitty's."

"You don't scare me, Pike. I'll be back!" said Bos as a hood was slipped over his head and Armit tied his hands together behind his back.

Pike sat back with a deep sigh after Bos was bundled out of his study, a satisfied look on his face. First phase complete, he thought to himself. He knew he wouldn't have long to wait, he could rely on the affront to Bos's gutter dignity, his rage and innate aggression, once he had met with his brothers they would feed off each other, it would lead to quick ill-thought-out retaliation and he would be ready.

An hour before dawn the following day Pike was woken by the expected call from Iskaz with a relayed message from the unmarked patrol car watching Kitty's: they were on their way.

Bos's minibus came to a stop before reaching the farm gate. Two heavily armed men in camouflage, black balaclava and night vision goggles jumped from the rear door and ran crouching through the undergrowth one on both sides of the road. On reaching the gate they disabled the two cameras and placed small explosive charges on the gate's hinges, moved away several paces and crouched with back turned until the gate was blown sideways onto the ground. One of them spoke into his radio and a small truck drove past the driveway then reversed into it, the same man taking a hook connected by chain to its towbar and attaching it to the gate, the truck pulling the gate out of the way. The minibus then came forward, both men jumping into the open side door when it stopped alongside them and remained standing on its threshold as it sped along the entrance road.

After the minibus had been travelling for less than a minute it entered a small copse, dense undergrowth on both sides. A few seconds later a truck suddenly rolled forward from the side of the road ahead of them, the front passenger shouting out a warning. The truck hit a rock placed on the far side of the road and came to an abrupt halt blocking it, the bus driver slamming on his brakes. Two bright lights were instantly turned on in the trees shining into the windows blinding all inside and weapons immediately

opened fire into the vehicle from both sides of the road, firing in bursts for several seconds. When no further movement could be perceived inside the minibus, a voice in the darkness shouted out, 'Cease Fire!'

A brief calm descended over the scene until a muffled command was shouted and two figures rose from the undergrowth and cautiously crept forward toward the rear of the bus, their weapon trained on the vehicle. One threw open the rear door and the other fired a burst into it before both entered the vehicle checking the passengers one by one for signs of life, one eventually shouting out 'Clear!' What appeared to be the leader then stepped forward, one of the lights casting a long shadow over the vehicle as he appeared out of the gloom. He entered the bus and inspected the identity of each victim, stripping balaclavas from faces and turning bodies over on their back where required, then exited the vehicle and called Pike to report.

"Did you find Bos's body, Captain?"

"No, Mr Pike. His brothers neither."

"Damn! They must have been in the bus. Search the whole area immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"How many dead?"

All twelve, sir."

"Have the guard at the farmhouse doubled," said Pike who hung up brusquely after the order had been confirmed and called Iskaz on speed dial, telling him that Bos and his brothers had got away and instructing him to send out an A.P.B. "Any sign of movement at my daughters' safe house ... or Armit's?" he added as an afterthought glancing at Armit who was standing alongside him in what had been Bos's office.

"No, nothing," said Iskaz.

"Tell them to keep alert. Let me know the moment anything happens," he hung up and continued to Armit, "You'll need to take some men and—"

Hearing a noise outside the window, he stopped mid-sentence and directed Armit with hand movements to check. Armit drew his gun with one hand and pulled the blind gently to one side with the other, surreptitiously peeking behind it, faint light wisping over his face. It had grown noticeably brighter in the last few minutes, civil twilight was advancing and Bos had less than twenty minutes of night-time cover left

before dawn proper. "Juz Bozo Security, Bozz," said Armit letting the blind drop. "Many dead tonart, Bozz," he continued sadly. "Some frenz."

"There was nothing we could do about it, Armit," said Pike unapologetically. "We agreed we couldn't warn them. If anyone else apart from your family had been missing when Bos went to the apartments it would have spooked him. But I'll compensate the families, like I said I would. You can rely on me. Anyway, look on the bright side. We can bring in more migrants now to replace them. Maybe some from your home town?"

Pike and Armit stood in silence for several minutes waiting for news, the daylight escaping into the room gradually getting brighter, until there was a crunching of footsteps in the farmyard, followed by a greeting and a knock at the front door.

Armit went to answer and came back accompanied by another man, Armit showing him into his office.

"Still no sign, Captain?" said Pike.

"No, sir. Are you sure he was on the bus?"

"I know him. He would have led the raid."

"Well, sir, he could have gone anywhere from the copse under cover of darkness: the marshes, the lake, the river ... He knows this place better than we do. If I was him, I'd find a bolt-hole, lie low until night then regroup somewhere with the survivors."

"The police are watching Kitty's. If he goes there we'll know about it straight away." The Captain nodded thoughtfully. "So, Captain. How did it go?"

"No problems, sir," he said confidently. "All my men are ex army. We've done this many times before."

"As soon as you've eliminated Bos and both his brothers, Captain, Bozo Security will get the security contract, but not a moment before. Just like we discussed. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely."

"Find them. As soon as possible."

Bos climbed noiselessly up the jetty ladder in the moonless early morning light and peered over the wharf planks waiting for several seconds as he searched for any movement, the enveloping silence broken only by

the gentle honking of an echelon of migrating geese flying low overhead following the line of the river behind him. Seeing the way ahead clear he motioned to Si in the dinghy below him to follow then ran crouching, pistol drawn, to one side of the full height glass window of his office at Kitty's. He waited dripping onto the wooden planks of the wharf for Si to join him then glanced inside. In the dim light he could make out a body lying asleep on a mattress on the floor under a thin duvet cover, face not visible, but after a few seconds the unmistakable sounds of his brother snoring wafted through the open louvres above the window. He knocked on the window gently with the barrel of his pistol once, then again when there was no reaction, still nothing, so he glided over to the glass door and tried the handle, gently lowering it and entering the room, the burglar alarm starting to beep rapidly. He slipped over to the recumbent figure removing his balaclava as he went throwing it to one side and placed his pistol on the floor, simultaneously clamping one hand over the snoring mouth and the other over his right wrist saying, "It's Bos." One sleeping eye opened, terrified at first, but once he had been recognised he released his grip and went over to the alarm panel on the wall and typed in his P.I.N., identifying himself to a worried call from the other side of the door, opening it and talking to someone in the corridor.

"Where the hell have you guys been?" said his younger brother.

"Get us some dry clothes and towels first, will you," said Si shutting the door behind him.

Bos's brother left the room and came back a minute or so later with an assorted jumble, dropping it on the floor at the feet of Bos and Si. "We had no means of contacting you", started Bos as he undressed. "All our electronics got wet. After my last message, our only way out of the copse was to crawl through drainage ditches. We headed roughly east. We knew they'd expect us to head south to the marshes or west to the tenant farmers. We made it by daylight to that disused barn on the neighbour's property. We hid out there under the floor until nightfall. Then last night we made our way to Marvod River, stole a boat ..."

"Did anyone else make it out?"

"Has no-one else called in?" said Bos, his brother shaking his head.

"I doubt it," said Si. "We only made it out ourselves because we were door-hanging."

"They must be watching this place," said Bos as he pulled on some tracksuit bottoms.

"They are. We spotted a car parked down the road that's been there for two days and not moved."

Bos and Si finished changing. "What are we going to do?" said Bos's young brother. "We can't stay holed up in here forever!"

"I've been thinking about nothing else for the last twenty four hours. We could escape down the river. We've got plenty of money stashed away safely. Make a start somewhere else. But where would we go? No, this is *our town*. I say we stay here and fight."

"Me too," said Si. "But what about Pike?"

Bos rubbed his head with a towel. "How many others have we got here?"

"Five, who can handle guns."

"O.K., post guards front and back. Then me and Si need to get some shut eye. We haven't slept much for the last two days. Take two mattresses off of the girls will you, Kid? We'll sleep in here."

At sunset, Bos's young brother took Bos and Si on a tour of their defences, checking the perimeter of Kitty's from several discreet vantage points. They saw the car still parked in the distance, but no others, if there was anyone else out there they were hidden in the shadows beyond the road. "Si, pick one of the girls to make dinner for us will you," said Bos after returning to the office. "I'm starving. And Kid, go and get two burner phones out of the safe for me and Si, then gather everybody's phones and program all the numbers in."

Bos stood at the window looking out over the river flowing silently by contemplating their situation, Si re-joining him a few minutes later followed by his kid brother another ten minutes on with two phones.

"O.K. Let's assess our situation," said Bos, the three of them coming face to face stood in a tight circle. "There's eight of us, right?" Bos's young brother nodded. "Guns and ammo?"

"Plenty," said the Kid. "And we could re-supply by boat. Where's Armit?"

"Forget him," said Bos. "He's gone over to Pike with two of the migrants as well."

"Can we get any of the other migrants in the flats?" said Si.

"With difficulty," said Bos. "They'll be watching there. We could probably sneak in. But how to get them out without being noticed? And

can we trust them anymore anyway?"

"What about Pike?"

"We know he's using that new security firm," said Bos. "Maybe eight to ten of them, I'm not sure."

"Marvod Police as well," said the Kid. "They won't answer my calls."

"Yeah, that's the biggest problem, I think. They seem to have sided with Pike. I don't know what Pike's promised our friends there, but I agree we can't rely on them."

"Could Pike use any of the migrants?"

"After that massacre I doubt many will be volunteering."

"What about the girls, the families?"

"That's an advantage for us for sure. Unlikely they'll risk attacking us while they're still here."

"And the truckies?" said the Kid, Bos and Si looking at him with raised eyebrows.

Footsteps sounded walking briskly down the hall then a knock came on the door, the barman entering. "Boss, there's call for you on the bar phone. It's Pike."

"Well now we know for sure where the police loyalties lie, they're tracking us," said Bos to his brothers then went through to the bar to take the call, gesturing for Si to follow him.

"Hello," said Bos taking the phone and putting it on speaker.

"Pleased to see you made it out, Bostultus," said Pike.

"Sure you are, Pike."

"No, you're wrong, Bostultus. I didn't want to kill you. But I couldn't accept disrespect, disloyalty. And I had to defend myself."

"What do you want?"

"I want to make you an offer. You can't stay there forever. How about we agree on a way for us to co-exist in Marvod."

"What are you offering?"

"You're a businessman, like me. You just made a poor business decision, that's all. I think even you realise that now. But maybe I was a bit harsh on you. You need to make a decent living. I can see a way for you to keep the brothels. If you offer me something in return."

