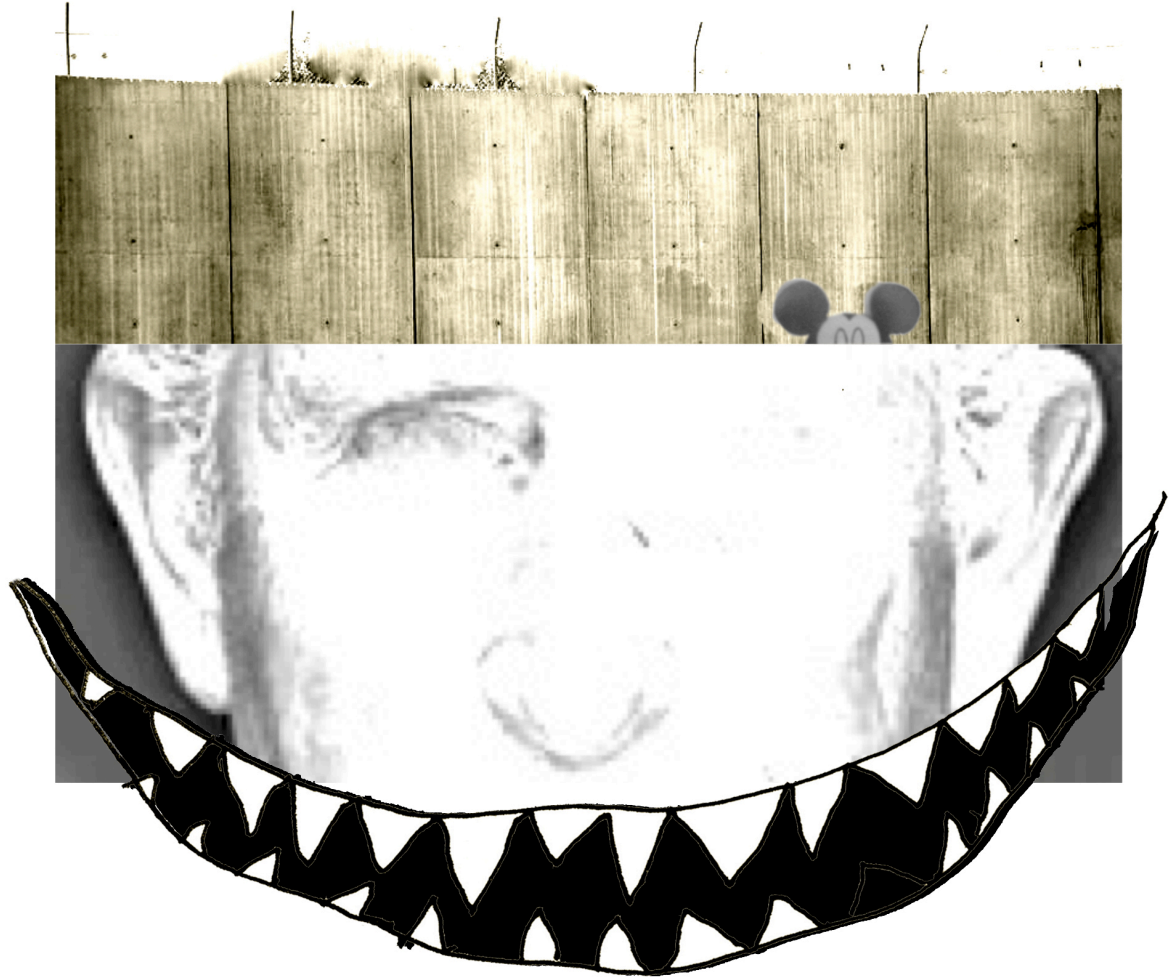


# THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC



BY  
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## The People's Republic

As the Commander made his Diplomatic journey north aboard the Royal shuttle, Corgi One, he observed the landscape from the carriage window as the country sped past. The architecturally sophisticated stronghold of the Capital gave way to mundane suburbs then pleasant rural fields, occasionally defaced by power stations, pylons and windmills.

The Commander glanced sporadically at his reflection, cast as an apparition over the landscape. The furrowed lines in his forehead and bags under his eyes bore the strain of over sixty years played out in the public eye.

