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Opening extract from

Slave Harvest

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ONE

She shouldn't be here.

Jessica Lane felt that strongly. She felt it as soon as she heard the boy screaming, saw him, one of the Harrington boys supposed to be on watch, racing into the Great Hall with the terrified cry of 'Outside! *Outside!*' on his lips. She felt it as the party was instantly forgotten, everyone abandoning their dancing or their drinking and surging out into the quad, faces marked with apprehension and anxiety and fear, herself borne helplessly along with them. She felt it as she emerged squinting and dazzled into a night that had lost the quality of darkness.

She felt it most acutely of all when she realised why.

Spaceships studded the sky. Alien spaceships. Jessica didn't need a crash course in extraterrestrial technology to recognise them for what they were. Human beings had never constructed such craft. Vast of size, colossal in dimension, they sliced through the night like blades of silver fire. Their design reminded Jessica, as far as her numbed brain was capable of coherent memory at this particular moment, of the sickles or the scythes farmers had once used to harvest their crops in fields of gold. The ships were fashioned like the crescent moon, and on almost the same scale, it seemed, their twin tapered points hundreds of metres apart. They were like the

sheerest of mountains, like silver icebergs on the sea of the sky, plying their course with imperious disdain for the tiny knot of youngsters huddled far below. So many craft, innumerable, identical. And the heavens throbbed with the rumble of their engines and the earth shook in awe at their presence.

Jessica suddenly realised that Mel's hand was in her own and squeezing, squeezing so hard her friend's nails were all but breaking the skin. Mel's black hair streamed as she gazed wide-eyed into the sky; the eldritch light from the spacecraft exaggerated her genetically pale complexion into ghostly whiteness. Around her, Jessica's other friends and companions. Linden clinging to Travis as if she imagined the aliens had come to take him away from her, Travis's mouth gaping as he stared up at the fleet, but his eyes still piercing, still strong, like chips of blue steel. Antony, blond like herself but with his tight curls resembling one of those marble statues she'd seen in Greece, his arm raised to shield him from the engines' furnace glare. Richie Coker blinking stupidly, opening and closing his mouth like a troubled fish. Simon Satchwell, the lenses of his glasses bright silver mirrors as the spaceships soared above him.

And some of the community were silent, and some were not. Shocked shouts, cries of dread and dismay from among the older kids, the little ones squealing, shrieking. They'd seen films. They'd watched alien invaders atomise the world's landmarks. They knew what to expect.

Jessica thought she did, too. Which was why she shouldn't be here. And maybe she didn't need to be here. Maybe she could simply close her eyes, shut out the threatening, treacherous present, transport herself to another place, somewhere silent and secret and safe. She'd done it before.

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The Sickness had been the reason then. The mysterious disease that had swept across the globe, infecting everyone in its pandemic path. Every adult, at least. Teenagers, toddlers, anybody under the age of about eighteen appeared inexplicably immune. And the government had said it could cure the Sickness but it couldn't, and whether it had given up trying before its members died, Jessica didn't know. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home and Foreign Secretaries, breathing air thick with the poison of plague. All the Right Honourable Gentlemen, so used to power, so complacent in their seats of authority, gasping out their final, tortured breaths while the Sickness carved its trademark scarlet circles in their flesh as with a knife.

But horrible though those days had been, the deaths of people known only through television, the deaths of people in far-off countries and in unvisited cities, of neighbours never spoken to, deaths of that nature could still be kept at a distance, Jessica had believed. She could cope. As long as her own family could be protected. As long as her own parents survived.

They hadn't.

Her discovery of their bodies had proved too much to bear. Jessica *wouldn't* bear it. Something had happened to her then, and whether she'd been its victim or its willing accomplice she wasn't sure. She only knew – now, after her recovery, and because Travis and Mel had told her – that she'd retreated inside herself, withdrawn from reality, shut down all conscious thought and fallen into what Travis had called a catatonic trance. She vaguely recollected darkness and closeness, like hiding in a closet during childhood games. Physically she'd still functioned, because she'd surrendered

her senses in her own home, and by the time she'd regained them, woken back into the real world, she'd left her house and her parents and Wayvale where she'd lived far behind. She'd found herself here, in a boys' public school built like a castle in the countryside. Harrington. Her friends had brought her here. Travis, Mel – it had been their decision, she knew – they could have left her behind but they hadn't and Jessica supposed she ought to be grateful for that. Part of her was. It meant they loved her. But still, as the alien armada continued to fill the sky to all horizons, like a net thrown over the world, most of her felt she shouldn't *be* here.

Jessica closed her eyes like she must have done before, willed herself into that secret, small, unconscious place again.

And nothing happened.

She could shut her eyes, but the bright fire of the spaceships burned through her eyelids and forced her to see. The aliens' reality could not be denied or ignored. No retreat for Jessica Lane. Nowhere to hide.

She shouldn't be here but she was. And it would have been unfair to expect her friends to tend to her again. Jessica could afford to be a child no longer. Somehow, she was going to have to make her way herself.

At last it ended. The final spacecraft passed overhead, and as they vanished like their predecessors beyond the range of sight, the light they'd brought dimmed like the fading of a vision. Night returned to its rightful place, a cool and velvet darkness. The air was silent once again. The ground had ceased to tremble.