"Like what?"

"Let's not discuss that over the phone, with everyone listening in. Let's

meet face to face, somewhere public."

"Where do you have in mind?"

"The café in the car park opposite the town hall."

Bos put the phone on mute then turned to Si. "It's a trap, Bos," said Si.

"Maybe. But Pike's right, what choice do we have?" Si thought for a few seconds then nodded, Bos unmuting the phone. "O.K. When?" said Bos.

"One p.m. tomorrow," said Pike. "Table at the back. I'll be there, unarmed. One of my men will be on armed guard at the door. You can bring one of yours armed. But he stays outside and you come unarmed."

"O.K." Bos hung up. "I'm going to take one of the others with me tomorrow. I want you and the Kid to stay here. Be ready for anything."

Just before eleven o'clock the next morning, one of Bos's men took a car and drove it out to the main road, the unmarked car following it as it left. It returned thirty minutes later and reported it was all clear, he had reached the outskirts of Marvod without incident followed the whole way, but he didn't see any other vehicles.

Almost an hour later two cars left Kitty's a few minutes apart, the first being followed by the unmarked car, Bos in the second driven by one of this team. Bos's car continued along the main road to Marvod uneventfully for a couple of minutes, although it was strangely quiet, not one vehicle passed them travelling in the opposite direction, which was unusual, Bos thought. He noticed unconcerned as another car gradually approached in the rear view mirror. A few minutes later they caught up to a slow moving vehicle in front and just as they were preparing to overtake it suddenly slowed and came to a stop, the vehicle behind stopping close to them. Bos opened his window and peered ahead and saw two vehicles blocking the road near a T-junction, a farm truck had come off the side road and been hit by a large utility vehicle, and they were now completely blocking both sides of the road, farm equipment scattered around from the impact. He could see the driver of the utility through an open window slumped forward motionless in their seat, smoke coming from the crumpled bonnet, but the inside of the truck cab was hidden from his view. There was no police car present and the crash looked fresh so Bos told his driver to go and take a look and see if the vehicles could be moved or they could drive round, but take his pistol and be careful. His driver approached the scene of the accident warily, pistol drawn. Just as he reached the utility and

was about to check its driver, the car behind them suddenly drove forward and pushed them into the car in front, revving furiously until it was sandwiched into position. Bos's colleague turned to check what was going on and as he did so a pistol silencer emerged from the driver's window behind him and before he could warn him there came the muffled sound of a quick burst of gunfire and his driver fell to the ground. Bos saw some movement out of the corner of his eye and as he turned his head his last image was pieces of broken rear window pane frozen mid-air.

Si tried Bos's number again. "Still no answer?" said the Kid with an anxious look on his face.

"No. Something's wrong. He should have contacted us by now."

"Si, come and look at this," said one of his team watching out the front window of the bar, pulling the curtain a small amount to one side. Outside, Si saw a police car had pulled up opposite and had parked parallel to them, then another followed as he watched, until after thirty seconds six cars were aligned nose to tail and more coming fanning out on both sides.

Si turned to his brother. "Wake all the others, Kid. Break out all the weapons. It looks like they mean business."

Several minutes later, Si and his men stood together in a group around a pile of weapons. "Take a couple each," said Si, "and as much ammo as you can carry, then take up position."

As they were arming themselves a loud click and screech was heard, then a voice came over a loudspeaker. "Attention in Kitty's. You are surrounded," followed by a long pause. Si walked over to the window and pulled the curtain aside. "Si, your brother Bostultus is deceased. And one other of your men. We don't want any further bloodshed. Come out with your hands up."

"Give that to me," said a faint distant voice, Si seeing the Captain grab the microphone off the police officer.

"Why don't we just finish it now?" the Captain said over the megaphone. "You know how this ends!"

Just then one of his men ran in from the back room and shouted that a police launch was coming down the river, 'What do you want me to do, Si?'. Si let the curtain fall and thought for a moment, then said resolutely, "Fuck this for a game of soldiers! I'm not spending the rest of my life in

prison, even if we make it there, which is unlikely. Come on Kid, let's go."

Si walked to the front door and grabbed the handle, the Kid following close behind, both holding semi-automatics at the ready. Si bobbed his head in time as he counted down from three then flung open the door and charged out with deep pitched scream firing his pistol, headed straight for where he had last seen the Captain. In response, the Captain crouched and returned fire, Bos feeling multiple thuds to his chest before he lost control of his legs and tripped, falling forward, skidding on his face and ended up facing the sky. The Captain called cease fire and after the bodies were still approached Bos standing over him, Bos's final image that of the Captain staring down at him, a few migratory stragglers honking plaintively.

The following morning Pike called them together in his study to debrief: Armit, Iskaz and the Captain. Pike invited Iskaz first who described the events leading up to Bos's demise, how the bodies of Bos and his sidekick were then moved to the damaged utility which was pushed off the road into a tree and set on fire, the coroner having already been paid off to remove and dispose of the bullets. The truck and farm equipment were removed and the scene cleaned of all traces of the fake accident before traffic was allowed to resume along the road.

"Good, now describe to me exactly what happened at Kitty's, Captain" said Pike.

"When I arrived at Kitty's," said the Captain, "the police were already set up, at least ten cars. Iskaz tried to get them to surrender, but I took over and told them their time was up. Then two of them came out the front door screaming, running straight at me."

"Huh! Juz like movies," said Armit smiling.

"I dropped Si with a head shot straight away then took out the other guy as well. But they got hit by a lot of other bullets as well. After all the guns had gone silent, there was a long calm. Everyone just stayed were they were, like they were waiting for some director to shout 'Cut' and the actors to jump up and congratulate each other on a 'good death'." Armit nodded. "Someone eventually shouted out from inside they wanted to surrender. A few guys came out hands up and were told to lie on the ground. I went and checked Si, he was lying face up with the back half of his head missing, his brain pooled like jelly next to his head. The other guy was face down with a

huge hole in his back. I turned him over and identified him as his kid brother. Both clearly dead.

"I waited while the police processed everybody, Bos's gang, all the women and children. I think we got everyone, Boss." He glanced at Iskaz for confirmation who nodded.

"What about the bodies?" said Pike.

"After the coroner had finished, the corpses, guts spilling onto the road, were scraped up with a dozer and put into white bags, brains dripping from the prongs, guys in white hazmat suits washing down the mess. Everything was cleaned up before the press got anywhere near it. Not like any Hollywood movie I've seen, Armit," he added.

"Now you see what can be accomplished when we work as a team," said Pike. "Let me do some updated introductions. My new farm manager, Armit. Captain Krasnam, my new Head of security. And you already know Iskaz, Chief of Marvod Police," he said, each shaking the other's hand.

Chapter 11 - In Whose Best Interest?

Nine weeks had passed since the 'Gunfight at the 'O'Kitty Corral' as the Gazette had headlined the following morning, the headline being repeated in the Chronicle and elsewhere. Inquests would be held, readers were told, Pike's new head of security was even expected to give evidence, adding fuel to the scuttlebutt, but no-one believed any Marvod inquest would get to the truth. The Captain was instead focussed on farm security and had just finished recruitment from a new crop of migrants to replace those that had been killed or weren't trusted by Armit and had been deported, Armit was spending most of his time in Marvod re-organising Bos's businesses having been found to be of even less use than Bos on the farm leaving Ivor to do all the farm management, only Pike at the head of the empire remained regally unaffected, but the convulsions in Pike's empire had meant a lull in cross-boundary activities.

On Greenfield's farm, autumn sowing of wheat and harvest of the other crops had now been completed, apart from sugar beet which would continue for weeks into early winter. Greenfield knew that rape sowing on his neighbours' farms should have been completed by now as well and

assumed pre-occupation with the farm was the main reason for the relative calm in Pike's extra-agricultural activities, but that could soon change. Just last week he had attended a meeting between the wheat farmers to try and find out what was happening with Pike, Anomia had even been sent to speak to Pike again, but Pike, still infuriated by Anomia selling his Cordiomar shares to Feldland, even though he had agreed to it at the time, had refused to see him.

"Con," said Greenfield sitting up in bed next to Constance. "With all the stuff happening over at Pike's, I've been thinking a lot about what you said a few months back."

"You mean when I told you I didn't think I could take it much longer?" Greenfield nodded. "I told you already, Hon, that was just spur of the moment," said Constance squeezing Greenfield's arm. "Things just got to me that week. I think we're doing fine, really."

"Yeah, but look what's happened in the last couple of months. Pike's clearly not in the least concerned about the impact he has on others, the sacrifices that are made on his behalf, the deaths, and they weren't even on our side! I can't get anything out of Pike and the police aren't saying anything either, it's all just rumours and innuendo based on what we can see over the river and I'm worried this is the lull before a big storm that's just about to break. Armit is maybe even more of a psychopath than Bos or Si was, I mean the stories about what happened to him before he escaped, it's not surprising he is the way he is, but that doesn't excuse it. And this new security team Pike's got, they're all ex-army apparently, and you know what the army is like, and they're recruiting new migrants I heard, so soon it'll be like before, only worse!"

"When a leader has started to make decisions that demonstrate he equates the survival of his organisation, whatever that may be, with his own personal survival, when he has eliminated all those amongst his advisers that would seek to defy or constrain him, then when he openly states it, when he has passed that narcissistic psychopathic threshold, then nothing can stop the inevitable slide to dictatorship and only assassination, civil insurrection or war can stop him. I can't ask the police, our workers, our friends, to make enormous sacrifices like that on our behalf to stop Pike and save us, and Pike knows that, and he knows that I know he will have no compunction in doing whatever he wants until he gets what he wants. So

to stop him we either we kill him or we have to make a compact with the devil, so I've decided ..."

"What are you saying, darling?" said Constance with concern in her voice.

"We're not the mafia, so I think I should try and talk to Pike; see if he's willing to leave us alone if we offer him Bull Island and the tenant farmer land." A look of shocked surprise came across Constance's face. "Hear me out first. The tenant farmers are a pain in the neck, all the hassle with their houses, and we never made much money out of that land anyway. And then Bull Island is so small, it was only ever any good for fishing. Pike controls it all now in any case and who knows, we may never get it back. We certainly can't rely on the Federation and Marvod court is under Pike's control. I don't mean just trust him, of course, it would have to be in writing and we would have to secure our border, but it's easier now with it along the river."