His features, despite the weathering of time, were still handsome enough, if not conventional. His grey hair, parted from the right, still had a thick and healthy texture and did not stray too far from his forehead, even if it struggled, despite his best efforts, to conceal the small bald patch on his crown. His nose was a little too long, as if it had failed to stop growing in line with his face, and his ears had always seemed oversized for the rest of his head, as if he hadn't quite grown into them, though this did not overly blemish his finished portrait.

These irregularities added character to his general finesse, and besides, he had presence. In moments of contemplation he sometimes questioned whether his self-perception was entirely aligned with reality, or if it was just the heightened assurance of delusion often championed by pedigree. Though fickle public opinion had tested him enough times, he felt his insight was accurate.

His wandering mind slammed the brakes on this digression. His physical appearance should be the least of his worries today, even though his grooming and tailoring were impeccable, garbed in the finest colours of State, to represent The Empress and thrash out a deal with the discontent tribes of the delinquent city.

The personal staff that surrounded him aboard the vessel judged his mood correctly and the carriage shuttled up the iron tracks with the deadened sound of a distant drone attack.

He sipped his Earl Grey tea and when he placed the cup on the saucer the clacking noise of the crockery amplified through the cart, an echo through a catacomb.

Not a word was spoken for the rest of the journey, and the Commander grimaced to himself as the northern city's giant wall drew into vision: the red, white and blue divider resembling a colossal stadium that bore the cracked emblem, like a grubby bric-a-brac imitation of the former Hollywood sign, was unmistakable. It stamped its conceit on the horizon and even from a great distance, and as dusk settled, the wording was clear as daylight. It stated: THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF MANCHESTER.

The world changed forever on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2000 at the beginning of the new millennium as the Republican Party of America launched a pre-emptive political coup and swept to power. Shortly after, the Republicans passed the new 'Proactive Pro-Life' Bill through Congress, for reasons unknown, regarding re-animation rights to prominent party campaign contributors of the past who had possessed the remarkable foresight to have their heads cryogenically frozen.

All that science fiction hocus-pocus and nonsense proved surprisingly accurate when, horror-of-horrors, Walt Disney's freezer-packed head was reanimated, and once surgically attached to the suitable body of a former Mr Universe runner-up, went on a political rampage and seized control, first of Congress, then the Presidency, by not dissimilar methods the Republicans had used.

Chairman Walt's (as he was to be known thereafter) foreign, domestic and economic mismanagement policies unleashed a tidal wave of misfortune that the

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world simply could not have fathomed. Wars broke out, ensued promptly by natural disasters and a Global economic crisis like none could have predicted.

A crazed, under-qualified statesman with a thirst for bloodlust, but little understanding of global politics was somehow able to grasp control of the leading superpower on the planet. How this was ever able to happen beggared belief around the world, but ironically aroused very little opposition in Disneynewland™ itself, as the former United States of America was to be known thereafter.

However, begrudging credit had to be given to the Chairman for his acquisition of EuroDisneynewland™ in the mayhem, an impressive demonstration of business dexterity. Britain's government policies became a shambles, with Parliamentary opinion fractured, as if savagely split by a clumsily wielded meat cleaver.

The Prime Minister of the age, an unashamed Disnaphile, believed that the nation's, or his, best interests lay as bedfellows to Chairman Walt, at whatever cost, though many of his Ministers and the British people vigorously opposed his views. First demonstrations took place, which gave rise to riots on the streets in cities, towns, villages and cul-de-sacs across the land. The United Kingdom was on the verge of civil war, when Her Majesty took the unprecedented action against Her useless Government Ministers and sacked the lot of them.

Those who went quietly were spared punishment, and in some cases rewarded with generous expense accounts to soften the blow of their newly defunct positions. The most troublesome opponents, however, still toiled and sweated in the backbreaking labour camps of Orkney, making tea towels and ornamental mugs in the cruel prison reform centre.

It was rumoured that the former Prime Minister had somehow wriggled into a rather comfortable administration position - cracking the whip on the workhouse floor, unlike many of his former Cabinet, who felt his unrepentant lashes tearing through the flesh on their backs. The Commander believed that this rumour was not unsubstantiated.

