

# **THE MUSKETEERS OF HAVEN**

A Science Fiction Story

By M S Lawson

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markslawson@optusnet.com.au

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Other books by this author

Claire Takes On The Galaxy (ebook, published on the web site Dreame, 2019)

Darth Vader – The good guy who lost (non-fiction ebook, 2018)

A Planet for Emily (ebook, 2017)

Disgraced in all of Koala Bay (ebook, 2016)

The Zen of Being Grumpy (non-fiction published by Connor Court, 2013)

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## Obstacles

Some writers acknowledge help in writing their books I can only point to self-imposed obstacles, notably the temptations of the computer games produced by the Swedish game developer Paradox. *Hearts of Iron IV* (World War II grand strategy) and its various mods, as well as *Stellaris* (space empires strategy) and *Imperator: Rome* (grand strategy in the Roman world), occupied time which I should have spent on this book. Curse you Paradox. The venerable *Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games) – never could get into Civs V or VI - also chewed up a lot of time, as did *They Are Billions* by Polish developer Numantian Games. A dishonourable mention must also go to Lion Shield's *Kingdoms and Castles*. Curse you computer game developers; curse you all.

## Genesis

Some years ago a sub-editor of the newspaper I worked on asked me, apropos of not much - America was invading somewhere or other at the time - if I thought any war could ever be described as just. Puzzled over why the question should be asked of me, I responded that I didn't think any war could be labelled "just", but there had been wars that could not be avoided.

## Prologue

The sudden appearance of a huge ring of metal in mid-distance earth orbit initially caused confusion, then concern, then puzzlement and, finally, curiosity. How had it been placed there and who or what had placed it? More importantly, why had it been placed there? A scan of the electromagnetic frequencies showed that The Ring – it was simply known as The Ring – was broadcasting the same statement over and over in all of the earth’s major languages.

“Use this device to visit our planet. You may live there, mine and farm it, but do not disturb us.”

A probe was sent through The Ring. It vanished then returned hours later with pictures of a world much like Earth but with no cities, civilisations or sentient species. More probes were sent, until one found a building in the uplands of a continent in the planet’s temperate zone. This huge structure was suspected of being connected to the ring in that both were featureless and made the same amount of sense.

A party of earnest young scientists was sent. After checking carefully for nasty diseases, they landed on the surface and walked around the structure, as big as four football stadiums arranged in a square, and about as tall. All of the outer walls and the roof were made of concrete-like material. They measured and studied and wrote dramatic bulletins about their attempts to make contact with whatever alien intelligence was inside/behind the structure and The Ring. They found that the structure was hollow and gave off a small amount of heat. Weak, varying electromagnetic fields were detected. Obviously, something was happening inside the structure, which extended well underground, but what?

The one visible feature in the structure was a single door – actually a slab of metal that was about the size and shape of a door for a human and set at ground level, but without doorknob, door knocker or doorbell. The space behind it was hollow, as near as they could tell. They knocked on the door. No response. They pounded on it. Nothing. The expedition had a hammer. This was fetched and, after some agonising over exactly what constituted an aggressive act, it was used to bash the door. The hammer left no mark but made the metal ring like a gong. That brought a response, in the form of a message sent on the same frequency as the message from the gate.

“We asked not to be disturbed. Use the rest of the planet as you wish but leave us alone.”

Well, okay, if the aliens wanted to be left alone that was cool, albeit unsociable. But why wouldn’t these creatures communicate? Fiction was full of Aliens who dismissed humans as primitive layabouts or lectured them about their wasteful ways. Other fictional aliens worked for decades to subvert human society to their own ends, or who skipped that boring subversion process in favour of blowing stuff up. Now that was communication. What could anyone do about aliens who invited humans to a whole new planet and then did not want to communicate at all?

Academics were consulted and, after much discussion and conferencing, came up with an answer that suited them. The aliens did not consider humans worthy of their time because the human race had not paid enough attention to fixing all the problems of the moment – poor minority rights, domestic violence, gender inequality, reduction in biodiversity and environmental degradation. The answer must be to build a community on the new world – now named Haven – that would show-case human abilities in sustainable economic activity, living peacefully and in creating a nurturing, caring, non-violent environment for their children, with inclusive decision making and respect for the rights of all. A few sceptics pointed out that the messages did not indicate that the aliens thought the humans unworthy, only that they wanted to be left alone. Perhaps, the sceptics speculated, the aliens just wanted humans on the planet to prevent anyone else settling there and making a nuisance of themselves. These sceptics were promptly condemned by right thinking academics for spreading “misinformation” and shunned.