"I doubt he'll speak to you, he won't even speak to Anomia at the moment, will he? But it's your land, honey, your family's land, your inheritance not mine. If that's what you think is best, I'll support you. But what about Nadia and the others, I can't see them agreeing. Have you spoken to them yet?"

"No, not yet. I wanted to see what you thought first."

"I don't hold much hope, but I guess there's no harm in asking. You'll need to hold a farm meeting first, you know that?" Greenfield nodded.

After work the following day, Greenfield sat waiting, freshly showered, at the head of the table on the front porch. Constance placed a jug of fermented beet juice in the middle of the table, complementing the assorted snacks she had already arranged, then sat down, Greenfield smiling at her.

First Nadia, then Mitson and Rev, arrived from the fields and joined them at the table, Greenfield and Constance greeting them.

"Sorry about the pong, Mrs G," said Rev laughing. "Hard day's work and all that."

"So why the meeting tonight?" said Nadia curiously. "You said it was important."

Greenfield explained what he proposed, he just wanted to stop the senseless conflict that seemed to have no end in sight, that the land he

proposed to give away was not very profitable and was more trouble than it was worth, that they lived on the farm not the others, his wife and child with him, and it was affecting their mental health not even mentioning the sporadic threat to their physical wellbeing, and various other reasons in favour of divestment, his monologue lasting several minutes, during which Nadia remained quiet but grew increasingly agitated.

"This is our farm too," said Nadia antagonistically after Greenfield had finished. "If you don't like it, you can move out!"

"We'd love to, but we can't. Someone has to be on the farm at all times or we'd lose it. Are any of you willing to live here? Are you? You, Mitson, with your young family?" Greenfield was greeted by silence, Nadia visibly fuming. After a few seconds he continued, "Then I'll put it straight to a vote. Those in favour?" Greenfield and Constance raised their hand, "Those against?" Nadia, Mitson and Rev raised their hand. "No abstentions. O.K., Con, minute the vote please. I was afraid this might happen. O.K., that was the only item of business," he said and wrapped up the meeting.

A week later, Nadia was having one of her semi-regular phone chats with Ivor that had continued clandestinely in spite of the conflict between their farms preventing normal neighbourly contact: latest farming equipment, farm practices, complaints about their respective bosses, and the like, when Ivor happened to mention that a couple days before he had overheard the Captain and Pike making arrangements to meet Greenfield, at Anomia's farm he thought Pike said. Then when he had asked Pike about it afterwards, Pike had said, not unexpectedly, it had nothing to do with him, but in an unusually happy mood had followed cryptically that he could expect less impact from security issues on farm management in the near future. Nadia was stunned. There could only be one reason that Greenfield would meet Pike. Apologising, she finished the conversation with Ivor abruptly and stormed into Greenfield's office.

"Is it true?" said Nadia hotly. "Did you meet with Pike?"

"How did you find out about that?" said Greenfield shocked.

"So you've sold out?" said Nadia fiercely.

"Calm yourself, Nadia. Sit down. We were just meeting to discuss a deal that's all."

"What deal?" said Nadia remaining standing. "We already voted against

any deal with Pike at the owners' meeting. Have you gone against the vote, is that it?"

"Nadia, I remind you that you three own less combined than I do."

"Don't patronise me! The terms of our farm contract state that any decision that affects the integrity of the farm must be put to the vote. And each owner has equal weight for decisions related to farm integrity and we represent the owners. It's written in black and white! It was part of the will when our families inherited this farm from Pike's great-uncle. If you didn't like it you should have got out back then," said Nadia growing increasingly passionate.

"It was my grandfather who accepted those terms, not me," said Greenfield calmly.

"That doesn't change anything. As principal shareholder, we've only authorised you to make operational decisions on our behalf, as it says in the contract, that's all! You're certainly not authorised to hand over any part of the farm without our agreement, but especially not to that ... that *cockroach*," spat Nadia.

"It's too late. The deal's already been made. I can't back out now. I did it for all of us."

"All of us, my fucking arse!" hollered Nadia. "You liar! You did it for yourself! If you don't cancel the deal right away we'll take you to court!"

"We? I don't see Mitson and Rev."

"They'll do what I tell them."

"You haven't even asked me what we got in return."

"I don't care."

"You know you're asking the impossible."

"Then you're going to suffer the consequences. After all I've done for this farm," said Nadia starting to cry and struggling to speak through her tears. "For your grandfather, your mother, when they were sick, when Constance was pregnant, how we helped protect the farm, I can't believe you'd betray me ... us ... like this!" Nadia sobbed for a few seconds then gathered herself. "I'm leaving. And so are Mitson and Rev. You can take this as one week's notice," turned and walked out.

Mitson and Rev came to his office first thing the following morning and handed him their notice. He tried to talk them round, told them they didn't need to do what Nadia told them, they could make their own mind

up, but Mitson cut the conversation short, said sheepishly that they'd been told not to talk to him and walked out. All three didn't appear on the farm again after a week. He arranged for a couple of the itinerant workers to replace them on contract until the remaining farm work was finished and for the following few weeks before winter set in he focussed on the sugar beet harvest. Constance had some spare time, with Jorah away at boarding school and Olivia having recently started at college, and helped out by taking responsibility for ensuring the farm equipment was prepared for over-wintering. At least they didn't have to worry about Pike as much: with winter almost here, Pike would not be able to mount any fresh offensives until the spring rains had finished and the ground dried out.

News of the tumult on his farm and rumours as to its cause had spread quickly around the other wheat farmers; some rang him wanting to know what was going on after they had been contacted by his former workers saying they were available for work and he had told the farmers what Nadia had said, what she planned. He had tried to call Nadia numerous times but she wouldn't take his calls, and as the days went by it seemed like the possibility of court action had passed, an idle threat in the heat of emotion. Then one morning when he went to collect the mail from the postbox he found an official looking letter from the public prosecutor, inside which was a summons instructing him to attend an arraignment at Forket court, he read: 'on charges of serious breach of contract, failing to act in the best interests of the company, negligent and fraudulent conduct'.

The first day of the trial proper finally arrived early February the following year, the last few weeks having passed excruciatingly slowly, each day Greenfield waking to a few seconds of strange calm numbness until he recalled his predicament. In contrast the weeks immediately following the arraignment had passed in a blur of activity, half his waking hours on the farm and the other half in Forket with his lawyer helping prepare court documentation, copious forms and certificates, attending interviews to narrow down the numerous potential witnesses and various hearings. Then came Christmas, normally a happy and busy occasion but was for once a brief quiet affair, only a few of the neighbours visited out of loyalty, his closest friends like Feldland, the pall of the impending trial hanging over festivities. With no farm work to do they agreed Constance would take the

children for a two week break at the beach over the new year leaving him on the farm with just two of the workers to monitor security and conduct regular patrols.

Greenfield had dressed in his best suit and stood in front of the mirror as Constance inspected him from behind, re-combing his hair and brushing his jacket with her palms. Once she pronounced she was happy they drove to the courthouse in Forket, Constance wishing him good luck once inside and leaving him to take his seat next to his lawyer while she tried to find a vacant spot in the packed public gallery. Yesterday, the first official day of the trial, had been taken up with jury empanelment, both sides having numerous challenges, the Prosecution aiming to empanel a young female jury and the defence older white males, neither had been successful ending with a fifty-fifty age split, to the consternation of Greenfield's lawyer. Yesterday's gallery had been sparsely occupied, only a few of the most dedicated reporters attending, but it was now quickly filling with members of the public: the trial of the largest wheat farmer in the area pitted against previously loyal workers, rumours about the nature of the deal that Greenfield had made with Pike, the possible attendance of Pike himself, had all been the cause of intense interest in Forket and a large crowd tried to make their way in to witness the spectacle.

As the last few minutes to the start of proceedings wound down, Greenfield turned to scan the gallery looking for Constance, comforted when he saw her waving back to him from near the rear of the first floor balcony. The clerk announced the arrival of the Judge in the customary way and as Greenfield rose and turned to the front of the courthouse, he briefly caught the scowling eyes of Nadia seated alongside her lawyer.

The Judge gave his opening remarks, noting that the gallery was full and had spilled out into the corridor outside and warned the public to keep quiet during proceedings. This was followed by addresses from both sides to the jury, then the Prosecution commenced their submission of evidence from discovery and called their first witness, Mitson. The following two days of the trial, Prosecution witnesses came and went until the second to last witness, Nadia, the principal Prosecution witness, came to the stand. Nadia's evidence extended over a further two days, including lengthy cross-examination and re-examination of her claims concluding mid-way through Friday afternoon and she was excused by the court. A buzz went round the

court in expectation of the final witness, a lengthy pause followed, the prosecutor standing with his back turned in intense quiet discussion with another seated behind him.

"Counsel," said the Judge. "I see Mr Pike is listed here as your last witness, but I don't see him in court nor do I see any video equipment. Has the case for the Prosecution concluded?"

"Ronner," said the seated man plaintively as he stood up.

"Ahh, Mr Maslyan, is it not?" said the Judge.

"It is, Ronner."

"You are assisting the Prosecution?"

"I am, Ronner, as Mr Pike's legal representative."

"So where is your client, Counsel?"

"I am most distressed to have to inform the court that my client, Mr Pike, has just this very minute informed me that he has declined to provide video testimony." A background chatter started to grow as the news spread amongst the attending spectators. "He has instead submitted an updated written statement I would like to tender—"

"Objection, Your Honour. How can we adequately challenge any of Mr Pike's evidence if he won't deign to be cross-examined? And to change his statement at such a late hour! I submit that this attempt to put himself above the court should be treated with the contempt that it deserves."

"That's quite enough, Counsel! Silence in the court!" said the Judge loudly, finally losing patience with the persistent loud murmur, then waiting before proceeding. "I will determine what is contemptible to this court, not you! Both approach the bench please."

"You honour," said Prosecution Counsel, "the deal between Greenfield and Pike is fundamental to the Prosecution case. It is why we are here after all. It would be severely prejudicial to disallow Pike's written evidence."

"It is because it so fundamental," said the Judge, "that it should be available for examination. I am sure you can appreciate the potential disadvantage at which this places the Defence."

"I can, Your Honour, but Mr Pike can't be compelled to attend, he is out of the jurisdiction of this court, as you know."

"Perhaps I can add, Ronner: presumably the Defence does not deny that there was a deal of some kind, so we can both examine Mr Greenfield when he appears. Also, my client has authorised me to say that if there are

further questions following submission of his statement, it may be possible for him to tender written responses."