'Trav.' Linden's lips were brushing his cheek, she was that

close as she whispered. He felt her shuddering in the thin white party dress she'd chosen for tonight from the community's shared stock of clothing, the gooseflesh rising on her bare arms. 'What were they? What *are* they?'

'Spaceships. It looks like we've got visitors.'

'Aliens?' It wasn't that Linden actually required an explanation, more that she could scarcely merit the truth of her own deductions. 'There's no such – aliens don't exist, Trav.'

'Perhaps somebody omitted to mention that fact to the extraterrestrials themselves, Linden.' Antony, his green eyes narrowed grimly. To Travis: 'Did you see that one come in to land?'

Travis nodded tensely. To begin with he'd thought the entire fleet might be landing, but they'd obviously only been adjusting their height for whatever reason. The sole spacecraft he'd observed physically descending to earth had seemed to put down beyond the range of hills to the south of the Harrington School. A fair distance away for now, but perhaps not, Travis feared, far enough.

'Vernham Hill's ten miles exactly,' Antony provided. 'We used to stage cross-country runs from here to there before the Sickness. The ship might have landed a few miles further still.'

'What are you saying?' prompted Travis.

'It wouldn't take us long to get there.'

Or for the aliens to get here, Travis thought. He exchanged a nervous glance with Antony. 'First things first. The Head Boy needs to take charge.'

The community was clustering around Antony Clive, whether they'd been students at Harrington or not. More

than sixty frightened faces turned to him for direction, reassurance, decision. The younger children were crying – not, Antony felt, an unreasonable response to the current situation – while some of the girls were trying to comfort and quieten them. The responsibility of leadership weighed on him as never before, like a solid force. He had to find the strength to bear it, in himself and in what he believed. People were relying on him.

'Clive, what are we going to do?' Leo Milton, his deputy – along with Travis now, Antony reminded himself – stepped forward, his freckled face flushed with agitation. 'We ought to—'

'Inside, Leo,' Antony said. 'Everyone. Back into the Great Hall. And please, don't worry.'

'Who's worried?' Mel muttered to Jessica. 'But if I was someone who chewed their nails when they were stressed, my fingers would be stumps by now.'

In the Great Hall, the party was definitely over. The rush to the quad minutes before had scattered and smashed glasses, spilled cans, upturned benches. The instruments the musicians had been playing lay lonely on the floor, like corpses; the dance space was empty. Already, Travis thought, the evening before the intrusion of the spaceships seemed to belong to another time altogether, a different era, like his life prior to the Sickness. They'd have to adapt again – if they could.

'Listen. Everyone, listen.' Antony stood on the platform where Harrington's masters had once used to dine. Travis and Leo Milton flanked him, and maybe it was coincidence and maybe it was not, but as everyone else crowded close, the boys who'd been students at Harrington tended to

favour Leo's side of the platform, while those who'd arrived at the school since the Sickness inclined towards Travis. Apart from the desolate sobs of the little ones, the assembly was silent. 'We all know what we saw out there. We all saw the same. Spacecraft, impossible as it may seem, spacecraft belonging to an alien race, piloted, crewed – we have to assume – by extraterrestrials, beings from another world. Now that much seems self-evident, but its implications are not. We obviously have no idea why they've come or what their intentions are, but what we must not do is panic. We must remain calm. For all we know, these aliens might be able to help us. They might be just what we need to get our society started again. That's for tomorrow. For tonight, I'm ordering lights out now. Go to bed. Go to sleep. I'll double the watch. You'll be safe, I promise. Harrington hasn't let anybody down so far, has it? Myself, Leo and Travis, we'll discuss and decide our best course of action. For tomorrow. But now, as I say, I think it would be wise if we tried to get some rest.'

'You don't think people *are* actually going to be able to sleep, do you, Clive?' said Leo Milton when he and his fellow deputy had joined Antony in the Headmaster's study. 'We ought to have told them our plans before we sent them to the dorms, given them confidence that we're in control of the situation.'

'Yeah.' Travis uttered a hollow laugh. 'In control of the situation. Right.' And with an alien spaceship half an hour's drive away and with countless others fanning out across the world, for all he knew, he was ashamed that it *still* felt

satisfying to earn a glare from Leo Milton. Fellow deputy? *Rival* was nearer the mark.

Antony shook his head, ran his hands through his tight blond curls. 'No, you're probably right, Leo,' he sighed. 'If we knew what our plans are.'

'If we knew who these *aliens* are,' Travis said, 'and what they want. What we do is bound to depend on what *they* do, what they're here for. If they're like ET, fine. But if they're hostile . . .'

'Why would they be hostile?' Antony frowned, his tone strangely defensive. 'A people intelligent enough, advanced enough to have mastered interplanetary travel . . .'

'How can we be sure they're even aliens, Naughton?' challenged Leo. 'Those ships might be American or Russian or Chinese, the products of technology secretly developed in case of just such a global catastrophe as the Sickness. Our saviours might be aboard those ships, and they might be human.'

Rival? *Enemy* was nearer the mark still. 'You don't really believe that, Leo, do you?' Travis said with a mixture of pity and scorn. Surely the ginger-haired boy was simply being contrary. 'You had your eyes open out in the quad, didn't you? Aliens. No question.'