The Commander still had many years of active service ahead of him, and to the most extent accepted the cards he had been dealt...to a point. Death was no longer what it once meant, but neither were his prospects of promotion. Born once into a position of expected hereditary greatness, he had been passed over enough times now, particularly on the big one, to accept that his path was not what was once intended.

A reshuffle had taken place, in effect, and though The Empress was still in remarkably good health for her advancing age, and had many predicted years of natural life ahead, when the time came...hey presto, reanimation and eternal rule, the same as the Zombie King, Chairman Walt.

No need for a successor. The Commander was out of a job. The British people were all for it too. That grated. So the Royal Family's traditional hierarchy was amended, with all of the Princes taking on the rebranded titles of Commanders.

Over thirteen years had passed since Her Majesty had exercised her constitutional entitlement and dissolved Parliament to take direct command of the former United Kingdom, now The Royal State of Windsor, and its overseas interests - which included British control of France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and Belgium - a great success in many ways.

The Royal State's closest allies were now Switzerland (who at the opportune moment relinquished their neutrality with quick abandon and now counted Austria, Norway and Iceland among their spoils, along with controlling shares in the Global Union of Bankers), North Korea and China (China to a lesser extent, as it was largely

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understood that North Korea wore the trousers since the invention, by its dear leader, of the kPhone and its various accessories, which China manufactured). The Royal State of Windsor's "special relationship" with Disneynewland™ had disintegrated, leaving only a faintly remembered rumour of a time long since passed.

The Great Superpower Disneynewland™'s franchises (empire) spanned much of Eastern Europe and The Cold War with Russia was over. The former USSR, remarketed as EuroDisneynewland™, fell under New Management of the imposing mouse ears, flying the white-and-black flag, and in its absence The New Cold War was directed between the former allies once known as Britain and America.

His current mission, perhaps the most challenging of his lifetime, presented the Commander with somewhat of a personal conundrum. The assignment at hand, a diplomatic task, was a last-ditch attempt at repatriating the sole garrison of domestic resistance into the Royal State without use of military force.

The Empress herself had personally instructed the Commander, and on paper the task at hand was relatively uncomplicated: a simple ultimatum to stamp The Royal Seal back on what was known as The People's Republic of Manchester, the resistance. The fact that this small pocket of opposition had not been aggressively seized already was purely down to The Empress's sentimental affection for Her subjects, and spoke volumes for her compassion. It drew no comparison to marching on Paris, Berlin, Madrid or any of those foreign territories. One had to be a little less heavy-handed with the British people.

The Commander's conundrum lay in part from the tittle-tattle that had been leaked that he was losing confidence in The Empress's new constitutional right to rule indefinitely. To him, it smelled of the same hypocrisy as Chairman Walt. But perhaps this was simply the pattern of power that littered the history books.

The Commander, in truth, believed that it had more to do with The Empress's lack of confidence in her successor, rather than the power-crazed sickness possessed by her nemesis, Chairman Walt. That still irked him somewhat.

But as the New Cold War with Disneynewland™ was at stalemate, or the British public had simply grown weary of hearing about it, matters turned to the unresolved domestic problems within the State, the Commander's current responsibility, which required swift and decisive resolution. He was having a crisis of conscience with regards to his duty. He couldn't be quite sure whether his reluctance was for the good of The Nation, The Royal State, or for his own self-interests as nobody's fate had been as directly affected by The Empress's decision-making as his.

The clear line had become a hazy blur, like the effects of too much port at the tail-end of a banquet, and the Commander questioned his instincts, wanting to do, he would liked to have believed, what was best for the Nation. But what was it?

As Corgi One penetrated the city, like a snake making its way into a rabbit hole, the Commander was conflicted. The further the train descended into the city, the whiter his wrapped knuckles turned, gripping his fingers tight around the handle of the red case in his possession, containing the documents of the Treaty. His breaths grew deeper, striding from a trot to a gallop, as he clung to the security of its contents, the promises and bribes, though little else betrayed his anxieties.