More people arrived at Haven and set up a settlement by a river on a fertile plain about two hour’s drive by electric car from the structure. They built a road from the resulting city, called just Haven City, to the structure. There was a small gorge just beside the structure with a river at the bottom of it, so the road required a bridge. Having undertaken such intrusive work on the peaceful natural landscape, the humans decided they might as well extend the same road out to a large summer camp where they sent their children to have constructive, sustainable fun. Later they put in a road junction with the joining road going out to a launch and receive site for rockets from Earth in the hills above the structure.

With that work done the governing committee realised that they might as well build a visitors centre across the road from the structure. They cut the grass, after some debate about whether grass cutting intruded too much on the environment, put in a car park, picnic tables and benches and then got on with the job of living in a peaceful, sustainable community without net emissions, and with full consultation on such matters as which set of toilets transgender individuals should use. Machines were brought in to do the work for what was mostly a community full of academics who had a whole world to investigate in a non-invasive way. A Haven Executive Office (words such as authority or department were considered too dominative, and the term colony was right out) was set up on Earth to organise delivery of more machines and parts through a network of orbital stations, present the settlement to the world and provide support to the ethical decision making process on Haven.

One early, major crisis occurred when the emissions free, sustainable energy network of unsightly wind turbines and square kilometres of photovoltaic arrays, plus some truly colossal batteries, could not be made to produce enough electricity for the colony. Worse, it occasionally failed to produce any electricity at all. After various academics finished justifying this failure on the basis that the theory was not wrong, just the execution of it, and that green energy still ruled, Earth sent a whole nuclear reactor.

This was not one of the huge reactors with gigantic water cooling towers and rooms full of computers, but a standardised, small scale reactor – an adaption of the type used on nuclear submarines for many years, and about the same size as one of those vessels. It was installed, encased in concrete and all working parts were sealed. The builders told the settlers to connect power cables to it, instruct the reactor’s operating system to make up any shortfall from the renewable energy network, but not to mess with the machinery. ‘Don’t open the

inspection hatches or you'll void the warranty big-time', they were told. 'We'll be back in five years to change the fuel rods.'

This new installation was sited well away from Haven City and never mentioned in public announcements. It was evidence that renewable energy networks did not work as idealists endlessly declared that they should, therefore it was part of a big-energy conspiracy which should not be acknowledged.

Another self-induced crisis was the introduction of horses. The use of such animals – for which there was no local equivalent - would be a fun way to get around and interact with the landscape in a not-very-invasive way, especially when tourists finally came to the planet. But what about the rights of the horses? Did they want to hang out on another planet? Could they be made to eat the local grass species? What about the dung the horses produced? Would the Haven ecosystem break up that dung or would it just sit there providing ideal breeding places for the local flies? These and other questions were answered and horses introduced, but the tourists to undertake treks using these horses never arrived. Tourism in all its forms was deemed to be far too invasive for Haven's fragile ecosystems. Some settlers took up horse riding and that was tolerated, just.

Apart from these crises the settlers got on with the job of proving themselves worthy of alien attention with sustainable practices, a caring and consultative approach to community life and a nurturing approach to raising children. The children for their part wandered around the new world, exchanged bootleg copies of media programs they were not allowed to access, wished that they could attend concerts and fantasised about eating hamburgers. Only meat substitutes derived from plants were permitted on Haven. When they became older they adopted the odd habit of hiking up into the hills and howling at Haven's two moons, much as wolves might howl in earth's forests. 'It's just something to do,' they told their parents.

Such eccentricities, however, did not interfere with the main business of the settlement being run in an ethical, non-judgemental, inclusive way as a community at peace with itself and the universe. Conflicts were resolved through discussion and the children were taught that violence was never the answer to any question. For above all the settlement would be at peace.

The aliens in the structure would somehow see all this virtue, so the theory went, conclude that the humans were worthy of their time and come out to play. As the older settlers frequently told themselves, what could possibly go wrong?

## Chapter One – Hating Gideon

*The angel found Gideon, not threshing wheat secretly but hiding from his colleagues in the Haven Executive Office behind a computer screen and told him his mission was to rescue the people of Haven from the Midianites.*

*"Why me?" asked Gideon, "for I am the least of my people – I'm a contractor here, not even a staff member, and they all hate me."*

*"You're a soldier aren't you?" said the angel of the Lord, "so get busy."*

Gideon Swift was not just hated by his colleagues at the Haven Executive Office, he was loathed, despised and reviled to the point where he had become interested in seeing just how bad it could get.