'But what if Leo's . . .?' Antony groped for hope. 'If they are human, that would explain why they're appearing now, to aid the survivors of the Sickness. Perhaps somebody's found a cure and—'

'Antony,' interrupted Travis. 'Don't. Don't even . . . You're deluding yourself.'

'The trouble is, Travis,' Antony winced, 'if the ships are alien, and, all right, I know they are, what can *their* possible

reason be for arriving on Earth at the very moment when human civilisation is so utterly shattered? I can't believe it's a coincidence.'

'No,' agreed Travis. And he knew where the blond boy was going with this. It had been at the back of his mind too from the moment he'd entered the quad and looked up, only he'd not dared to acknowledge it, like a patient refusing to accept the tumour growing inside him, slowly killing him. Leo no doubt secretly felt the same. Probably everyone did.

'But if not coincidence,' Antony continued remorselessly, 'then we have to assume intent. The aliens have arrived among us now because they meant to, because they've been watching us, watching the Earth. All those ships. Think of the logistics required to gather together a fleet of that size. This is happening by design. It's planned. And if it's been planned . . .' Antony's voice trailed away with his courage.

'If it's been planned' – Travis took over – 'then whoever those aliens are must have known about the Sickness. But how could they have known? Unless they caused it.' He felt his words to be true even as he spoke them, even as they sickened and terrified him. 'We were looking in the wrong place for blame. Terrorists. Biotech experiments gone wrong. We were looking down when we should have been looking up. The Sickness didn't come from Earth. It came from space.'

Antony turned away, as if he could face neither Travis nor his conclusions. His eyes sought refuge in the portrait of Dr Stuart that hung on the wall. Dr Stuart, Harrington's late and last Headmaster and the man who'd appointed Antony Clive Head Boy. The artist had captured perfectly the Headmaster's quiet, confident certitude, perhaps as a reminder for those who would come after him. Dr Stuart had

believed in decency, fair play and giving others the benefit of the doubt. So did his protégé.

Antony returned his gaze to his deputies. 'You could be right, Travis,' he conceded, 'but you could also still be wrong. Perhaps the aliens have been observing Earth and wanting to make peaceful contact with us for a long time. Perhaps they've been deterred from doing so through fear of our reaction, because they've witnessed from space little else but wars, acts of terrorism, hatred, violence, the kind of things we know the human race has become rather expert in over the years. Perhaps now they've seen the decimation the Sickness has caused, they've finally judged it's safe to show themselves. That's possible, isn't it? They could still be here to help us.'

'It's possible, Antony,' Travis said without conviction, 'but possible doesn't mean certain.'

The blond boy nodded. 'And we need to know for sure. In which case, our course of action is clear. We have to establish contact with the aliens ourselves. As soon as possible. As soon as it's light.'

'I don't agree, Clive,' Leo Milton objected. 'It would make more sense to leave the aliens to themselves and to address first the question of our own safety. We should stay here at Harrington. We can defend ourselves here. We've done so before.'

'Against Rev and his bikers,' Travis reminded him caustically. 'Oh yeah, and a few guys in cars. Yeah, and a commandeered bus. If these aliens are hostile, Leo, I think they'll have more to throw at us than a handful of Molotov cocktails.'

'If they're hostile, Naughton,' retorted Leo, 'why offer ourselves up so readily for the slaughter?'

'All right, all right,' Antony said. 'Differences of opinion are healthy so long as they're voiced with respect. Unfortunately, we don't have time for debate. As Head Boy, I recommend we send a party to the ship at Vernham Hill with the aim of establishing friendly relations with its occupants. What do my deputies say? Leo?'

'I say no.' Unsurprisingly. 'I say we reinforce our position within these walls, strengthen our defences . . .'

'Stick our heads in the sand,' Travis added by the way.

'Travis,' reproached Antony, 'there's no need for that. Leo's entitled to his point of view, as are you. And it seems yours will be the deciding vote.'

Travis glanced between the two Harrington boys. Leo Milton was already gnawing at his lower lip in barely disguised fury. He knew which side of the fence the newcomer was on. Travis didn't disappoint him. 'We go to the ship.'

Travis wasn't unduly surprised to find his group waiting for him in the dormitory he shared with Richie and Simon, even though it was now past midnight and, according to the rules, girls were not permitted in the boys' accommodation at any time. Still, under the circumstances, he felt an exception could be justified. Funny, too, in a way, that he should still think of them as 'his' group, when technically they were all now part of the wider Harrington community. Mel, Jessica, Simon, Richie, they were perched awkwardly on his bed as he entered, like their limbs were frozen. One person missing.

'Trav!' Mel relaxed, brightened when she saw him.

'Where's Linden?'

'She's with the little ones. Juniper, Willow and the others.' Linden's fellow Children of Nature, the extended family of eco-warriors they'd all belonged to before the Sickness. 'They were too frightened to even try to sleep without her.'

'What if I told you I was too frightened to sleep without *you*, Morticia?' advanced Richie Coker.

'I'd tell *you* to get used to bags under your eyes, Coker,' snorted Mel.