As the train approached Platform One of Manchester City station, where the leaders of the rebellion waited like a pack of hyenas, the Commander's conscience was still pulling him every which way. The train drew to a stop. The doors opened. He stepped onto the grubby platform, flanked by his entourage, as several of the resistance's most distinguished dignitaries formed a sloppy red arrow formation behind their leader, the Chief Executive of the People's Republic, General Mick. The

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Commander faced the red-haired man and in that moment, a pin dropping on the platform would have sounded like an atomic bomb.

'ey up Chuck!' broke the silence, as General Mick greeted him informally.

The Commander frowned at the damned impudence.

'One really would prefer to be addressed as "Commander Wales", General.'

The Commander was no longer officially referred to as The Prince of Wales, which was the source of constant irritation for him. Being addressed as Commander Wales was frustrating enough, but Chuck was purely inflammable.

'Whateva ya want, Charlie - I mean, C'maander Wales...'ey. I could refer to ya as "Yer Royal 'ighness" couldn't Ah?' Mick cackled.

The Commander chose not to dignify the question with a response. As Mick's cackling petered out, a starched silence hung in the air.

'ey, I'm just fucking with you, Charlie, ah mean, C'maaaander Wales....Let's go get a pint in, eh? Got a taxi waiting and all.'

As first greetings could have gone it could have been worse, he supposed. The Commander followed Mick out of the station to a waiting convoy of black taxicabs, with the Commander's entourage and Mick's handful of Ministers hovering about ten paces behind.

The official meeting was to be undertaken at Manchester's Parliamentary Offices, The Hacienda building, in the heart of the city. The taxicab at the head of the convoy was occupied by the Commander and Mick, the Commander's Personal Secretary, his Chief of Security, and Mick's next-in-command, Deputy Liam; the Ministers and other dignitaries trailed behind in necessary rank, with the lowliest commuting in beaten-up minicabs at the tail-end.

As the fleet navigated its way through the city streets, the Commander took in his surroundings. Nightfall gradually enveloped the city, and the streetlights that were operational flickered and buzzed onto the cracked pavement beneath them. The city centre apartments, the most desirable ones being converted industrial warehouses, housed the Republic's elite.

As the city sprawled out, the apartments gave way to rows of terraced houses populated by the masses. Urban decay was kept at bay by a heartbeat but the city had a certain kind of resonant energy and vitality.

Life pulsed under the neon lights, in the shadows of the doorways and behind the cracked windowpanes. The Commander admired the imposing Victorian architecture of the converted warehouses. Lit by the night sky, their phallic chimneys resembled amber mountains pushing up through the lifeless tiles.

The modern buildings were revolting though, it couldn't be denied; glass and steel, or worse, panelled units; a kind of industrial-scale Lego experiment gone horribly wrong. Monsters abusing the skyline with brutish force; artificial vines creeping up like ruthless serpents in the rainforest, strangling and suffocating the life from their competitors, to emerge the victors at whatever cost. Survival of the ugliest. The urban jungle. Welcome.

'Shall we stop for a quick sharpener at the Lass O' Gowrie?' suggested Mick. 'Grease the wheels before the official stuff, eh? It's just round the corner from The Hacienda.'

The Commander, grateful for anything that purchased him a little more time to clarify his thoughts before the official matters, was open to the unscheduled stop and nodded his consent.

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Three hours later the diplomatic party were no nearer to the official meeting in the Parliamentary offices than when they first set foot in the pub. He'd certainly been given more time. Mick had matched each of the Commander's drinks with two of his own, and the Commander had not exactly been the definition of restraint.

In this time, perhaps facilitated by local ale, the Commander had taken measure of his senses and the path became clear. Gone were his doubts, insecurities and reservations, drowned in the warmth and comfort of the softening embrace of six pints.

The Commander's staff had for the most part abstained from the proclivities, his Chief of Security and Private Secretary sticking to Salford Springs sparkling water.

'General, this has been rather agreeable but the time is now 8:17 p.m., perhaps we should attend to the official matters of State.'

'Eh?' Mick responded, then looking at his wristwatch, 'Suppose you're right. Quick one for the road?'

As the diplomatic party waddled out of the pub like a flock of fattened goslings, Mick threw his arm around the Commander and gestured to a bar on Oxford Street.