He got a strong taste of what was to come, and of the general staff culture, on his first day as a contractor when he arrived to find some of the employees staging a protest sit-in in the foyer of their own office over the issue of using the pronouns he and she in personnel contracts. This was considered to be categorising individuals into genders and that was bad.

“What do we want?” shouted one bearded you man in a Tee shirt on his feet in front of a half a dozen mostly youthful protestors, waving banners reading “Gender is fluid” and “Gender is a choice.”.

“No labels in contracts!” they shouted back.

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

The noise was deafening.

“Is it often like this?” Gideon asked of the 50s-something lady sitting behind the reception desk. She wore a floral print dress with a circle of flowers on top of lank, blonde hair that made her look as if she could have stepped straight from a flower power protest of the 1960s. A sign on her desk read:

“First contact facilitator, not receptionist, you judgemental arseholes.”

This facilitator-not-receptionist shrugged but did not smile. “Most days,” she said. “But you can see their point. Transgender people can be offended by the use of he or she.”

“Guess,” said Gideon, who wasn’t going to pick a fight on his first day. “I’m Gideon Swift here as an IT contractor. I’ve an appointment with your HR people.”

As soon a Gideon mentioned his name the facilitator-not-receptionist’s attitude changed from indifference to icy hostility.

“Oh you’re the baby killer,” she hissed at him.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, you’re a baby killer, a soldier.”

“A reservist quartermaster sergeant, and we don’t mistreat babies in stores,” said Gideon evenly. It was fashionable at the time among the fringe dwellers of social media to revile soldiers as “baby killers” - the worst accusation that anyone could think of. Soldiers supported totalitarian regimes and were trained to kill, so they were obviously all bad, or so their reasoning went. This accusation had been hurled at Gideon before but to have it hissed at him by a not-receptionist on his first day in a new contract was taking abuse to the next level. He later realised that he was lucky that the protestors did not hear the receptionist above their own chanting or notice her hissing, otherwise he might have had to flee for his life.

“What do we want?”

“No labels in contracts!”

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

“Maybe if you just let me through and tell me the office to go to,” said Gideon.

The not-receptionist flung a visitor’s identity card at him, spat “fifth floor, room 503” and buzzed him through the security gate.

The HR person Gideon found in room 503 was at least not overtly hostile and had the grace to acknowledge that Gideon might have a problem, as she showed him to his desk.



“There was real trouble about you being hired,” she told him. “Everyone’s past employment histories are disclosed as part of our transparency directives and your CV says you’re a soldier.”

“Sure,” Gideon shrugged. “I did a year full time and been active in the reserves as part of deal in which the army paid for my education. I was deployed once to count bandages for a relief operation. Now I’m a quartermaster sergeant.”

“Okay..” said the PR lady. “What is a quartermaster?”

“Keeps the stores. Gets the right equipment to the right people at the right time.”

“Including guns?”

“Oh yes, guns and ammunition.”

“I see,” she said distantly. “In fact, we almost had a full strike over Dr Benson – the HEO director – hiring you, the moment the committees found out you were a soldier.”

“A strike? But if it’s that much of a problem why hire me at all? There are plenty of others who do what I do who aren’t in the reserves.”

“That’s what we told Dr Benson but he insisted that you be hired anyway, and you specifically.”

“I’ve heard of Dr Benson but why, on earth, would he take any interest in me? I’ve never met the man?”

“We were curious about that too,” said the HR person. “Here is your desk.” She walked off quickly, glad to be shot of her embarrassing companion.

Once seated at his desk, Gideon’s next interaction with his colleagues was when a woman appeared in front of him, arms folded. She had long, red hair and a figure that reminded Gideon he was newly single, but the woman’s hostile stare told him that flirting was not on the agenda.

“Baby killer!” spat red haired and marched off, shoulders back.

“Nice to chat,” Gideon called after her. He was not a man to wilt because others thought badly of him, which was just as well as all his new colleagues considered him a waste of office space. As the protest in the foyer indicated, those who gravitated to the HEO were attracted by the thought of a new world free of big energy conspiracies, and shadowy, sinister government forces. As far as these activist types were concerned Gideon’s humble role in the military was in the same category as the leaders of black op teams (they knew that phrase at least) which, they imagined, slaughtered villages full of innocent people for ill-defined purposes. Like the HR person they had no idea what the terms quartermaster or sergeant meant.