'Can't you both shut up with the smart remarks for once?' Simon complained peevishly. He was rubbing his thumbs and his forefingers together constantly, without realising he was doing it. 'This isn't the time for trying to be funny. We've got to be serious. Who knows what . . .?' He shrugged, defeated by his own question.

'It's all right, Simon.' Jessica placed her hand on his. 'Did you decide anything, Travis?'

He told them the plan. 'So at first light half a dozen of us are going to make our way to where the aliens landed – I doubt we'll have any problems finding the ship – and, I guess, introduce ourselves. Or something. We'll have to see what happens when we get there.'

'Are you sure it's a good idea, Travis?' Mel ventured, concerned. 'I mean, it sounds dangerous to me. It could be – are you sure?'

'I don't think good or bad idea comes into it, Mel,' Travis admitted. 'I don't think we have any choice. We just have to go out there and pray *our* aliens haven't seen *War of the Worlds* or *Independence Day*.'

'How do you pray?' grunted Richie Coker. 'But these half-dozen guys, Naughton. Six? Do they know who they are?' He looked vaguely fearful.

'Don't worry, Richie.' Travis smiled thinly. 'You're not one of them.'

'Just as well,' Mel said. 'God only knows what the aliens'd think if the first human being they saw was Richie Coker, complete with baseball cap.' She dropped her voice an octave lower. 'I thought the monitors reported *intelligent* life on Earth, Captain.'

'Thin ice, Morticia,' grumbled Richie, pulling at the peak of the baseball cap in question.

'Who *is* going, Travis?' Jessica wanted to know. She seemed to colour a little, not that anybody noticed. 'Is Antony . . .?'

'Yeah, Antony. Me. Hinkley-Jones. That little Giles kid. And two others who went to Harrington I don't really know, Tolliver and Shearsby.'

'Hinkley-Jones,' noted Mel. 'Supposedly the best shot we've got.' She frowned. She'd hoped the small arsenal the Harringtonians had amassed from neighbouring farms and the like wouldn't need to be pressed into service again.

'And Giles is fastest on his feet,' Simon put in. 'That's why he was chosen to be the runner when Rev attacked. I was partnered with him.' And had mistakenly thought Giles to be the boy's first name. It had turned out to be his surname: the school's formalities of address died hard.

Richie chuckled. 'Had the runs yourself now and again, Simes, huh?' Simon wanted to retaliate but didn't dare. 'So that ginger plonker Milton's not going with you?'

'Leo's in charge here till we get back.'

'Oh my God.' Not a popular promotion with Melanie Patrick. 'Sure there isn't room for a goth chick on this otherwise sexistly male jaunt of yours, Travis? Get back *soon*, you hear me?'

'And safely, Travis,' Jessica added, her green eyes earnest. 'You and Antony. And the others. Be careful.' Boys who could shoot. Boys who could run. It seemed like the group was preparing for trouble. 'Promise you'll be careful.'

Travis reached out and stroked Jessica's long blonde hair. 'I promise,' he said.

Stroking a girl's hair seemed to be becoming a habit of his. Linden's was much shorter than Jessica's, of course – she'd had it cropped close to the head, she'd told him, when she and her mother had first joined the woodland encampment of the Children of Nature. It was different in colour, too, a russet tint, putting Travis in mind of tumbling autumn leaves, though Linden was very much alive. Her eyes might be closed but her lips were slightly parted in her breathing, her chest rising and falling peacefully as she slept. Maybe sleep was the only state where peace could be found in the unrelenting nightmare the world had become.

Maybe he shouldn't disturb her after all.

But he'd had to see her before he left for the alien ship. Outside, dawn was already breaking; by the time the sun set again they'd know *something* about their likely fates. For better or for worse. It struck Travis how, before the Sickness, whole months of his life could pass by with blithe mundaneness, without any deviation from their ordinary routines, without disruption, months that he could hardly remember now because nothing of note seemed to have happened in them. Maybe he should have tried harder to make his life special, to make it count for something in the world that had gone. Now he had no choice. Now, post-Sickness, a lifetime could be

concentrated into a single day, and nothing ever stayed the same, and every precious moment of living mattered.

He wondered, was this the last he'd see of Linden?

If so, it would be a good memory to carry with him. In her dorm, Linden had pushed two beds together so there was room for the younger children to sleep with her. Juniper, Willow, Rose, River, Fox, all of them crowded under the covers. Travis's mouth twitched a mischievous smile. *There were six in the bed and the little one said . . .* No. Best not to say anything. No need. He'd be back. He'd already made a promise, and his dad had taught him always to keep his promises.

He leaned down, kissed Linden lightly, tenderly on her lips. She sighed in her sleep but didn't wake. By the time she did, Travis would be long gone.

They didn't take any of the cars. Antony thought approaching by road would be too conspicuous, that it would be more sensible to conceal themselves from alien eyes, if stealth was even going to be possible – 'and however many eyes the aliens might have,' little Giles had added – at least until they'd given themselves a chance to survey the ship from closer quarters; they could determine how to proceed from there. So they travelled by foot and across country. They did, however, take with them a shotgun each – except for Giles, who being a first year and twelve years old was deemed too young to bear firearms even in the present crisis – and plenty of spare ammunition in pouches slung over their shoulders. They didn't bother with the bows that had helped to repel Rev and his gang; the odd arrow probably wouldn't make much of an impression on a spaceship twenty storeys high. Truth to tell,

the shotguns would hardly reduce the aliens to quaking in their boots, either – 'if they wear boots,' Giles had pointed out, 'and if they've got legs' – but the weapons made the boys feel better, like comfort blankets made of metal and wood. If Hinkley-Jones was indeed Harrington's best shot, Travis was assured that Tolliver and Shearsby ran him a close second and third.