'ey Charli- I mean, your C'maanderness. Quick shot a voddy on the way? They've over seventy different flavours.'

The Commander glanced at the flickering sign above the establishment door: 'REVOLUTION'.

'Well, the name could be more appropriate but one supposes it may not hurt.'

An hour later, and God knows how many samples of flavoured vodka consumed, the party staggered back onto the street. No official banquet had been set in place, and though the group had remained fattened up on pork scratchings, this was a poor substitute for a proper hot meal.

The Northern party were now mostly charged on the excesses of the night, though the Commander's entourage was comparatively abstinent. Most were now tipsy though, with the exception of his Chief of Security and Private Secretary. The group as a whole however, including the Commander, were ravenous.

'Yer fancy sum scran?' asked Mick.

'I really must deliver these terms. Time is pressing,' responded the Commander, though hunger was accelerating past other urges.

'Go on. Pit stop at Mackie Dees?' countered Mick.

The glowing neon light from the Golden Arches was to prove another temptation impossible to resist, particularly as the Commander could see his staff salivating at the prospect. It was also an unmistakable privilege of the occasion. McDonalds had now been forbidden in the rest of the Royal State, its allegiances to Chairman Walt too close to deny, and all the outlets had been replaced with Burger Kings.

This was drinking at the last chance saloon. McDonalds would never survive the repatriation should the Commander's terms be successful. The heavenly pictures of the Big Macs, Quarter Pounders and, to a lesser extent, the McChicken sandwiches cast a hypnotic spell on the now ravenous posse, and they staggered mindlessly into the restaurant like zombies on the scent of flesh.

As the Commander wolfed through a portion of Chicken McNuggets dunked in ketchup, washed down with slurps of a chocolate thick-shake, he thought to himself that he really must get down to business.

He had to admit though, that after the consumption of what seemed like gallons of booze, the plastic food really did taste like nectar, whether or not it was

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made from horse. And at least it hadn't been that bloody awful fish & chips decimated by lumpy instant gravy.

And of course, McDonalds had it licked when it came to chips; nowhere else came close. Burger King's chips verged on inedible. KFC's too. McDonalds chips were even better than - bloody hell! His mind lurched to the whereabouts of the Royal box containing the treaty. *Where was it? Phew, okay.* Just next to him. *Mustn't lose that bloody thing. Would be a complete disaster if that fell into the wrong hands.*

He made a note to himself to take better care. One more burger to soak up the grog should do it and then back to crucial matters of State. Not up here on a jolly you know, despite how these Northerners like to carry out their affairs.

How the hell had they been able to ward off the Queen's armies so long? From what it appeared, the only thing they could organise was a piss-up in a brewery. It was the breweries that had kept them afloat financially after all, but who was really backing them? The real brains of the operation.

'General, I believe we should press on.'

'Right. Yeah. Reckon I'm about done,' Mick muffled through his fries. 'Better get crackin' eh?'

The doors flew open and the group spilled out onto the streets of the Republic like a feral herd of antelope. The Commander's wits were still about him, if somewhat compromised by alcohol and forbidden junk food, but his duty was as apparent as the vomit lining the pavement.

The Hacienda was within a stone's throw now and...and...he wobbled slightly as Mick slapped his back. 'Eh, Ch'mmaander. The Hacienda's a bit boring. Make as much sense to have the meeting at 'ooters on Deansgate? S'bout same distance to walk, eh'.

The Commander considered this. What difference did it really make where the meeting was held, as long as he did his duty and delivered The Empress's terms? He didn't expect the Mancunians to take the bait, regardless.

He surveyed the mob. His entourage was mostly in a better state than the resistance by about 3:1. As long as his Chief of Security, Chief of Staff and his Private Secretary kept their senses about them it would probably be fine. Hooters it was. He followed Mick's staggering lead.

Hooters was like Pagan Rome. For some people a radiant abyss, for others like staring into the Gates of Hell. Ample-bosomed girls in black hotpants and tight white T-shirts served pitchers of coldish beer to the diplomats, as synthetic dance music boomed from the venue's speakers.