"How noble of him!" muttered Greenfield's lawyer under his breath, the Judge flashing his eyes at him.

"I'm going to allow it," said the Judge after a lengthy pause, "but in return I will give the Defence considerable latitude. How long will you need for review, Counsel?"

"If we could have the weekend, Your Honour, it is almost the end of the week anyway? ..."

"Granted; the court will adjourn until Monday," the Judge said rising.

Pike's new statement was submitted Monday morning, the Defence saying they reserved further questions for Pike until after the Defendant had testified, which the Judge duly allowed, thus concluding the case for the Prosecution. The Defence then commenced with submission of a large number of documents after which Constance was brought to the stand to give evidence, followed over the next two days by all the neighbouring wheat farmers, then Olivia, 'to break the chain of middle-aged white men,' said Greenfield's lawyer. Greenfield took the stand as the final Defence witness, the examination by his lawyer taking one full day after which he was handed over to the Prosecution for cross-examination.

Prosecution counsel rose slowly from his chair. "In your earlier testimony to my learned colleague you admitted you were in breach of your contract by making a deal with Mr Pike against the express recorded wishes of the majority of owners; that is correct, is it not?"

"That is my testimony."

"But you still maintain you were acting in the best interest of the owners?"

"Yes, I do."

"Now, I have had your land valued independently—Exhibit Twelve C, Your Honour," he said handing copies of a lengthy report to the court officer who passed them to Greenfield, the Judge, Defence and jury—"Read the highlighted passages please, Mr Greenfield." The lawyer waited while Greenfield read until he looked up. "As I understand from your testimony, Mr Pike received this land, whose value you can see on the page before you, for free. Is that correct?"

"Yes, but—"

"The bargain basement deal of the millennium, was it not?" he said facing the jury.

"As I explained earlier," said Greenfield carefully, "the tenant farmer land has very little farming value. The topography is not suited to our crops. It's more suited to manually intensive farming techniques which have low profit margin. And the rent we got from the tenant farmers, which they rarely paid on time, was fixed by the government and low. The value on paper here ignores all of that and I totally reject it. In short, the land was of little value to us."

"To you clearly, Mr Greenfield," said the lawyer still facing the jury, "but certainly not to the other owners. You have ignored other potential uses for the land, as shown in the full valuation report and consequently grossly undervalued it—assuming of course that giving something away for free can even be charitably described as having been valued at all—other potential uses that the other owners were not even given the opportunity to explore by your precipitate actions. Did you in fact discuss any other uses for the land with the owners?"

"No."

"Did you even discuss the value of the land at any stage with them?"

"No, I did not."

"No, so by your own words, the best interests of the owners according to you were to give away extremely valuable land for free. Is that correct?"

"The land was in exchange for written guarantees from Pike regarding our title to the farmland west of the river and to ensure the health and safety of my family ... amongst other things, but those were the main two."

"Ah yes," he said walking over to where Greenfield was seated. "Written guarantees from a man whom, in your own words, you do not trust one iota. And your family's health and safety, yes, interesting, I'll get to that in due course. But, now, do you recall Nadia's testimony?"

"Not all of it, I'm not an elephant!" said Greenfield to titters from the public gallery and smiles from several in the jury.

"Not an elephant," said the lawyer slowly examining Greenfield top to toe. "Well perhaps I can refresh your non-pachydermal memory," he said picking up a file, opening it at a tag and ostentatiously placing some reading glasses on his nose. "I quote, 'My family and that of Revedir and Mitson, used to own the tenant farmer houses and adjacent small plots of land. We

worked the surrounding farmland in return for a fee to the landowner, a relative of Pike's great-uncle. Then our property was confiscated during the war by a former government to be used for housing refugees. We were given temporary housing in Forket as compensation, but this was with the understanding that our property would be returned to us after the war. This never happened; once the war ended our properties were handed to the landowner by an incoming government as part of a so-called farmland modernisation programme, and legislation was passed enshrining the occupancy rights of the tenant farmers making it very difficult to evict them. But we—"

"I do hope you're not going to read back her entire testimony, Counsel," interjected the Judge in laconic deadpan.

"Almost finished, Your Honour," he said, cleared his throat then continued—"But we weren't interested in the money. We have a long connection with our land, we wanted our properties. We had a verbal agreement, first with Pike's great-uncle and later with Greenfield's grandfather as well, that our properties would be returned to us as soon as the tenant farmers were evicted.' You recall that testimony now, Sir?" he said removing his glasses with a flourish.

"Yes."

"A little louder, for the benefit of the jury, please."

"Yes," enunciated Greenfield deliberately.

"Thank you. Now, the court was earlier presented title deeds, court orders and assorted correspondence regarding the confiscation of Nadia's and the others' property—Exhibits Twenty Seven A through W, Your Honour—these have not been disputed by the Defence." The Prosecution Counsel paused and rubbed his chin with his hand, as if debating an issue with himself, then continued in a tone of amused curiosity. "Are you aware of the recent judgment in favour of Mr Pyklit that resulted in him returning properties to owners of confiscated land occupied by tenant farmers?"

"Objection," said Defence Counsel rising, "relevance, Your Honour. May I approach the bench." The Judge waved both attorneys forward. "I fail to see the relevance to this case other than superficialities. Firstly, there was no third party, like Pike, involved; secondly ownership was not in dispute, it was a claim of illegal eviction in a civil court by the tenant farmers against the owner, Pyklit; thirdly it was in Marvod court, renowned for ... umm ...

if I am being generous, laxity in evidentiary robustness, which I am sure Your Honour would not want to see in Forket." The Judge raised his eyebrows, puckered his lips and nodded. "And lastly, written evidence of an agreement between the original landowners was provided, and there is none in this case I remind my learned colleague, and following the eviction of the tenant farmers its terms were honoured by Mr Pykli. No, if anything, I submit that the more relevant precedent is the recent case on Mr Bartel's farm: another neighbour, where the owners of confiscated land sued the state in a civil trial and were awarded compensation. That is how this case should have been dealt with, as I have expressed before, You Honour, not this vindictive criminal—"

"All right, Counsel, that's enough. We're not having that discussion again. What does the Prosecution have to say?"

"I maintain, Your Honour, it demonstrates that a deal, where former owners with a similarly strong connection to the land wanted their property returned rather than monetary compensation, has occurred elsewhere, nearby and under very similar circumstances."

"Similar, ha!" scoffed Defence Counsel. The Judge raised his hand and thought for a few moments.

"I'm not going to permit this line of questioning to continue, Counsel. Keep your questions to Greenfield's property, and I remind you that you are required to demonstrate criminality in the Defendant's business dealings. A civil trial this is *not*. Be seated."

"The jury will disregard the previous statement by the Prosecution," the Judge addressed the jury as the Prosecution Counsel returned to his chair. You are to put out of your minds what has happened on other farm properties recently with regard to arrangements made with tenant farmers on their properties. Only the circumstances on Greenfield's farm are to be taken into consideration during your deliberations. You may proceed, Counsel."

"Thank you, Your Honour," he said rising. "Nadia testified, under oath, they had a verbal deal with your grandfather to eventually evict the tenant farmers and return their properties to them. Do you continue to deny any knowledge of this agreement?"

"I repeat what I said in my earlier testimony. I have no knowledge of any such agreement, nor if any such agreement even existed."

"You're a liar," shouted Nadia jumping up in the public gallery pointing at Greenfield.

"Security!" called the Judge. "Remove that person from my court." Two security officers walked down the aisles from both sides towards Nadia, who then raised her hands and sat down sheepishly saying loudly, 'Sorry, Your Honour'.

"Madam, if you intervene again in that fashion I will have you removed." Nadia nodded in acknowledgement to the Judge who waved the security guards away, the Judge then nodded towards the Prosecution Counsel.

"Your grandfather," continued the Prosecution Counsel after a few moments, "in his earlier testimony, said he couldn't recall such an arrangement, but it was quite possible, he admitted, he is after all 'an elderly gentleman, my memory isn't what it used to be', in his words. Not an elephant either, perhaps?" he said smugly, Greenfield pursed his lips but didn't respond. "Your grandfather admitted being aware of the grossly unfair treatment Nadia and the others received from the government, and that was the reason he had employed them on the farm, as a way of partially compensating them. But they were just being paid wages for performing work so how can that be called compensation?" Greenfield shrugged. "Would you say your grandfather was a fair man?"

"Yes, at least initially, but later ... His mind was not all there sometimes, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, later, but at the time of his inheritance of the farm his mind was still sound, so is it not possible a fair man would have made such a deal?"

"Yes. I suppose so. But whatever was said, if anything, to Nadia and the others was not passed on to me. And there are certainly no written records that I am aware of," he said facing the jury.

"Nadia, Mitson, Revedir," said Prosecution Counsel. They've all been very loyal to you for years, is that not correct?"

"Yes, that is correct, we could not have survived without them."

"So then do you not feel some sympathy for them?"

"Yes, of course I do, but the safety of my family must come first. If they are unhappy with the deal, they must take up compensation with the government, as others have done, or even with the new owner, Mr Pike." There were a few outbursts of shocked laughter from around the court at the mention of Pike's name, Greenfield continuing in a louder voice. "We

are are happy enough with the deal."

The Prosecution waited for the hubbub to die down. "O.K., you mentioned your safety, I would like to go back to what you said earlier, I précis, 'The land was in exchange for ... the health and safety of my family', perhaps you could explain what you meant by that."

"It simply means that Pike would accept the new farm boundaries as permanent and all attacks on us would cease."

"And when you say 'us', you mean the farm, I presume, because there have never been any attacks on Nadia nor the other owners in their own homes."

"Yes, I mean the farm."

"And you described in vivid detail, as did your wife and daughter, your life on the farm, described the actions of Mr Pike that, as your wife stated, 'made your family's life miserable', and who, Mr Pike that is, you described in such colourful terms as, I quote, 'an untrustworthy deceitful sadistic wretch, a man you could not trust one iota'. Yet, it is with this same man that you felt able to make a deal, and such a one-sided deal that it would appear you are in fact close friends, someone with whom another secret arrangement has been made. It looks suspiciously like you made this deal on the understanding that the land would be given back to you at the expense of the other owners."

"That is an outrageous accusation!" said Greenfield. "How could ..." Greenfield unable to finish the sentence through his anger just shook his head in bewilderment.