Antony set a brisk pace from the start. For once, he'd dressed in something other than the Harrington uniform and his Head Boy's tie, a more practical sweatshirt and jeans like the rest of them, dark colours to provide a semblance of camouflage. After three miles, Travis was struggling to keep up with the Harringtonians.

'Hey, Antony,' he called, 'I know you said you used to do cross-country runs over this route, but we're not doing one now.'

'Ah, state-school pupil,' Antony grinned. 'Unfit. Lack of competitive sporting opportunities. It's because the government sold off all your playing fields for development, you know.'

'Thanks for that. 'Preciate it.'

'Sorry. Soapbox. I suppose politics don't matter much any more.'

'That's where you're wrong.' Travis increased his effort, found the energy from somewhere to catch up with Antony and match the public schoolboy stride for stride. 'They matter as much as ever, today most of all. When we come face to face with these aliens—'

'If they even have faces,' contributed Giles, kind of bobbing up alongside the older boys.

'When we *meet* them,' Travis revised, 'it won't be just as

individuals. We'll be representatives of the entire human race.'

'Like ambassadors,' Antony approved. 'My father would have enjoyed that.' He smiled wistfully. 'I told you he was a diplomat, didn't I?'

'But what I want to know . . .' Giles interrupted again. His teachers must have loved him, Travis thought. 'What I want to know is what the aliens will actually look like. Will they be like us, sort of human, give or take a head, or will they be monsters with tentacles, or will they be like robots, not flesh and blood at all?'

'I think we can probably ignore all those cheap sci-fi-show clichés, Giles,' Travis said. *If only we could ignore you, too.*

Antony was nodding. 'The real issue isn't appearance. It's communication. How are we going to communicate with an entirely different species? The language barrier. My father told me once, if one can understand another's language, one can understand his mind. Share words and one begins to share ideas, identify common ground, build trust, mutual co-operation.'

'Let's hope they speak English, then,' said Travis.

'If they don't, we'll find another way.' Antony gazed serenely into the bright early-morning sky. 'I know we've taken precautions, but the more I think about it, the more certain I am they'll prove unnecessary. Whatever language the aliens speak, they're a civilised race. They must be. Only great civilisations produce great technology – their ships. And I believe that civilised societies by their very nature embrace the same core values: freedom, equality, the dignity of life. We share those common values, don't we? That'll be enough to begin establishing a relationship.'

'It *sounds* good, Antony,' Travis conceded, though heavily implying a *but*. 'It sounds *easy* . . .'

'It'll be fine, I'm sure of it. My father always placed his faith in discussion and negotiation. Everyone can be reached by reason. Respect others and they'll respect you.'

Unless, of course, thought Travis darkly, they didn't. But he kept his doubts to himself. He thought of his own father. Keith Naughton had been a police officer but he hadn't lived long enough to perish in the Sickness with everyone else's parents. Dad had been stabbed to death in the street by a thug high on drugs. No doubt he'd tried to reason with the junkie first, had reached out to him. It hadn't worked. Discussion and negotiation were all very well, everything Antony had said, mutual this, common that, his underlying assumption that everyone was like him really, all very well – in an ideal world. Travis had not believed in an ideal world since he'd been fetched from class at ten years old and escorted to the Head's office to be informed that his father was dead. The Sickness had only confirmed what he believed. That the world was flawed. That life was a struggle. That while you hoped – while you *strove* – for the best, you had to be prepared for disappointment. You had to be ready for those who did *not* respect you or anything you held dear, who despised you, who would not listen when you talked, who had no interest in your words. And when confronted by such an irreconcilable enemy, Travis believed, you had to make a stand. You had to fight.

Tightening his grip on his shotgun, Travis moved inexorably closer to Vernham Hill.

*

'He should have woken me,' Linden said. She sought explanation from Jessica and Mel. 'Why didn't he wake me?'

'He probably didn't want to upset you, Lin,' suggested Jessica.

'Well *that* didn't work, did it?' Linden's eyes were red, as if she'd been crying.

'Travis always does what he thinks is right,' Mel sighed. 'It can be a downer sometimes, but that's Trav. He won't change.'

'I don't want him to change,' said Linden. 'I want him here.'

And Antony Clive with him, Jessica found herself thinking.

The girls were standing outside in the school grounds, staring off in the direction they knew Travis and his companions had taken. The boys had been gone two hours. Mel remembered a Great War poster she'd once seen of a woman in white with long black hair (like hers, though she never wore white) striking a dramatic pose on a shoreline, evidently forlornly awaiting the return of her soldier lover/boyfriend/husband from the Front. Mel had mocked the poor woman mercilessly. 'Wasting all her time waiting for a man to come back,' she remembered scoffing. 'Stupid tart should get a life.' She supposed that was irony.