Many of the party gazed feverishly at a couple of dancers wrapping their limbs around two erect poles in the centre of the bar. The night progressed and the official matters drifted further from the Commander's grasp, replaced by recurring thoughts about The Empress being the only relevant Royal as she could now live, and rule, indefinitely thanks to modern technology.

'Now really General, we must get down to business,' interrupted the Commander, as Mick stuffed a five-pound note into a waitress's hotpants.

'Eh? Oh yeah. Right,' replied Mick somewhat absently as his gaze drifted from the waitress to a dancer on the podium. 'First things first, let's 'ave another round a tequilas, eh?'

The Commander made eye contact with his Chief of Staff, as a girl's bottom was being wiggled in his face. The Chief of Staff, he noted, had succumbed to allowing himself the odd drink. The Chief's expression read *what the hell?* His Chief

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of Security appeared to be letting himself go a little as well, succumbing to the entrancing atmosphere.

The beer was making rapid progress through the Commander's body and he felt his bladder expand against his steadily restricting belt. He excused himself to the gents, almost forgetting about his red case. Catching himself, he gestured to his Chief of Staff to remain vigilant. An hour earlier and he would have taken the case with him.

Upon his return the row of tequilas lined the table like a glistening squadron of glass soldiers. The Commander took his seat as Mick slapped him on the back and commanded, 'Right lads, bottoms up.'

The group downed the shots in unison, and Mick gestured for another round. This repeated itself two or three times, until the Commander proposed to Mick:

'Now General, with regards to the details of the Treaty, we must reach a settlement for the good of the Nation.'

Mick wobbled slightly in his seat, his eyes semi-glazed, though the Commander appeared to have most of his attention.

'Nobody wants a violent end to this matter, least of all Her Majesty, though things cannot continue as they currently persist. We must reach a resolution and the nation must be re-united. Her Majesty has proposed generous terms for you and your...colleagues, providing you submit willingly to the rule of the Crown. We'd like to put this whole mucky business behind us. If you do not though, Her Majesty will not restrain from using Her considerable force.'

Mick's expression remained vacant. The Commander continued. This charade had been going well. Especially letting Mick believe he'd been calling the shots.

'Her Majesty is in possession of the greatest military force on the planet,' the Commander stated, eyeing up the rest of the group who were now entirely inebriated, even his own Chief of Security, Chief of Staff and Private Secretary, then lowered his voice, '...or at least that's what I'm expected to inform you. The contents of this case, it's prizes, bribes and threats,' he gestured to the red case in his hands, 'I regard as explosive.'

'So what d'ya want, Charlie?'

'What do you think I want?'

'You don't wanna wait for eternity and never be King?'

'That would be one way of putting it, yes.'

'You don't wanna live forever?'

'Not especially, no.'

'You wanna play ball?'

'Come to an arrangement between ourselves? Yes.'

Mick mulled this over, taking the Commander's deceit into account, and appeared to be sizing the Commander up in search of signs of false treachery. Over the past several years, through various channels, it had been let out that the Commander did not share all of The Empress's opinions, that there were cracks in the corridors of power. The Commander's disdain, though hardly an open secret, was noted in certain circles. Mick cackled:

'And the fookin' idiots send you up to broker the deal! Muppets!'

Muppets would be apt, thought the Commander.

'Ah reckon we should talk in the private room.'

The Commander studied the group, who were now mostly comatose.

'Come with me,' stated Mick. "Want you to meet someone."

The Commander and Mick made their way into a backroom, the private dance area labelled 'V.I.P.', through a curtain and into a dimly-lit room. The interiors were



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gilded and the seats finished in purple silk. The Commander nearly dropped his red case in shock by what he saw.

'You?!' He exclaimed.

In the middle of the room, being waited on like pharaohs by several sirens, sat two men. One, a fat, grotesque specimen in his late sixties, spilling out of his suit, and shovelling what looked like a bottomless supply of pork ribs into his gullet between huge slugs of ale and belching. The other was slim, considerably more refined and composed than his Deputy and wearing a Saville Row suit.

He sipped from a crystal flute of champagne that sparkled in the room's dampened light. His hair was short and smartly-combed, and though age had been catching up with him, his eyes still had their hypnotic, snake-charmer effect, and of course there was his grin: a row of gleaming teeth flashed a predator's smile.