"Outrageous, you say, but is it really, Mr Greenfield? It was your own grandfather, was it not, who came to an amicable arrangement with Mr Pike and now lives happily in Marvod with his attractive young wife?" Angela, wearing a tight white tee shirt and short sequined red skirt stood up in the public gallery and waved archly to the lawyer, causing a ripple of laughter through the court, the lawyer waiting for it to die down. "Who knows, if your mother had lived longer she may already have done a deal as well. It runs in your family, does it not, making deals with Mr Pike?"

"The terms of the deal are as in my witness statement," said Greenfield through gritted teeth.

"So you are putting an extremely high price on what you allege is the threat to your family's health and safety."

"I would not put any price on the health and safety of my family, and there is nothing alleged about it. It's a fact! We lived it, still are living it!"

"Quite right, and very noble sentiments too. Whereas in fact there were other solutions that did not require you to put your family's safety at risk. For example, they could have lived in Marvod or Forket, could they not?"

"Someone needs to be on the farm at all times. As the principal owner and the heir of my grandfather's estate, it is my duty to do that."

"Yes, perhaps, but if your family's safety is priceless, as you say, you could stay on the farm yourself and insist your family stay off-farm, as Nadia, Mitson, Revedir, the other farmworkers do, could you not?"

"My wife insists she stay with me. Clearly you don't know Constance," said Greenfield, to a ripple of laughter round the public gallery.

"Or you could sell the farm?"

"I can't do that, it's my inheritance."

"Inheritance, yes, but you weren't always on the farm were you? You were living in Forket, training to be a lawyer and your wife was working at Forket Council. Farming's not in your blood, unlike your grandfather, Nadia, Mitson; you're not even a farmer really, you're a Johnny-come-lately to farming, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am, but I take my duty seriously."

"You said someone has to be on the farm at all times. So tell me, Mr Greenfield, who is on the farm today while you are at court?"

"Some of our farmhands. I can't say how many, obviously, for security reasons."

"You don't need to; the number is unimportant, but clearly you don't have to be on the farm at all times, do you?"

"I suppose not, no. There are occasions when I can be away, some seasons when the risk is lower, winter, such as now. But not for extended periods, mind you. History has proven that fairly conclusively, I would say."

"Well let us hope then we conclude this trial quickly. But you could in fact live in Forket with your family and employ your farmhands, with additional security if necessary, to stay on the farm?"

"I could, but that would be very expensive."

"Ahh, so money does come into your considerations after all?"

"We have to make a profit or there is no farm. Not for me or any of the owners. And besides, as I said before, I take my responsibilities very

seriously."

"Actually, you said duty, Mr Greenfield, not responsibilities. So you see yourself much like a great General Greenfield?"

"Counsel!" said the Judge.

"No further questions, Your Honour."

Greenfield's Defence team then re-examined Greenfield to clarify his testimony regarding maintenance of the tenant farmers' houses, why so little was done, Greenfield agreeing that upkeep of properties was his responsibility as owner, but he had a verbal agreement with the tenant farmers that repairs would only be done out of his share of the profits from the tenant farmers' sales, which were always so small, or that's what the tenant farmers' records showed anyway; he had always believed they fiddled the books, he said. When they used lack of profits as an excuse for late rent payment that meant no repairs were done, hence their complaints, which the tenant farmers then used as an excuse to miss rent payments, so he said. A vicious circle, a Catch 22, he called it. This was followed by re-examination by the Prosecution, where they asked what evidence he had to dispute the tenant farmers' records; he admitted he had none, it was based on his farming knowledge only. Just as it appeared Greenfield's ordeal was coming to an end, Maslyan hurried forward from the back of the court to the Prosecutor's legal clerk, handed her something, and whispered in her ear. The legal clerk leant forward and tugged on the Prosecutor's shirt, the Prosecutor turning and having a brief hushed discussion with her.

"Have you finished with the witness, Counsel?"

"Yes, I apologise, Your Honour. However, might I request a short break while I discuss some important new information that has just this minute come to my attention?"

"How short?"

"Fifteen minutes?"

"Counsel?" the Defence lawyer nodded, "Mr Greenfield, you are excused. All right, let's have a fifteen minute coffee break everyone. It's been a long day so I'm sure you'd like to stretch your legs."

"Your Honour, I'd like to recall Nadia to the stand," said the Prosecutor on returning to the court.

"On what grounds?" said the Judge.

"New evidence has just come to light, a letter," said the prosecutor taking

some documents from his desk and holding them out to the court officer, "from Pike's great-uncle to Nadia's great grandfather—"

"Objection, Your Honour!" said the Defence Counsel rising to his feet. "This should have been presented in discovery. The trial is about to conclude!"

"Counsel, the trial won't conclude until I say so! Approach, both of you please."

"Defence has a point. Why wasn't this letter made available in discovery?"

"We would have, of course, Your Honour, but it only came to light after a search of Marvod church records was suggested by Mr Pike during preparation of his updated statement and kindly made available by Mr Maslyan just now. This letter is dated a few months before the end of the war, quite an unexpected discovery I can tell you."

"A miracle, I would say," said Defence Counsel cynically.

"I'm going to allow it as evidence, but no more, is that understood? Is this all of it, two ... three pages?"

"Yes, but there's only a very short section that is relevant, Your Honour," said Maslyan handing a copy to the Defence lawyer.

"How long will the Defence need?"

"If we could have a short adjournment while I confer with my client?"

"Nadia, sorry to have to call you back to the stand, and thank you for making yourself available at such short notice. This letter from Pike's great-uncle to your great grandfather, a former minister at Marvod Church, covers some minutiae of church business and an agreement on tithes, which I won't bore the court with, but if you could read out the last sentence please, starting where highlighted."

"and as agreed, I will return to you your house and land, and that of Mitson and Revedir to them, as per the title deeds you showed me, gratis, once the war is over."

"The letter is signed by Pike's great-uncle and dated, is that correct? Nadia confirmed it. "So why wasn't your property returned to your great grandfather after the war, Nadia?"

"My great grandfather died in the war."

"Yes, but that didn't stop Pike's great-uncle from returning the land to

your family, did it?"

"No, he could have done it. You'd have to ask him why he didn't."

"No further questions, Your Honour."

"Does Defence want to cross-examine?"

"No, Your Honour."

"So, has Defence concluded?"

"Ahhh ... we are still waiting for the independent expert to submit his report on the letter, Your Honour," said Defence Counsel half-rising after checking first with his colleague.

"It has been confirmed by Mr Pike as his great-uncle's signature," said Prosecution Counsel helpfully, half-rising himself.

"Exactly why we still need independent confirmation, Your Honour!" reaffirmed Defence half-rising again. "We expect it later today, and as we agreed in your chambers earlier, we will need to examine it before concluding," the Judge nodding in assent.

"In that case, given the time, we'll adjourn for the day."

"So how's it looking?" said Greenfield hopefully to his lawyer.

"It's hard to say. But, I've got to be honest with you, Mr Greenfield, that wasn't a good day for us. That letter lends credence to everything Nadia has said and about her family's connection to the land. Combined with your breaching the terms of the contract and giving the land away for free, as many will see it, will the jury believe you were acting in everyone's best interests, or just your own? I think we've lost the young jurors, so it may all come down to what your peers on the jury think. "

"Bozz. You going to inquezz todie?" said Armit.

"No need, Armit. I already know the outcome," said Pike leaning back in his chair. "Was there something else, Armit?"

"Yes. Eets very quiet on farm. You need me here todie? I needed een Marvod. New migrants juzz arrive een truck."

"No. You can go to Marvod, Armit. Send the Captain in on our way out." Armit went next door to the Captain's new office, converted from one of the old store rooms, passed on Pike's message then left.

"You wanted me, Mr Pike?" said the Captain at the open door.

"Yes, sit down. I've been meaning to thank you for organising that letter with Maslyan. I don't know how much it helped with the verdict. But it

can't have harmed. Now, we've been a bit down on income recently, as you know. Re-organising all Bostultus's businesses has taken longer than I would have liked. He had his fingers in so many pies. Armit is doing a reasonable job, but he doesn't have the experience Bostultus and his brothers had. I want you to keep an eye on him. Report to me weekly on what he's doing. You're providing the security for all the businesses so you have full access to all areas. Let me know if Armit is uncooperative. But he's not to know what you're doing."

"Understood, Mr Pike. I'll brief my boys."

"You'll be called as a witness at the Kitty inquest next week, I assume?"

"Already got a summons, Mr Pike."

"O.K. I've already given my written statement to Maslyan. I sacked Bostultus for suspected embezzlement. And you were there on my direction to take over. He and his brother and a few other miscreants refused to vacate the premises. Some of them came out firing. You just defended yourself and the police. Don't forget to mention that you were defending the police. You don't know anything about Kitty's other than that. I assume I don't need to remind you to keep my name out of it."

"No, Mr Pike. That's clear."

"Good, because you'll be exonerated. I've already made sure of that. I don't want anything on record that could come back to hurt me. Now to the spring offensive. I've been going over your plans. You think we'll be back to full strength by then?"

"Yes, I'm very confident. With all the new migrants still pouring in every day, some with military and irregular experience, and still a few months to go to train them, we'll be ready."

Constance was seated alongside Olivia at a small plastic table in a large spartan room with plain white walls and ceiling, polished grey concrete floor, both uncomfortably observing small seated groups congregated at other identical tables spaced uniformly in a geometric grid pattern around them. Greenfield entered the room through a door at the far corner accompanied by a prison officer and scanned the room. He saw Constance waving to him from a table in the corner and joined her, embracing her and Olivia together across it.

"Where's Joe?" said Greenfield sitting down.

"He's too upset. I took him to stay with the Feldlands for the day."

"How often are they going to let you visit?"

"No more than once a week, they just told me. This is the first time I've ever been to a prison, darling, I don't know the rules yet, but I'll check with the lawyer."

"What's it like here, Dad? Are you O.K?" said Olivia with tears in her eyes.

"It's not too bad actually," said Greenfield squeezing her hand. "I'm going to lose weight for sure, the food ... but that's not a bad thing, I suppose. It's only minimum security for white collar criminals like me."

"You are *not* a criminal!" said Constance.

"That's not what the jury thought though, is it?"

"The jury got it wrong!"

"The lawyer is asking permission from the Judge to interview some of the jurors to try and understand what their thinking was," said Greenfield. "He says he's confident he'll get the O.K., it was such a high profile case and the unanimous verdict was such a big surprise, after all. Have Feldland or any of the others spoken to the jurors yet?"