If he left anything on the desk it was taken and smashed (a coffee cup) or taken, “baby killer” written on it in big, red letters and returned (a family photograph). Conversation stopped whenever he entered the lunchroom, and they would all turn to look at him.

“Killed any babies today, soldier,” sneered one bearded man, his hair in a bun.

“My rank is sergeant,” replied Gideon calmly, “and not so far today. Weekly parade is on Wednesdays. I’ll see what I can do then.”

As rational discussion, or tolerance of dissent were not part of the DNA of the office, his only option was to turn the other cheek. Any attempts by him to, say, sneer back or smash photos in return would result in instant denunciations and give his many enemies (the whole staff) a good reason to ask for him to be sacked.

The men were bad - Gideon came to associate beards with trouble – but the women could be worse. If three activist women gathered together, they seemed to reach a critical

mass of meanness, and shout angry comments at him as they passed his desk. His response was to smile and wave.

“Nice to have this conversation,” he would say.

His colleagues were so mean to him that Gideon became morbidly curious about just how far this meanness would go. He recalled reading of someone living in a Latin American country where most government functions had broken down, and the writer had become interested in seeing just how bad conditions could get. So it was with him at the HEO.

The part-time soldier liked the occasional cup of coffee. Blameless though that would be in any other office, at the Haven Executive Office it proved a real problem. Coffee was banned as, apart from adverse health effects on those who drank it, the steam contributed to indoor pollution. He brought in some instant coffee of his own – he was no coffee connoisseur – only for the offending material to be taken off him and replaced with a formal warning about his failure to respect the rights of others. He framed this warning and put it on his desk, but the frame was smashed when he wasn't there, and he was handed another for failing to take official warnings seriously.

Unlike the previous warning, Gideon received the second in an interview with the head of the workplace rights committee – the committee that all the others, even HR, were afraid of.

“Your behaviour shows that you don't respect warnings about the rights of others,” she said.

“On the contrary, keeping the warning framed on my desk shows that I wanted to be reminded of it at all times.”

“Nonsense,” snapped the committee head. “We know how recalcitrants and military types like yourself think.”

“If you hate me so much because I've been somewhere near the army, why don't you get rid of me? I'm just a contractor, not even a staff member.”

“If it was up to me, you'd be gone,” said the woman. “Having a trained killer in the office sends entirely the wrong message about peaceful co-existence, but we've been told you have to stay.”

“Really, who told you this?”

“Never mind, baby killer,” said the committee head. “But we don't have to put up with your extremist attitudes.”

“Okay,” said Gideon, stifling a laugh. He knew from the biographies on the intranet that the committee head had done a Masters in Marxist Theory and actively encouraged people not to vote in elections. Voting for politicians only encouraged them. Best to tear down the whole rotten, corrupt, exploitive system and replace it with something Marxist, where citizens were servants of the state and their electoral choices were guided. Being called extremist by her struck Gideon as funny.

“No, humph” (he put a hand to his mouth) “extremist, humph” (his shoulders shook) “attitudes”. He finished with a fixed grin. The committee head glared at him. She was extremely good looking in a naturalist sort of way, but Gideon was so preoccupied with not laughing that he did not trust himself to make the traditional response to complete rejection “I guess a fuck is out of the question”. This was just as well, he thought later, as it might have tipped the committee head over the edge.

That head left muttering about failure to conform and closed the door to the conference room just as Gideon lost control. He covered his mouth so that the office would

not be aware that he was laughing, but his sides shook and tears ran down his cheeks. It was fully ten minutes before he had recovered enough to creep back to his desk. But even then, whenever he thought about being reprimanded for his “extremist behaviour” he had to suppress chuckles. His workmates glared at him suspiciously.

The easiest part to bear of this discrimination was not being invited to any of the seminars held in the office meeting rooms with titles such as ‘asserting your rights’ or ‘toleration in the workplace’, or the endless meetings of this or that workplace committee, which were a major feature of the HEO. These committees had some say in how the place was run, but all Gideon knew about these meetings was when he passed glass-fronted meeting rooms full of earnest people deep in discussion. Sometimes there might be a diagram on an overhead display, at other times these meetings would be addressed by someone standing up, which seemed serious. Then he would get to the open plan area, where the work was done, to find it almost empty. The meeting rooms were full and the work area empty.