'Hello Charles', said the former Prime Minister. 'Great to see you again. Please...take a seat.'

'But, but, but...you're in Orkney!' blurted out the Commander.

'And the moral of this story, Charles, is that if you have an enemy simply take them out when you can. Makes things much simpler.'

The fat Deputy topped up the former Prime Minister's champagne flute.

'Thanks, John. Charles. Please. Take a seat. What are you drinking?'

The Commander took a seat with trepidation. The fat Deputy belched again, stood up and loudly announced, 'Right, I'm off to the bog to stick me fingers down me throat. Back in five.'

'Very good John. Thanks for sharing that with us. Charles, G & T?'

'So you're behind all of this?'

'Well, uh, yeah. You don't think these fools could really have been the actual brains of the operation. No offense, Mick.'

A grunt came from the General, who until this point had made himself comfortable, slapping his belly and swaggering in his seat, staring lustfully at one of the girls.

'So Charles, what are we going to do?' asked the former Prime Minister.

'Well, Prime Minister, we're in a bit of a pickle. I have come here on matters of State to deliver The Empress's terms to the rebellion. But I happen to have an agenda of my own and I'm not sure if the policies are mutually inclusive.'

'Ah, so you're worried that if the Manchester rebellion is quashed then your odds of ever being King are pretty much scuppered. In other words, you're having a bit of a wobble?'

The Deputy entered the room again, and as he parked his bulky posterior back on his seat, knocked a glass from the table onto the floor.

'Now, now, John.' said the ex-Prime Minister.

The Deputy belched some kind of incomprehensible response.

'I believe that there is perhaps another alternative, some might regard as Machiavellian, to support the resistance and to retain my rights of succession.'

'Well I'm always interested in a deal, Charles.'

'Tell that to Gordon!' laughed the Deputy.

'So what's your proposition?'

'Well, nobody, least of all Her Majesty wishes to invade Manchester with military force...but the rebellion must be stamped out, in the State's eyes. Least of all, it sends out the wrong signal to Chairman Walt. If we can't sort a few troubles out at home, it looks weak. Puts ideas in Disney's head, and all of that.'

'Right.'

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‘My proposal is to assuage the State that the Northerners will submit, to avoid the invasion, but have them stall the handover. This can be achieved with a certain amount of bureaucratic horseplay, which can delay the exit strategy. In the meantime, I’ll keep on nagging Mummy not to reanimate and to let me be Prince of Wales again, and ultimately King. Then I’ll reintroduce Parliament. How does that sound?’

The former Prime Minister looked, for once, speechless. A small line of ants had gathered where the champagne had spilled on the table. The Prime Minister regarded the insects. As he did, several more of the Northern Command filed into the room.

‘I’ve always secretly admired the likes of Saddam and Gaddafi. I mean, while I was PM, I always technically outranked them on the Global scale, I know, but I always had to sort of, you know, answer to people, so in a way I never had their kind of power. They had so much more control, domestically, than me. I mean, it’s so much easier when you can gas, kill and torture your citizens, never mind the opposition, that you can get so much more, you know, done. And no one will question your methods.’

The Prime Minister picked up a drinking straw.

‘The public are like these ants. These ants aren’t concerned with what’s going on in this room. All they care about is what’s on that table. And if I happen to do this...’

The Prime Minister squashed several of the ants with the straw. The survivors paid little attention to their fallen brethren and continued to consume the champagne.

‘...the other ants don’t care. They go about their business, as long as there’s champagne on the table.’

‘That’s an interesting analogy, Prime Minister,’ observed the Commander dispassionately.

‘So as long as they’re distracted, the Public will carry on regardless. The truth is, Charles, it doesn’t matter who’s in power. Now, what distractions have you got in this box?’

The former Prime Minister opened up the Royal case, slid out the Treaty, broke the seal and flashed his eyes over the terms.

‘Usual rubbish,’ he said. ‘Yada, yada, yada. Titles, country house, peaceful resistance...submission to the Crown...threats of violence...survivors to Orkney... Been there, got the T-shirt...oh this is an interesting carrot on the stick, “the return of David Beckham to Manchester from Madrid”, that is original...bit vague on promises of eternal life though.’