"Not that they've told me. I'll check with all of them when I get home. When's the sentencing hearing?"

"Two weeks tomorrow."

"Is that all, we'll never get everything ready by then!" said Constance in a slightly panicked voice.

"Don't worry, darling, the lawyer and I will handle the hearing, you just focus on gathering evidence for the appeal, all right?" Constance nodded glumly. "How's the farm going?"

"Don't worry about the farm, I've organised everything. Let's just focus on getting you out of here as soon as possible."

Chapter 12 - Muscular Revenge

The start of spring had been unusually and frustratingly wet for weeks, heavy rain one day then the next sunny; combined with the run-off from the melting snow this had delayed the start of Pike's planned spring activities. His rape crop was also feeling the effects; the waterlogged soil was

inhibiting root growth and oxygen availability, stressing the plants, subduing growth. Ivor said it was similar with the wheat farmers, wheat growth had been slower than normal and they had all delayed sowing of their secondary crops until the fields dried out. This had somewhat dampened Pike's otherwise intense pleasure at the news that Greenfield had been sentenced to fifteen years in prison, the maximum penalty available for his offences. The court had also issued a court order annulling the deal he had made with Greenfield, but when Maslyan had told him this, he had just shrugged his shoulders, after all, the court in Marvod had already ruled all the land was his, Forket concurrence would have been an added bonus that was all, a cherry on the top of the half-eaten cake, and he had no intention of keeping to the terms of the deal anyway. The only purpose of the deal from his perspective was to lull Greenfield into a false sense of security, assist his final offensive, but now with Greenfield in prison and his woman running their farm, it was uncannily similar to circumstances when he had taken Bull Island all those years ago; the time was right for the coup de grace, but annoyingly the weather was temporarily thwarting his plans.

The only thing that seemed to be flourishing was the mice, the humidity and warmth had created an ideal environment for them; Ivor had noticed an increasing number in the fields confirmed by chew cards he had placed judiciously around the fields and they were starting to appear in small numbers near the farm buildings as well. Pike had no enthusiasm for Ivor's recommended actions: a similar approach to what they had done years back; although it was more personally satisfying it was too manually intensive and he had told Ivor to organise aerial baiting, but they were still waiting for a forecast of three days straight without significant rain in order to start treatment.

Today's forecast was for a warm day, with heavy rain predicted again tomorrow, so Gemariah decided to take advantage of the opportunity to do some laundry she had been delaying for such an occasion. She picked up the heavily loaded laundry basket and went outside wearing a thin floral above-the-knee dress, Dior sandals and matching wide-brimmed straw hat, sunglasses, her ponytail swaying from side to side, humming to herself happily. She smiled and waved at Ivor as she passed him, Ivor turning to admire her athletic legs highlighted by the morning sun shining through the translucent fabric, before correcting himself and continuing on his way to

the shed. She placed the basket on the ground, went to collect a bag of clips still hanging on the clothes line and returned to the basket, reaching into it blindly. She shrieked when she felt something furry brush her arm, rapidly withdrawing her hand and glanced down to see a mouse and stood rooted to the spot briefly before moments let seeing another squirming through the surrounding grass, shrieked again and ran inside the house leaving the basket where it was.

Ivor came out of the equipment shed in a rush and followed her inside finding her in the hall. "What's wrong, Gem?" he said anxiously, gripping her upper arms.

"There are mice everywhere outside!" said Gemariah agitatedly.

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, Gem," said Ivor trying to maintain his concern with a smile breaking through. "I know there are a few."

Pike joined them from his office, Ivor hurriedly dropping his arms to his side.

"Just a mouse, Boss," said Ivor smiling at Pike.

"Don't you dare laugh!" said Gemariah angrily to Pike. "I'm not leaving the house until you get rid of those horrid things. Not unless it's to get in the car and go straight to Marvod. I've only been back a few months since that stinky time," she said bursting into tears.

"All right Ivor, you can go now," said Pike and led Gemariah into the lounge sitting her down on the settee.

"Paris finished a month ago," said Gemariah between sobs, her head down, "and there's nothing until New York in September. I could stay in our Marvod house, I suppose ..." she mumbled.

Pike handed her a tissue and Gemariah wiped her eyes delicately to avoid smearing her eye shadow and disturbing her eyelashes.

"There's no need to leave, Gemariah. We're going to bait them as soon as we get some decent weather," said Pike, but seeing this was having insufficient impact added a few moments later. "I tell you what. Just to prove to you I'm taking your concerns seriously. I'll get Armit to take care of them."

"Could you?" said Gemariah demurely lifting her eyes to Pike, Pike nodding. "All right, but just do it," said Gemariah emphatically rising to her feet. "Don't tell me what you're going to do, I don't want to hear about it, just get rid of them!" and stormed upstairs to repair her make-up.

Later that morning Armit arrived from Marvod in a minibus with two of the migrants and drove straight into the equipment shed where they offloaded some boxes, barrels and equipment. They started by baiting stations with anti-coagulant and setting them inside and around the farm buildings, particularly where they found any small piles of discarded food and secluded corners where the mice might hide.

After dinner that evening, Pike went across to the barn where he met Armit and the migrants staying there until late into the night. When Gemariah was preparing for bed later she noticed that Pike had still not returned. She went down into the kitchen from where she saw a light still on in the shed on the other side of the farmyard and muffled shouts, thuds and laughter emanating from it and decided to leave him to his entertainment.

Shortly after lunch the following afternoon, after waiting for a heavy shower to pass through in the morning, Ivor and the two migrants packed a rucksack each with zinc phosphide baits, went out into the fields and pacing out ten steps between themselves walked in a line dropping baits every ten steps until they had finished and had to re-load, continuing all that day until by evening they had treated all the nearby farmland. At dinner that night, Gemariah asked Pike if he would be late to be bed again that night, to which Pike responded by asking rhetorically if she wanted to know what he was doing, then when she didn't reply left to meet up again with the others in the barn.

The following morning the bait deployment was completed; Ivor drove the migrants back to Marvod in the afternoon before returning to the farm. Pike returned from the barn that evening earlier than normal sucking on a finger on his right hand, and found Gemariah in the lounge.

"Finished early tonight, darling?" said Gemariah looking up from her phone.

"Yes. All done. They should be all gone in a few days. Then we can start the aerial bait bombardment as well. Extermination is the aim of the game, Gemariah."

"What's wrong with your finger?"

"It's nothing. A splinter that's all."

"Here, let me see," said Gemariah gently, Pike reluctantly letting her take his hand. "Ohh, it's just a tiny scratch. Let me put a plaster on it," and she

went to the bathroom coming back with a large bandage that she wrapped around the site of the wound. "It's the smallest I could find. There, that should fix it," she said smiling at Pike, who kissed her on the forehead and left the room.

The next few days passed uneventfully, scattered heavy rain and bright patches of sun racing each other across the farm, Pike keeping a closer eye on the weather than usual, checking every morning, the long range forecast foretelling an extended dry spell a week later, but that had been forecast several times before and had not eventuated, the weather seemingly having its own eye on local events. Still, after three days the forecast had been maintained; even the weather-vane agreed as Ivor had told him, Lupee having been consulted when Ivor grew as frustrated as Pike about the seemingly endless rain. With the good news, after breakfast Pike had called a war cabinet meeting with the Captain and Armit for that afternoon to make final preparations for the start of the spring assault. But as the time for meeting approached, Pike felt he was coming down with a fever and his muscles strangely ached all over. He postponed the meeting until the following day, took some paracetamol and told Gemariah he was going to take a lie down for the afternoon, 'it was flu and no, I don't need a doctor'.

Gemariah checked in on Pike towards sunset and found him lying still clothed on top of the bed, greeting her with a half-hearted smile. Gemariah gaily said to cheer him up, as a special treat, she would cook him his favourite for dinner, beef stroganoff, an order that he commonly put in with the food delivery service but Gemariah herself had never cooked before. He didn't have the energy to try and dissuade Gemariah so she danced happily downstairs to prepare the food.

Pike lethargically picked at his dinner, insufficient appetite to even try and chew the overcooked boiled beef, unenthusiastically sipped the thin flavourless broth and swallowed a few of the spongy tinned mushrooms. He pushed his bowl away, said he was still not feeling right, took another paracetamol and went to bed early.

In the middle of the night Pike woke up suddenly with severe stomach cramps and rushed to the bathroom where he vomited into the sink. He stood there for a few seconds, unsteadily holding onto the ceramic basin with both hands, before vomiting again just as Gemariah came running in, woken by the commotion. She passed him a facecloth and he wiped his

mouth with it then she felt his forehead. "You're really clammy," said Gemariah, "and your arms are all covered in sweat. I'm going to call the Doctor now." Pike said nothing and walked back to bed flopping down on the duvet.

Thirty minutes later Pike's phone rang and Gemariah answered it, saying, 'Yes, let Sarlat in. Pike's sick'. A further ten minutes later there was the sound of tyres on gravel then shortly afterwards a knock at the door, Gemariah going downstairs to answer.

"Good evening, Gemariah, I came as soon as I could."

"Follow me, Dr Sarlat. He's upstairs in bed."

"There's been a lot of flu around recently," said Dr Sarlat to Gemariah as he sat on the bed next to Pike and opened his medical bag, "probably due to the changeable weather, you know," he said with a knowledgeable air, putting a thermometer in Pike's mouth and setting up his stethoscope. "Breathe in ... Now out ... O.K. thanks," then reached out and felt both sides of Pike's neck with his fingers. "But this seems more than flu at first examination: he's got slightly swollen lymph nodes in his neck, can you see there? Have you come into contact with any rats or mice recently, Mr Pike? There seems to have been a plague recently."

"This is a seed farm, Sarlat. So what do you think?" said Pike sarcastically raising both hands off the duvet in frustration. "Anyway, I'm already inoculated against those little bastards!"

"I'm not aware of any vaccine, Mr Pike—not available in this country anyway—What happened to your finger?" he said having seen the large plaster waved in front of him. "Can I see it, please?"

"No. It's just a splinter."

"And can I examine the rest of—That's a no then. O.K., well that's all right—I'm going to prescribe you antibiotics anyway, which will cover flu as well as any rodent diseases, and I'll give you a tetanus booster, just in case. I'll just go and get it from the cooler box in my car ... won't be a moment."