Mel wasn't out here just for Travis, however. Where Jessica went, she went.

'How long before they get there?' Jessica was wondering now.

'I don't know whether I hope it's soon,' said Linden, 'or never.'

'So this is where you're hiding.' A familiar voice from behind them. Simon trotting through the archway that led to the quad.

'Hiding, Simon.' Mel looked pointedly at the open spaces around her. 'Right.'

'You're not inside.' Simon frowned. 'We all need to be inside.'

'Why?' Linden's heart raced. 'Has something happened?'

Simon glanced nervously up at the sky as if he entertained a powerful suspicion that something *might*, and that the event could well consist of an alien ship appearing overhead to blast the Harrington School to dust. The reality was that Leo Milton had called a meeting in the Great Hall, attendance compulsory for every member of the community.

'Didn't take Ginge long to start throwing his weight around,' Mel said acidly. She followed the others in heading to the Great Hall nonetheless.

Jessica placed a sympathetic hand on the bespectacled boy's shoulder. 'How are you holding up, Simon?'

'Fine,' he said tersely. Because he could do without being patronised by Jessica Lane. She didn't care about him. If she did, she'd have voted against Richie Coker joining up with them. But oh no, she couldn't do, could she? Jessica Lane hadn't been in any condition to cast a vote one way or another the night they'd fled from Wayvale, because she'd been totally out of it, a zombie, dragged along by Mel, unable even to feed herself. If it hadn't been for them, Jessica wouldn't even be here. She'd be lost and alone somewhere (if blonde girls with fit bodies ever stayed alone for long), in despair. And yet now she had the gall to ask him how *he* was 'holding up', pretending concern, all this touchy-feely sort of crap. She had probably only invited him to her parties back in the old world because her parents knew – had known – his

grandparents and had taken pity on him. Like he was a stray dog or something.

It was a stupid question, anyway. It deserved a lie for an answer. He wasn't fine. How could he be fine? How could anyone be fine with an army of aliens poised to overrun the planet? That was what the occupants of the spaceships were here for, whatever anyone else said, to make them all victims. Simon possessed expertise in such matters. He'd been a victim his whole life.

Here was his tormentor-in-chief now. Richie Coker, slouching against the wall at the back of the Great Hall. 'Keeping out of the way in case Leo's looking for volunteers, Richie?' Mel goaded as they passed. Richie Coker, heavy, sullen features – *Crimewatch* features, ugly, brutish, that stupid bloody baseball cap. Richie Coker, who'd bullied and tormented him pretty much every day of his school career, who last night had made it clear to Simon, with the aid of violence, that he could expect pretty much the same treatment to continue even though school was out for ever and the teachers were all dead. If the aliens' arrival could change that somehow, then there might be something to be said for them.

He was suddenly aware that Jessica was still looking at him, her brow creased in puzzlement. 'Simon, are you *sure* you're okay?'

'I'm sure,' he said.

'Look at this, though,' Mel said disapprovingly. 'Look at this. While the cat's away . . .'

Leo Milton was pacing the platform from which Antony had spoken as if staking out new territory. Mel, Jessica, Linden and Simon approached no closer than the fringe of the assembled community; maybe Richie was right to keep

his distance after all. 'Everybody here?' Leo's eyes darted from side to side. 'Good. We've got plenty of work ahead of us, so I'll keep this brief and to the point. I believe Clive was wrong to actively seek contact with these aliens.' Murmurs from the floor. 'I want you to know I objected to the proposal last night and I still disagree with it now. Our first priority should be self-preservation. What we must do is fortify our position here, within Harrington's walls, build barricades, not bridges, wait for the aliens to come to us if they choose to do so, but we must be in a condition to defend ourselves if necessary. To that end, I am making the following changes to the work rosters . . .'

'No!' The vehemence of Jessica's outburst surprised even herself. Mel was staring at her agog. But the *assumption* Leo Milton was making, she couldn't let him get away with it. 'You can't do that. You can't change anything . . .'

Leo Milton peered coldly across a sea of heads, all of them turning towards Jessica. 'Do you have something to say, Lane?'

She suddenly felt abashed, her cheeks flared red, but she couldn't lapse back into silence now. She didn't want to. 'Yes, I . . . You're not Head Boy, Leo. You're not our leader. Antony is. You don't have the authority to change anything without Antony's consent, and he's not here to give it.'

'Precisely.' A malign smile played at Leo's lips. 'Neither, I believe, will he be coming back.'

'What do you mean?' Jessica's protest was joined by Linden and Mel, and some of the others. But not all. Not even many. Scarcely any, Mel realised, among the original Harringtonians.

'They'll be back, all of them,' Jessica cried. 'Of course they will. Of course.'

'Wishful thinking.' Leo Milton shook his head in artificial sadness. 'They were lost the moment they left the protection of Harrington behind them. At least, we who remain must proceed on the basis that they are.'

'Why?' Mel yelled. 'Why must we? This is all about *you*, Leo, you . . .'

'We cannot afford to wait for Clive's unlikely return. Or Naughton's. We cannot delay doing what needs to be done.'