‘Well, look Charles, I’m sure the Northerners would have loved all this crap, but I’m the one that’s really calling the shots and there’s nothing in here that remotely interests me. And your proposal of treachery is, well, rubbish. It’s nothing at all. It’s about as genuine as Saddam’s WMDs. And the truth is Charles, well, we’ve got you exactly where we want you anyway.’

‘Excuse me?’ asked the Commander, somewhat incredulously.

‘Well, to be honest, for my plan to succeed, I’m relying on the Queen to invade. Depending on it, in fact. That’s been the plan all along. The Queen goes and invades Manchester, taking out a few irrelevant ants, and the rest of the ants become distracted with the outrage.’

I can drum up the necessary support to lead the masses into resistance and I take power. But this time I do it without having to answer to Parliament and certainly not to the bloody Crown.

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I then team up with Chairman Walt, joining the UK and Disneynewland™ to create a Global Superstate which I'll Chair, and to be fair - who did you think was pulling the strings with Walt?

All he can do, until he's had a little nudge and suggestion in the right direction, is make spurious animated propaganda films...though they do have their uses. I engineered all of that: the Republican coup, the passing of the Proactive Pro-Life Bill, Walt's reanimation, the lot. It's all been part of my masterplan to become Premier of the World - for eternity. Pretty clever isn't it? The final piece in the jigsaw puzzle is ensuring that the Queen invades Manchester, which you've handed to me on a plate.'

'...'

'So deal, or no deal? No deal of course. When the Northerners don't submit, and particularly don't give you back, the Queen will have no choice but to invade.'

The Commander took in the room around him. Fortuitously the girls had momentarily left. It was just the Manchester High Command, the fat Deputy and the megalomaniac former PM. He started chuckling to himself.

'What's funny?' asked the Prime Minister sharply.

'I don't think you understand, Prime Minister. You haven't got me where you want me. We've got you just where we want you. The Queen has no intention of invading. That's not going to happen.'

'What do you mean?'

'And I've got no intention of betraying Mummy. And Her Majesty has no intention of reanimating. You've been victim to an even more elaborate plot than your own, where I've been the bait, and you've fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. We never supposed that the Manchester rebels were really pulling the strings. We just needed to draw out into the open whoever was. Whilst our spies hadn't revealed it was you, we thought that by letting out the rumour that I was discontent before this meeting with these drunken buffoons, it might get us a little closer to whoever was. I'm just staggered that you fell for it. I mean, it was so easy, and so obvious.'

'Well Charles, whatever, we've still got you as our hostage now.'

The Commander chuckled to himself, looking to the red box on the former Prime Minister's lap, then down at his Rolex and said,

'Of course one thing that I mentioned before was true, I don't wish to live eternally. And your generous advice was quite correct, "If you have an enemy, simply take them out if you can". I mentioned I regarded the contents in that box as explosive...well, they literally are.'

The Commander pushed a button on his timepiece as the Prime Minister looked aghast and said, 'What the f-'

The box detonated; blinding light, an explosion of ash and cinder, as the Prince executed his Royal duty, taking out the evil Mr Bl.....

'Fred dear.'

'Yes Gladys.'

'How's your speech coming along, darling? Have you finished it yet?'

'Oh, the speech? Er...well, erm...I'd gotten oneself a little distracted.'

'Have you been writing your far-fetched stories again?'

'Err... well, yes dear. One supposes one has...'

'Dear. You really have got better things you should be getting on with. We can't have the Prince of Wales as a fiction writer. It simply wouldn't be allowed. And have you written yourself into it again? You know how they'll analyse it. It's not

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another thinly-veiled attack on Mr Blair is it? You know you're supposed to be politically impartial. And if it's got hints about succession you know how that will go down with your mother...'

'I suppose...very well, dear.'

The Prince of Wales slowly closed his laptop, staring mournfully at the spines of pristine, leather-bound classics. The Duchess swept from the room, missing his tender parting glance. Discreetly placed between King Lear and Great Expectations, sat a dog-eared copy of Casino Royale.