The Doctor returned with a vial and administered the jab in Pike's upper arm then put a packet of pills on the bedside table. "Take these three times a day for a week, until the course is finished—I'm relying on you, Gemariah, to make sure he follows my instructions—and I'll check on you tomorrow. Now goodnight all."

"See! I told you you needed to see a doctor," said Gemariah faux

peevishly popping two tablets from a blister pack and handing them with a glass of water to Pike.

The following morning, Pike had recovered sufficiently to get up and have breakfast. His appetite apparently fully restored he compensated for missed meals, Gemariah cheerfully providing him with four boiled eggs, several slices of toast, which he coated liberally with marmalade, and endless coffee. Feeling more like his old self, he went that afternoon to the gym for the first time in days and worked himself up to a sweat. As he was showering, he thought to himself he had better get back to his normal routine, present himself properly as head of the farm, show his powers were fully restored; he certainly didn't want to have to deputise the Captain just as what he felt would be the final push was about to get started. He called Armit as he was changing and arranged for a sparring bout tomorrow morning, Armit accepting with a little surprise, not having boxed with his boss since he had been promoted, one of the migrants having been roped in recently instead.

Armit absorbed the punches as duty required, just as in the old days, although they were strikingly feebler than before, and noticed that even gentle jabs to Pike's stomach and head seemed to cause Pike to wince. Pike called a halt after a few minutes, before Armit had even found the appropriate opportunity to go down in the customary fashion. After the bout, Pike called the oft postponed campaign meeting for that afternoon, the start of the dry spell being now just a couple of days away.

At breakfast the next day Pike developed a dry cough. He took a gulp of coffee and cleared his throat which seemed to temporarily fix the problem, 'Just some toast stuck in my throat', he said.

"Darling," said Gemariah coquettishly. "You seem better now. Do you mind if I go shopping today? It's the last day of spring sales and I don't want to miss out on any bargains!" Pike smiled insipidly and nodded. Gemariah kissed him on the forehead then pranced up the stairs to get changed. Gemariah returned late that afternoon with several bags draped over both arms, telling Ivor to bring the other bags and chirping out to Pike as she came through the door, then dropped them on the floor surprised when she saw Pike sitting on the settee in the lounge under a blanket, leaning over to take a sip from a large glass of vodka then coughed and lay down. She rushed over and checked his head and found it clammy and

wet, but he was shivering, and she saw he was still fully clothed.

"This is the same as before," said Gemariah. "The fever has come back hasn't it? You need the Doctor now," she went to get her phone from her bag not waiting for an answer.

"No!" said Pike emphatically. "I don't want that idiot anywhere near me! I pushed myself too hard in the gym. I just need some rest, that's all. I'm sure I'll be better in the morning. Help me up to bed, will you?"

That night Gemariah was woken by Pike saying something unintelligible over and over and moving around in bed groaning. She got up and turned on the lights, then saw his head was covered with sweat and noticed a prominent red rash on both arms from his shoulders right down to his hands. Gemariah frantically phoned Dr Sarlat.

"Doctor, it's Gemariah ... Yes ... Pike's sick again ... Well, the flu seemed to go away and he was fine for a few days, but now he's got that high fever again ... Come quickly."

"Turn off the light, Gemariah," said Pike after she hung off. "It's too bright in here." Gemariah got off the bed and turned off the main light but left the bedside lamp casting a pale shadow over the bed, the night light in the hall illuminating the doorway. She came back to sit on the bed and held Pike's good hand waiting for the doctor.

"Where did you say it hurts?" said the Doctor gently poking Pike in the abdomen below the stomach, Pike wincing in pain. Dr Sarlat moved his focus to Pike's neck, feeling both sides, checked under his armpits, along both arms and hands, removing the bandage on his finger. He found a small bite mark on a swollen and reddened right middle finger, then removed the bedcovers and checked his legs and immediately saw his right calf was swollen and had a small bite mark surrounded by a large red patch. "Well you've clearly been bitten, Pike. If you had told me this before it would have helped," he said testily. "Right, so let's summarise, you've got abdominal pain, swollen glands—"

"That's just from my boxing yesterday," interrupted a pallid faced Pike—"sensitivity to light, a fever, a rash on your arms and legs, bite marks. All these symptoms suggest rat bite fever."

"What! I have haven't seen any rats!" said Gemariah frightened lifting both feet off the floor onto the bed. "Is it dangerous?"

"You can get it from mice bites too, you know. And yes, it can be deadly

if not treated. There's been a spate recently, actually."

"What's the treatment, Doctor?" said Gemariah anxiously.

"Antibiotics. But he's been taking the antibiotics I prescribed... ?"

"Yes, Doctor, I made sure he did."

"Well then that should have killed it off," said Dr Sarlat puzzled. "I'm going to up the dosage and give him something stronger, vancomycin. And I'll take some blood for testing," he said taking a syringe from his bag. "Let me know as soon as his symptoms change," he said authoritatively after he had collected the sample and left.

Pike's condition remained constant through the night and the next day, Pike waking fitfully then falling asleep, mumbling quietly to himself, while the rain pounded down outside. For dinner, Gemariah heated up a can of chicken soup. 'My Mum always said chicken soup for the body and soul,' she said holding a spoonful up to Pike's mouth, Pike taking a sip after frowning at her. After dinner, Gemariah lay down on top of the bed next to Pike as he slept and fell asleep herself. She was woken in the middle of the night by Pike squirming agitatedly in the bed accompanied by pained shouts and garbled nonsense, sweating profusely. Gemariah shook Pike who half woke still in a daze, one arm swinging wildly hitting her in the face with the back of his hand. "I've got pains all over," he groaned, mumbled something then fell into a fitful sleep again.

Gemariah called Dr Sarlat immediately, followed by Armit in case they needed to hold him down.

"So what's wrong with him?" said Gemariah frantically after the Doctor had finished examining Pike.

"The initial blood test results have come back," said Dr Sarlat. "He definitely had rat bite fever and some kind of viral infection as well. We can't be sure which one, could be influenza but equally could be hepatitis or even HIV! It's hard to pinpoint which one yet; we're doing some follow-up tests now. What's that he's saying, sounds like, 'The mice. Those something mice. Kill them Bos?' But Bos is dead! He's delirious; this could be dangerous. We need to get him to hospital right away."

The mention of the word seemed to rouse Pike and he opened his eyes and sat up, startling both Gemariah and Dr Sarlat. "Don't you *dare* take me from here," he said facing Armit who was standing at the end of the bed. "Tomorrow I'm going to finish him off. I *must* be there to see it. Armit, you

and the Captain make sure of it," Armit acknowledged the order. "You need anything," his head swivelling slowly towards Dr Sarlat, "you bring it here, understood?" then fell back onto his pillow semi-conscious.

Dr Sarlat looked at Armit for any sign of dissent and was met with a deathly stare so he called the hospital and gave instructions on what personnel and equipment to bring. The ambulance arrived thirty minutes later and the medical staff rushed to set up an I.V. drip, monitoring equipment, ventilator, oxygen bottles and defibrillator around the bed in the dim light. Once all was set up to his satisfaction, the Doctor dismissed all but one of the medical staff, who remained while the others returned to Marvod in the ambulance, and asked Gemariah where he could sleep in the house. Gemariah showed him through a connecting door to the adjacent bedroom then returned to Pike's bedside, sitting on the bed holding his hand while the nurse sat on the other side.

Gemariah was woken by the loud pre-dawn calls of waking birds, a bright light streaming in through the window welcoming the end of the rain. She raised her head from the bed where she had fallen forward and looked up groggily at the nurse who smiled back at her, the patient monitoring system screen casting a gently undulating rainbow over the bed; all was calm. She asked the nurse if she wanted some coffee then went downstairs to prepare it, coming back with two cups. Just as she was handing the cup to the nurse Pike suddenly sat up, his body rigid and opened his eyes looking straight at the door, his right hand pointing, accompanied by several alarms sounding, the nurse running from the room to wake the Doctor. "A mouse!" he said, Gemariah turned and saw a small mouse standing in the doorway on its back legs sniffing the air unconcernedly, the fresh dawn light in the hall behind it casting a long silhouette across the room towards the bed. Pike fell back on the bed and Gemariah smiled at the mouse, before it dropped to all fours and ambled off casually out of sight.

"Better call Bishop Cyril," said Dr Sarlat as he entered the bedroom with the nurse. Gemariah took her eyes off the doorway to Pike, he was lying limp on the bed, eyes wide open staring open-mouthed at the ceiling, the room silent.

"It's too late," said Gemariah serenely.

"The nurse started towards the defibrillator but Dr Sarlat shook his head

and held her back while he checked for vital signs, pronouncing him dead to the now forlorn Gemariah, who fell on Pike's chest weeping.

MAG

PART 5

"Oh, hi, Connie," said Gemariah as Constance sat down on the edge of the vacant beach chair next to her. "What *are* you wearing?" she said peering over the top of her sunglasses.

Constance glanced at Gemariah who was lying back in her reclining beach chair, barely clothed in a skimpy bikini, her lithe tanned body shaded by the beach umbrella from direct sunlight, large sunglasses reflecting the bright white sand and crashing surf back at Constance, then down at herself. "It's only a cheap cotton beach dress over my bathing costume, Gem. I wasn't expecting you to ask to meet at the beach, but I guess I am overdressed compared to you."

"Have you got your farm back yet?" said Gemariah taking a sip from her umbrella decorated cocktail then placed it back on the table between them while Constance arranged herself.

"Yes. The final court papers came through a few days ago, Bull Island and the tenant farmer land are ours again in the eyes of the Marvod legal system. Thanks for all your help, Gem; Ivor and Barton have been a big help too. This won't make any difference to the way we run the farms now we've merged our operations, at least until all the other legal issues are resolved, but it's one less headache at least." Constance thanked the waiter as he delivered her glass of sparkling water.

"When's the appeal due to be heard?"

"We've almost finished preparing our case. Just a few more questions for Ivor from the lawyer."

"What are your chances, do you think?"

"The lawyer's very confident. He says," said Constance gathering her thoughts, "the new evidence we've gathered will conclusively demonstrate a history of actions and threats by Pike that created an egregious environment, and under the circumstances not only was making a deal with Pike a natural solution to an unnatural problem', to use his words, 'but under those actions and threats our land was devalued to such an extent that it was almost worthless to anyone except Pike anyway'. And all the stuff we've got now about the tenant farmers and Fixa, 'that helps demonstrate a conspiracy against us', oh ... and 'that the other owners had demonstrably

unreasonable expectations and demands'."