'You bloody—'

'In the absence of Clive and in the absence of my fellow deputy,' Leo Milton declared, 'the leadership of Harrington by right devolves to me. I am the new Head Boy.'

'You little *shit*.' But Mel could hear cheering from some quarters.

'And there are going to be some changes to how we operate and organise here, let me tell you,' Leo continued triumphantly. 'To begin with, this nonsense Clive was about to introduce last night, renaming this institution the Harrington *Community*, that will not happen. Its true title, its only title, is the Harrington School, and that is what we shall continue to call it.'

'Did you hear what I called *you*, Leo?' Mel shouted.

And Simon was trying to shush her, his eyes round with fear behind his glasses. *The little weed.* 'Mel, I don't think you should – I don't think we should make a fuss.'

'Maybe now isn't the time, Mel,' added Linden. Like Simon, she'd noticed stony glares directed towards them from several of the Harrington boys.

'And *because* this is the Harrington School,' Leo Milton announced, 'those of us who belonged here before the Sickness, those of us who attended as students, it is only fair

and just that we be granted certain privileges in recognition of that fact. It's only right that the rules are made and enforced by us, for example. We, after all, are the true Harringtonians.'

Fresh cheers from the Harrington boys, louder, more confident, almost swaggering, in fact. Mel was astounded, more so that the few voices that had been raised in opposition to Leo were now stilled – including her own.

'Those of you who have sought shelter here since the Sickness . . .' *What?* Mel anticipated. *Will be expected to grovel in servile gratitude?* She didn't do grovelling. '. . . You will not be denied it. You are refugees, and the Harrington way has always been to extend the hand of charity to those in need. But you must know your place. You are here not because you have a right to be but because *we* allow you to stay. You will therefore treat true Harringtonians with the respect we deserve. You will obey the new order of things.' Leo Milton's eyes fixed on Mel, Jessica, Linden and Simon. 'Or you will suffer the consequences.'

About halfway to Vernham Hill, and as if by one accord, the Harrington party fell silent. Perhaps it had occurred to them that they would soon be closer to the aliens than to the school. Perhaps they were beginning to wonder whether the extraterrestrials might have emerged from their ship by now, might be closing in on the expedition this very minute, or lurking just ahead, within that thicket, beyond those trees.

It seemed natural that Hinkley-Jones should take point, and he prowled forward warily, vigilantly, his shotgun poised to fire. Tolliver and Shearsby followed a few paces behind

him to right and left, the three of them forming a protective arc around Antony, Travis and little Giles. Travis could see in the younger boy's eyes that he was afraid. His ridiculous prattle about aliens with multiple heads or oil for blood had been a defence mechanism, an attempt through exaggeration to mask the genuine dread he was plainly feeling at the prospect of encountering beings from another world. Travis wished he hadn't grown irritated with the boy earlier; Giles deserved only his understanding.

But no aliens appeared in any case. No traps were sprung. And now the ground was rising as they began to climb the thickly wooded incline of Vernham Hill itself. Perhaps, on the other side, the spaceship might be spread out below them, the alien creatures milling around breathing the air of a planet not their own. Travis felt his heart beat faster, and not simply because of his physical exertions. Weariness, in fact, seemed to have deserted him. He was advancing now more quickly, more purposefully than ever. So were the others. So near to their goal, they were almost breaking into a run. The need to *see* outweighed their fear and impelled them forward.

Hinkley-Jones crested the hill first. He cried out in awe, staggered to a halt, swayed as if he'd fall. 'It's here. My God, we've found it.'

Travis did run now, gasped the final metres to the summit, to the brink of Vernham Hill's second slope, a declivity that swept down to a broad valley, a further range of hills ascending on the far side. The topographical niceties of the scene did not, however, impinge on Travis's consciousness.

Between this hill and the others, the giant blade of its scything curve spanning the valley, its silver exterior glistening in the spring sunshine, the alien ship stood at rest.

Travis was unsettlingly reminded of an executioner's axe. Antony fancied the craft was reaching out its arms to embrace the Earth. That didn't stop him from seeking cover behind a tree, however, as his companions had done instinctively. Giles began to whimper.

The ground immediately surrounding the ship had been scorched and scarred by the landing, the undercarriage of the craft itself having compensated somehow for the unevenness of the terrain so that it had settled in the valley perfectly horizontally. In flight, every surface had been sheathed in the favoured silvery metal, but now the inner curve of the crescent had in part dispensed with what it seemed had been shields; its lower section, perhaps a dozen levels, burned with lights, red and blue and green, like jewels among a conqueror's spoils. A background hum of energy emanated from the ship, but no doors or hatches or portals were open, no ramps extended, no personnel or machinery dispatched outside that the boys could see.

Travis wasn't sure whether the aliens' apparent reluctance to venture out into the Earth environment relieved or perturbed him. 'Looks like they don't want to be disturbed,' he said in a whisper.

'They might be carrying out tests,' Antony returned in similarly hushed tones, as if alien ears might possess the ability to detect sound at considerably greater distances than their human counterparts, 'establishing whether they can live in our atmosphere without suits or something . . .'

'Clive,' hissed Giles, 'what if these ships aren't manned at all? What if they're fully automated, run by computers?'

Antony breathed in deeply. 'That's one of the things we need to find out.' He turned to the others. 'Who's coming with me?'