What could they be discussing? Given how the staff behaved towards him he was almost curious to know if he featured in the seminar on workplace toleration, but not curious enough to attend. What he would not do was reward this bizarre behaviour by seeking forgiveness, or trying to fit in. The soldier was a man of his own mind.

Instead it had the opposite effect. If his colleagues thought their behaviour was the answer to anything, well, stuff them. Although he had a strong interest in military history, he had never really identified himself as a soldier, or thought much about military life. It had been a means of paying for his education and he was working out his time. He had turned down, with polite thanks suggestions that he apply for officer training. Now, if they were going to spit on him, he would spit right back metaphorically. Maybe he would take that officer training course?

Harder to take was the sarcasm from those who were meant to be briefing him on his job. He had been called in as a contract IT trouble shooter but after a week was still unsure what he was supposed to be doing there.

“What system am I meant to be looking at?” he asked a bearded individual in his first meeting.

“I dunno, baby killer. We don’t have any guided missiles that need targeting.”

“Oookay, but you guys called me in for some reason, and you’re paying me. Is there anything you want me to do while I’m here?”

“Comm systems for the colony,” muttered beard, obviously gritting his teeth.

“There’s a problem.”

In between being abused, Gideon looked at those systems and, as he was good at what he did, he realised that the real problem with the settlement communications was that no-one seemed to be communicating. A substantial flow of data ranging from texts and tweets through to long documentaries on how the non-violent approach was really making a difference and, more usefully, information on the environment of a whole, new planet usually flowed out of Haven through satellites on either side of the star gate and down to a receiving station on Earth. Emails and entertainment went the other way. The torrent of data flowing out from Haven had shrunk to a trickle and no-one knew why.

Gideon checked the equipment at the earth end. He contacted the separate organisation that ran the satellites and launched the rockets. It had none of the staff politics of the HEO and its IT people assured Gideon that they had looked closely at their equipment. Everything was in order. Gideon could not raise anyone on the Haven side of the gate but

managed to check the equipment remotely. No problem. He intercepted a few of the files sent from Haven, only to find that they were encrypted. The only part he could read was a header “for the director’s eyes only”. Hmmm!

On a hunch, Gideon monitored the main Haven web site and realised that although the site was being updated regularly it was with old news or with statements from the HEO office. Comments and queries which required a response from someone on Haven were being palmed off. However, there was nothing in any of the news feeds and nothing on the staff bulletin boards to suggest trouble on Haven. What was going on?

He could not discuss his suspicions with anyone. As far as he could tell most of the staff members were too busy attending workplace committee meetings to notice that there was very little news from Haven. In any case, they were hardly likely to listen to a word he had to say. Gideon did the only thing he could and wrote an email to the director outlining his suspicions. After that he was reduced to drumming his fingers on his desk, wondering what to do next.

Gideon had graduated from finger drumming to going through the Haven web site for clues about what might be happening there, when a staff member spoke to him.

“Baby killer,” she snapped. It was the same woman who had spat on him on the first day. “The director wants to see you in his office.”

“Dr Benson wants to see me?”

“Maybe he wants to sack the extremist baby killer,” she snarled, and walked away.

“Love you too,” said Gideon, absently.

As it was not safe to leave anything behind, he closed his IT connection and put his water bottle – the only thing he kept on his desk - into the small backpack he used. If he was going to be sacked, he could simply walk out and be damned to them all. He was a contractor, anyway. As he left the few staff members not at meetings jeered.

“The baby killer’s going,” chortled one.

“I’ll treasure every moment of being with you guys,” said Gideon.

Dr Benson looked every inch the aging activist that he was. His flowing white hair was tied back in a ponytail, weathered skin indicated long nights camped in the open to prevent development or logging. His tee shirt did little to hide his many tattoos. On different shelves of his cluttered office were souvenirs of his many attempts to subvert the exploitative, capitalist system. There was a picture of a young Dr Benson lying in front of a bulldozer, and another of him being chained to a tree. On one wall was a framed doctorate awarded for environmental studies. Gideon understood that his research had been genuinely ground breaking.

“Sit down please,” he said. His tone was not friendly but it was not hostile, which placed him streets ahead of any other staff member in his dealings with Gideon. At least the sacking would be civilised. Gideon sat.

“Coffee? I’m told you’re a coffee man?”

“Well, yes I am,” said Gideon, taken aback. “But doesn’t coffee steam violate some directive or other?”