"Oh yeah, whatever did happen to Nadia, Mitson and ... What's his name?"

"Revedir."

"Oh, that's right, Rover Dear, such a strange name, how could I forget."

"I don't know; they won't talk to anyone about it. Let's wait and see. We've already promised to give them back their property, through our lawyer that is, so now the land is ours unencumbered again I've started that process. And if we win the appeal as well, maybe they'll forgive Greenfield. But what about your legal problems?"

"You mean my arrest warrant?"

"No, the girls; is that all resolved now?"

"Pretty much. Pike's will was clear: I got the farm and May and Kate got all his properties in Marvod. But after they found out more about the properties and my arrest warrant was issued the girls didn't want to have anything to do with them, so they challenged the will instead. Oh, you knew all that didn't you? So, my lawyer's had that conciliation meeting with them and Maslyan and they've agreed for her to sell the assets that haven't been seized by the courts and send the proceeds to Maslyan."

"How are you going to get the money to him?"

"The usual; funnel it through the offshore accounts. Lucky they were mostly in my name anyway, eh? My lawyer's in the Craymans now sorting it all out. I don't know all the details, she said to leave it all to her, all I needed to do was just sign some documents, but everyone seems happy. You know, I never really liked it on the farm before Pike's, ahh ... But I suppose it grows on you, right? I can see why everyone is so passionate about it all now."

"And what about your arrest warrant?"

"No change. My lawyer met with the Police Chief and the Mayor. She told me there's just too much bad blood there; even the property confiscations, the donations apparently weren't enough to make up for years of humiliation by Pike. She says that even if I can convince a jury I had nothing to do with running the businesses, they still maintain I benefited from the money, and it would be hard for us to argue otherwise. I'll just have to wait until they retire and are replaced with someone hopefully more amenable. Oh well, it's a shame, but I guess I'll just have to

stay here," said Gemariah archly sipping her cocktail languidly turning on her side to face Constance.

"Did you hear the news about Sarlat?" Constance shook her head. "He's moved out of Marvod! The inquest found Pike had contracted that antivirus thing."

"Yeah, I heard. You mean hantavirus, Gem, H.P.S."

"Yes, H.P.S, and rat bite fever as well. The antibiotics Sarlat prescribed worked for the rat bite fever, but they covered up the effects of the H.P.S. and weakened his body."

"I thought H.P.S. was only found in the Americas?"

"Apparently this was the first ever case outside the Americas."

"Perhaps it was spread by contact with the Cowboy," said Constance with dark irony.

"Well it *was* a strain called the Andes virus so it's possible, I suppose!" said Gemariah oblivious to the sarcasm. "So Sarlat was cleared by the medical board but reprimanded, but then everyone refused to be treated by him anyway, so he had to leave and go to some place out east, I don't know where exactly. Good riddance, I say. Everything's slowly falling into place, don't you think, cuz," said Gemariah happily. "Just think, if Cyril hadn't insisted Pike look into my family history before we got married, if the girls hadn't challenged Pike's will, I might never have found my geneology report, and we would never have found out we were related. I'm not really that interested in that stuff normally so I would never have looked into it myself in a million years!"

"I know, I think that was the only good thing that came out of Cyril's relationship with Pike; a silver lining I guess you could call it. And don't forget everything else as well, you and Ivor, Barton ..."

"Yes," said Gemariah with a broad smile.

"Where is Ivor, by the way? Will he be here soon?"

"Oh, didn't you see him? He's got a conference call with Barton. He went back to the hotel just before you arrived. You should have passed him on the way here."

"O.K. I've still got those questions for Ivor I mentioned earlier. I'll go and meet him in the hotel. See you in the café for lunch? Around one?"

"Thanks Ivor. That's it, no more questions," said Constance shutting

down the audio recorder on her phone. "I'll get the transcript converted to minutes after lunch and do a final check with you."

"I hope I've been of some help."

"Your inside knowledge has been invaluable, Ivor. We didn't have access to that kind of information at the original trial. Our lawyer says your testimony at the appeal should hopefully be enough to sway the judges."

"No problem. I never had anything against you and Mr Greenfield and I never agreed with what Pike and his mongrels did."

"I know, we've talked about this before. Greenfield and I hold nothing against you, I assure you," said Constance gently.

"Yeah, I know we have. But it doesn't matter how many times we talk about it, I still feel guilty about what happened," said Ivor, Constance lightly touching Ivor's forearm.

"What was the call with Barton about?"

"He was just letting me know they've finished the rape harvest. Then we had a long chat about about preparations for autumn."

"O.K., but don't forget what we discussed: after all those years of rape you need to re-invigorate the soil before you sow wheat and barley, and non-invasive tillage, no pesticides, remember that! Barton's got Gemariah's and my authority for day-to-day decisions while we're away, but I need to be involved if you want to change what we agreed. Don't forget, we're the ones with all the experience of trying to meet Alliance requirements."

"Don't worry, Mrs G. It's been a long time since we grew wheat, but I'm sure we'll pick it up as we go along ... I'm joking, Mrs G," said Ivor when Constance frowned.

"I've already talked to the Alliance about the new circumstances, but they still won't drop the rest of the sanctions and tariffs until we give the O.K. Your farm is still only an observer member."

"Understood, Mrs G," said Ivor solemnly.

"It's almost one," said Constance glancing at her watch, "time for lunch. Are you coming down?"

"No, you go ahead, I'll catch you up later."

Constance and Gemariah were seated at their usual table in the café, Constance was placing an order with a waiter from the menu she was holding in front of her when Gemariah started to wave vigorously to

someone behind Constance and beckoned them to come over. Constance turned her head and saw a tall young muscular man at the café entrance returning the wave; he then walked over to the table giving Gemariah a long lingering kiss on the lips to the obvious delight of Gemariah before sitting down next to her.

"Hello again, Ivor," said Constance, Ivor winking at her.

"Have you girls already ordered for me?"

"Hey! Ladies if you don't mind, young man," said Constance sternly.

"I ordered your favourite for you, darling," said Gemariah then leant forward and whispered something to Ivor while Constance finished the order.

"So what have you lovebirds got planned for today?" said Constance.

Gemariah turned to Constance with a wicked smile, "Oh, you know, just laze around, shopping ..."

"Actually, I may decide to stay on longer, with all the attractions there are on offer," said Ivor taking hold of Gemariah's hand and looking into her eyes.

"Well, bear in mind what we all agreed, Ivor," said Constance in a business-like manner. "If you're going to move here permanently, we'll need to replace you as farm manager."

"I haven't made any decision, Mrs G," said Ivor kissing Gemariah again. "Just a thought bubble. I'll discuss it with you first, of course."

"So now you've finished with all the questions, Connie," said Gemariah. "Are you going to keep coming over to see us?"

"Us?" said Constance quizzically.

"Me, I mean."

"Of course, Gem. But maybe not quite so often, at least not until I've got my husband back home."

"Hey, did you guys hear about Cyril?" said Ivor, Constance and Gemariah shaking their head." Apparently a church official walked in on him in his private room at the church and found him giving one of those migrant girls from Kitty's a lesson in humility," said Ivor standing and bowing deeply, all three of them bursting into laughter.

"We shouldn't laugh," said Constance after she had regathered her composure; "it's sad about those poor girls, at least. I thought they all got deported?"

"They were, mostly," said Ivor, "before Kitty's was pulled down, but the story goes she caught his eye attending church each week. She was one of the few regulars from Pike's clubs. Cyril promised her he would speak to Iskaz to stop her getting deported in return for her assistance at the church."

"Assistance!" Gemariah ejaculated. "She must have been a great help for him; I bet he had it bottled up for years!"

"Don't say that, Gem. The thought makes me want to vomit. 1 Corinthians," she continued after a moment, "'he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her'. Cyril must have skipped that bit. Was he charged with anything?"

"No, she didn't lodge a complaint and he hadn't committed a crime, except against his own supposed moral values and those of the church of course—How could he look anyone in the eyes after that?—so the church 'punished' him," said Ivor doing inverted commas with his fingers, "by moving him to a different diocese."

"Which one?" said Gemariah.

"Not sure; somewhere over east," said Ivor, Gemariah and Constance saying the last two words in unison with him then laughed.

"I hope he enjoys the medical treatment he'll get over there," said Gemariah giggling.

"Who took over from him?" said Constance.

"Sovremon. He's head of Forket and Marvod now."

"Sovremon! Ha! I bet that really stings, Cyril."

"Is Armit still missing, darling?" said Gemariah. "I worry him being on the loose and you living over there."

"Don't worry, honey, he's long gone. No-one's seen him since ... you know ... when you last saw him with Dr Sarlat. Rumours are he went home months ago and re-joined I.S.I.S."

The food arrived at the table and the waiter left an international paper Constance had requested. While Gemariah and Ivor were occupied ladling food out onto each other's plate, Constance glanced at the front page and saw a cartoon of the Cowboy's shrunken head protruding from the stocks wearing a broken crown. She picked up the paper and folded it out finding the head was on the body of a huge bulging and obese bull, a group of other normal sized bulls and cows standing on two legs, each with bandages

and plasters on their body, throwing tomatoes, popcorn, eggs and various other things at him, each with a different label, 'free speech', 'R.I.G.ged', 'fifth estate', internet freedom', 'Pike', at the front shown as a rodent throwing a peanut with the label 'democracy' below a poison sign, the Cowboy's slavering mouth open in the process of catching it, and in the bottom corner a miniature but muscular bulldog with its leash held in one of the Cowboy's hands, yapping inconsequentially. Below the cartoon she read that the Cowboy was on trial on charges of animal cruelty and alleged illegal feed supplements. He had ordered the charges dismissed while he was Mayor, tried and failed to get incumbency limitations overturned, and after he had been voted out of office the charges had been resurrected. He was facing the likelihood of licence removal, which would prevent him from owning a bull riding school, rodeo and bulls, 'the only bull,' the article said, 'he will likely now be able to own is a mastiff.

"You know," said Gemariah out of the blue, "I never realised Pike was hated so much. I got plenty of messages of sympathy for me, but loads more telling me they were glad he was finally gone. And there was an anonymous one that said he was a blight that had been eradicated and the best thing I could do now would be to rip out the whole crop, burn it and replace it with another," she said waiting for a reaction from Constance, who just shrugged slightly. "And in the end, Gem," said Constance, "all it took was the smallest of assassins: a mouse."