'Down . . . *there*?' faltered Shearsby, as if such an intention was as foolish as throwing oneself from a clifftop.

'It's what we came for,' Antony reminded him. 'We need to make contact with them. We need to communicate.'

Antony was right, of course. Travis knew that. But, as so often before, doing the right thing was not easy. However, 'I'm with you, Antony,' he said.

'For Harrington,' said Hinkley-Jones. Tolliver and Shearsby nodded nervously.

'I'm coming too.' For little Giles, being left on his own was a far more daunting prospect than meeting an alien, whatever it might look like.

'All right then,' Antony said. 'Let's go.'

Grouping together more closely than they'd done so far, taking advantage of the screening foliage, the boys began to descend. On this side of Vernham Hill, unhappily, there was more natural cover near the top than lower down. Almost as if, Travis imagined disconcertedly, the trees themselves were in retreat from the aliens. The undergrowth would not obscure the party from the ship's sight for more than a few metres further. If they were still unable to see the aliens after that, the aliens would sure as hell be able to see them. And that was if their presence hadn't already been detected by the spaceship's instruments, if their progress was not already being monitored every step of the way.

'Carry your guns at your sides,' Antony was instructing. 'Don't make any aggressive motions with them. We don't want the aliens to think we're hostile.'

'Clive,' Shearsby said, marvelling at the ship, 'I don't think it's going to matter what they think we are.'

As the trees, like traitors, gave the boys up.

As a slight hiss, almost of derision, escaped the spacecraft.

As, above the multitude of lights, a wide aperture opened in its hull, gleaming doors sliding back, a black and grinning mouth.

'Is this good or bad or what?' worried Shearsby.

A second ship suddenly shot from within. The boys cried out involuntarily. A second ship, identical to its parent in every respect save size, and even so it was still larger and boasted a wider wingspan than any aircraft Travis had ever seen. He kind of hoped its appearance was unrelated to their own. He kind of hoped it had business elsewhere.

It wasn't and it didn't.

Engines glowing at each tapered point of the scythe, the ship wheeled in the sky towards them, hung in the air directly above them, a hovering bird of prey.

Little Giles had seen enough. He screamed, his hands balled into terrified fists.

Shearsby was howling: 'Let's get out of here! We've got to get out of here!'

But Antony was adamant. 'We can't do that. Shearsby, there is no going back.'

Ludicrously, Hinkley-Jones was raising his shotgun as he might during a shoot on his late father's estate.

'No!' Antony seized the barrel and pulled it down again. 'What do you think you're doing? What did I tell you?'

'But Clive . . .'

'This may not be an attack. They may have come to greet us. We have to give them . . .' *The benefit of the doubt*, Antony was going to add.

Until silver panels slid open in this second ship too, in its undercarriage, disgorging even smaller flying craft, tiny, these,

relatively, hardly larger than the size of a man, oval in shape, like eggs or pods, the lower half metal and the upper half a transparent substance like glass. Six of them.

Six of *us*, Travis thought, fear clawing at his insides. He was stepping backwards almost without realising it. They all were, even Antony.

'No.' But the Head Boy forced himself, willed himself to stop.

The pods circled overhead between the boys and the ship. They were occupied. Through the glass Travis could make out a compartment, a cockpit of a kind, with a pilot seated in each, a figure humanoid in form though highly unlikely to be a man.

'We have to reach out.' Antony flung down his weapon, threw his arms wide as if preparing for crucifixion. 'We have to show them we're no threat.' He moved apart from his companions.

Travis had to concede, Antony Clive had courage. Especially as the aliens seemed wholly and uncompromisingly encased in some kind of armour. Their garb might have been an innocent type of spacesuit or flying suit, he supposed, but he was put more in mind of medieval knights, warrior knights, and the armour was glittering and dark, like black ice, except in one case where it dazzled as its wearer looped above the boys' heads, the brilliance of gold.

'Can you hear me? Can you understand me?' Antony was appealing to the aliens at the top of his voice. 'Please, talk to us. We only want to talk.'

But the helmets the aliens had donned concealing their features flitted past Travis's straining sight like the heads of strange and savage beasts, each different but all either tusked

or fanged or horned, cast in the violent image of creatures that had never trod the Earth. Their aspect did not appear conducive to mutual co-operation or the establishment of common areas of interest.

'We want . . . we want to be your friends.' But even Antony seemed less certain than before.

And below the glass cockpit of each pod, a circular hole was suddenly opening, white light crackling within. A gun port.

'Forget it,' Travis yelled. 'Antony!'

Hinkley-Jones was swinging his shotgun up to his shoulder, his finger quick to the trigger.

But the aliens were quicker.

Six bolts of energy flashed simultaneously from the pods. Each one struck Hinkley-Jones, enveloping him in blinding brightness. The rays blazed like white fire but the boy froze like ice. He didn't even cry out. Couldn't. Hinkley-Jones, the best shot in the Harrington School, pitched forward and thudded to the ground and did not move again.

Travis gaped in horror, though it occurred to him bitterly that their mission had at least been successful. The boys had wanted the aliens to communicate with them, and the aliens had. In no uncertain terms.

They hadn't come to help. They'd come to kill.