“Yes, it does,” said Benson, “but I won’t tell if you don’t.” The chairman brought out two cups, hot water, milk and Gideon’s confiscated jar of instant coffee. “I used your own coffee. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I guess not.” The soldier saw that his cup had already been poured. He added milk, he did not take sugar, and drank it gratefully. There was a slight metallic flavour to it, but he put that down to the herbal tea that had no doubt previously been drunk out of the cup.

“The staff have been making life difficult for you,” said the chairman.

“You could say that. Reading between the lines they seem to have a set against soldiers.” Gideon took another sip of coffee. That metallic flavour was more pronounced, but it seemed rude to point this out.

“I don’t like soldiers much myself,” said Benson. Gideon thought the chairman was eying him curiously. “But I have need of them.”

“What?”

Dr Benson got out of his chair and paced up and down, hands clasped behind his back. Instead of the calm executive director he had been, he became agitated, stopping every now and then at the door to listen as he lectured. Unlike almost all other officers in the HEO the director’s office did not have a glass front on the corridor. Instead it had an impressive window view out onto a canyon of skyscrapers. Dr Benson touched a button on his desk and that window was masked by blinds.

“When Russia was hit by a major famine in 1920,” said Benson, pacing, “Lenin re-introduced markets. Farmers could sell their produce and be taxed on what they earned. Bolsheviks of the time thought that it was a betrayal of socialist principals, but it worked for a period and that’s all I wanted our people to do – bend their principles for just a while and in response to a crisis – just a temporary fix. But I just couldn’t get them to do it.”

“What is this man talking about?” thought Gideon.

“As your email indicates you’ve realised that our communications problem has nothing to do with the equipment or software. The problem is that Haven City is not communicating, and that failure is due to the settlement being under attack.”

“Say what?” thought Gideon, and he realised that he could not speak or move. Then he remembered the metallic flavour in the coffee.

“I know you can hear and understand me,” said Benson taking the coffee cup before it fell out of Gideon’s fingers, “and for what it’s worth I’m sorry I’ve had to do this, but I’m desperate - at my wits end. Haven has been invaded by thousands of creatures with very basic technology – just swords, spears and shields. Our people have taken to calling them Midis, short for the Midianites of the bible. The situation calls for military intervention and so I’m violating all my principles and sending you to Haven, in the next mission.”

Gideon noted this as if it was an item of business in an exceptionally boring meeting agenda.

“I’ve chosen you not because your name is Gideon – yes, I know about the Bible story - but because you’re a soldier I could get into the office, and then use my powers as director to switch you onto the mission lists. I spoke with someone in your unit who said you turned down officer training. I’m not sure what that means, but it sounds like you’re the best of those I could shanghai into this mission. Only one other is a soldier. The rest have criminal records and that might do.”

“Criminal records? What on earth did Benson think that soldiers did?” Gideon later realised that the chairman did not understand the difference. Both groups were occasionally violent, so they were both the same in his mind.

“I’ve had to put this all together at the very last moment. I know there are supposed to be ways to hire mercenaries, but I have no idea how to do that. I begged the Haven committee

to see sense and ask governments for help. All I wanted for them was to drop their non-violent approach for a short while, and get governments to call in those teams with guns and hoods that shoot people..”

“SAS or SEAL teams, maybe Delta forces or Marine Commandos? Paratroopers or marines if you want more of a crowd,” thought Gideon, in his drugged state.

“Those people could have dealt with the Midis easily. No need for massacres, just a little strong action now would save a lot of grief later. But even when our own people were being massacred..”

“WHAT!”

“.. the committee could not see the sense of calling in the military. The matter was debated for hours and then even my governing committee here forbade me from taking any action. Non-violent resistance to enslavement was the only solution, they told me.”

“Enslavement? Was this guy for real?”

“I’ve now done the only thing I could even begin to think of and found some people who know about guns and violence, including you as a soldier.”

“Yeah, right! A reservist quartermaster sergeant,” thought Gideon, “as if I’m going to be of any use in a front line.”

“I’m sending you and the others ostensibly as part of the negotiating team to provide security. The negotiating team won’t know anything about you until you all get to the rocket port on Haven, but I’ve managed to buy three hunting rifles with ammunition which I’ve hidden in pods full of the equipment needed to fix the fictional communications problems we’ve been having with Haven City. You may be too late. We’ve lost contact with the whole city. Last we heard the children had been shipped off to a summer place they use, well away from the city itself. But we don’t know what happened to the adults. I want you and your team..”

“My team? People I’ve never met with no equipment beyond a few sports-store rifles to do something I’m not trained for and have been shanghai’d into.”

“.. to do whatever it takes to restore order and defeat these Midis, or at least make them see that violence is not the approach.”

If Gideon had been able to in his drugged state, he would have laughed at the last statement. He was aware that Benson was standing beside him with something in his hand.

“I said I don’t like soldiers and I don’t. I loathe what they stand for, but I have real need for one, fuck you all.”

Darkness descended.

## Chapter Two – Grievous Ordeal

*“We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind.”*  
Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 1940.

Gideon became aware that he was staring at a ceiling. Then he realised he had no-idea where he was. The last thing he remembered was a speech by Benson who had slipped him a drug in his coffee. How weird was that? Well it was all over now. No doubt Benson had been

arrested and Gideon was home in bed, the Haven Executive Office a bad memory. But he did not remember a concrete ceiling at home.

He looked down – he could move his eyes but could barely stir his head – and realised that he was in some sort of capsule, with a mask over his mouth and a tube down his throat. The tube was, in turn, attached to a fixture on the side of the capsule. More tubes were attached to his arm, and electrodes taped to his chest and head. Hospital then. When did hospitals have concrete ceilings and why was this sort of treatment thought necessary for a case of drugging? Unless.. but how could Benson have gotten a drugged person through the launch administration people – a completely separate group from the executive office?

The mask and tube had become uncomfortable. Gideon found that he could move his arms and, with considerable effort he pushed the mask up, over his face. The breathing tube followed. He took several relieved breaths then let the tube and mask drop over the side of his capsule. He pulled the tubes and electrodes from his body. There, that should bring the nurses. No-one came. With considerable difficulty, he swung his legs over the side of the capsule and levered himself upright – to find that he was in a parking garage or, to be strictly accurate, in a space that reminded him strongly of a parking garage. It had the same blank concrete walls and columns, floor and ceiling. No decoration at all. Unlike a parking garage, however, there did not seem to be a way for cars to get in and out, just a door at one end.

He looked around. There were five other capsules and, to judge from the movement, people were struggling to get out of all of them. Gideon was one of the first up. To his left was a man with straggly red hair and beard and a fierce number of tattoos on the bits of the skin Gideon could see. He was also about the about the size and shape of a small gorilla. Someone to be wary of. To his right was a man with long, dark hair, a spade beard and the look of an all-in wrestler. He managed to stand and fixed the reserve sergeant with his beady eyes.

“You the shit in charge of this fuck-up,” he growled.

Charming!

“Don’t think anyone’s in charge,” said Gideon, grabbing the side of his crib for support. He did not think this was the time to mention Dr Benson’s speech and comment about ‘his team’. He became aware that he was wearing socks but no shoes. What happened to his shoes? For that matter, what had happened to his clothes. They were all wearing one-piece technician overalls.

“Where the fuck are we?” said the red-haired man.

Gideon noticed a tall figure standing in the shade of a pillar, at the far end of concrete space.

“You beside the pillar,” he called, pointing. “You know what’s going on?”

The figure took two paces forward, emerging from the shadow. It was humanoid in basic form with two hands, two legs and a head and dressed in a blue, luminous suit, but his face was a wrinkled ellipse, like the cross section of a gridiron football, with two dark eyes that never blinked, a thin mouth and a vast, curved prominence of a nose. The creature towered over the humans and was considerably broader.

“What the fuck is that,” said the charmer.

“Whatever it is, it ain’t human,” said the redhaired man.

“What’s going on, honeys?” said a female voice. Gideon turned to see an Asian female who might politely be called chunky emerging from her capsule. Beside her was a

small dark man who chose not to say anything. As Gideon later discovered, he rarely said anything at all.

“Hey, shithead,” called the charmer. “Call the boss down here to tell us what’s happening?”

The creature said nothing.

“I’m talking to you!”

This also produced zero result.

“I guess we’re not in Kansas anymore, honeys?” said the female.

Gideon had to agree. The capsules they had been in had Haven Executive Office stencilled in large letters on the side, as well as a ‘Keep upright at all times’ supplemented with an arrow that pointed in the right direction. They had been offloaded on arrival and brought to this place, wherever it was. He then noticed another, small capsule with COMMS stencilled on the side, behind his own pod. He flipped open the top of this to find that it contained a few items of equipment which Gideon couldn’t identify plus a notice headed “Confiscation”.

The notice was a form that had been filled in by what amounted to an inspection officer, who must have gone through the box before it was loaded aboard the space ship. The form included a series of small boxes with a one line label beside each. The box labelled “dangerous implements” was ticked and beside that was written “three rifles”. Another box for dangerous goods was ticked with “30 boxes of ammunition” written beside it. At the bottom of the form in a space marked comments, the same official had written “incident referred to police for investigation”.

“So much for Benson’s carefully-planned fight back,” thought Gideon, but at least it confirmed the director’s story and what he had suspected. “We’re in Haven,” he said to the others, loudly.

“What?” said the red haired man. “You don’t buy that load of crap that Benson-dude handed us, do you?”

“Haven? You’re shitting me,” said the Asian girl. “I was thinking about moving to another city and now I’m on a different planet?”

“I’ve had enough of this,” said the wrestler-type and he marched over to the tall creature. Although the wrestler type was a tall man he was full head shorter than the creature, which tilted its head to look at him. As that was the only movement the creature had made since emerging from the pillar, Gideon suspected that it was mechanical, or perhaps bio-mechanical, rather than flesh and blood.

“Listen, shit-head, call your head guy down here now.”

No result.

Charmer grabbed the creature’s clothes in both hands and hauled. The cloth moved a little, the creature did not.

“Fuck, we’ve got rights. Get your guy down here.”

By then Gideon had recovered enough to notice more of his surroundings including a distant, rhythmic clanging sound, as if a bell was being hit, every few seconds by a heavy mallet. Gideon had watched the news reports from Haven in the early days, before the place had become a settlement dedicated to political correctness, and he realised where they might be.

“We’re in that Alien structure on Haven. We’re inside it.”



“WHAT?” said the red-haired man. “You mean that big place they found? The one with the aliens inside who didn’t want to know us.”

“At a guess. Pretty sure there’s nothing like this in Haven City,” said Gideon, indicating his surroundings. “All their large areas have windows, and I think someone’s knocking on the structure front door.”

“Yeah, how do you know that?”

“Just listen to the sound? Can’t you hear it?”

“Oh yeah,” said the red-haired man after a pause. “Couldn’t hear over Boothie shouting.”

Boothie, for Boothroyd, had indeed been screaming obscenities at the android for precisely no result.

“So, what’re we going to do, honey,” said the Asian woman. Her name was Honey because she called everyone honey.

“Well, when Boothie stops shouting at our friendly neighbourhood android,” said Gideon, “I’ll try.”

“Hey, Boothfuck,” yelled the red-haired man. “Let this guy have a go.”

Boothroyd looked around and snarled but stopped shouting. He pushed the creature, hard. It did not move.

Gideon walked up to the android, still a little unsteady. The creature moved its head slightly to look at him.

“We know we’re in the big structure we have seen, but we don’t know what we are doing here. We are here against our will. We also know that someone is hitting the entrance door - panel. Can we talk to the person in charge please?”

The android stared at Gideon with its deep, dark eyes for what seemed an age then abruptly stood to one side and held out a hand, fingers extended, towards the room’s one door. Gideon walked towards it, android following.

“Don’t forget us,” yelled the red-haired man.

“I won’t,” Gideon called over his shoulder.

Beyond the door was another corridor then a lift which took him up to the receiving room of ‘The Witches’, as Gideon promptly dubbed them.

They never thought of any name other than The Witches. They had the same long, pointed faces and very prominent, beaky nose of the android and so resembled the popular idea of witches. Unlike that popular image, however, they wore bright red, flowing robes akin to an Indian sari with a gold trim and a hood. When Gideon entered the reception room and saw them for the first time they were seated on high backed, ornate chairs on a dais, as if they were three queens receiving the commoner earthman, an impression reinforced by the room’s rich, red carpeting, small trees in gigantic pots of earth at either end of the dais and walls lined with an impressive number of portraits of witches all in slightly different poses. All he could see of the creatures was their faces and, when he first saw them, they all had their eyes shut and appeared to be humming.

Gideon stood there for a few moments waiting for them to acknowledge his existence and then coughed discreetly. Three pairs of eyes snapped open to stare at the impertinent human.

“You are the leader of the group below?” said the middle witch. She spoke with a slight English accent.

“I cannot be called a leader, as I only just met the others.”

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