

# EMPIRE

## SIMON BROWN

SIMON BROWN's stories have been published in Australia, the US, England, Japan, Russia, and Poland. Some of his stories can be found in the collections *Cannibals of the Fine Light* and *Troy*. He began writing science fiction novels such as *Privateer* and *Winter*, but has turned his hand to high fantasy with the Keys of Power trilogy (*Inheritance*, *Fire and Sword*, and *Sovereign*) and the Chronicles of Kydan series (*Born of Empire*, *Rival Son*, and *Empire's Daughter*).

He lives on the NSW south coast with his wife and two children.

In this deft and stylish evocation of H. G. Wells, Brown tells the story of how the world was really saved...

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'You know, little brother,' Isaac said, looking out the window of their tiny room, 'you can see the stars. When we first came to London there was so much fog that you could not even see the tops of buildings. I can even see Mars.'

'Is it really red?' Leonard asked, joining Isaac and leaning out on the sill.

'Yes. Small and red.' Isaac pointed it out.

'I can't see it.'

'There, next to the really bright white one. That's Jupiter.'

Leonard's face fell.

'What's wrong?' Isaac asked.

'Mama told me the brightest star was pop, all the way up in heaven, looking down on us.'

Isaac nodded. 'Well, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it is poppa.'

Leonard shook his head. 'No. You are always right, Isaac. It is Jupiter if you say so. And I can see Mars, too.'

'I am always right, eh? Even about Machines?'

Leonard snorted. 'You are *never* right about Machines.'

Isaac checked the song sheet in his hand, trying to memorise all the lyrics, and started singing. Leonard joined him for the last few lines, and they knew how sweet they sounded. Some things in their lives were right, at least some of the time. When they stopped they looked at each other with something like pride, and almost with one mind turned to look out the window again, to see the stars and planets. And eventually they looked down to see spread out before them the yellow lights of reborn London, and beyond the city the high wall that kept them in, and beyond that the red landscape that was the domain of the Martians, their hunting grounds and their nursery.

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History made Erin Kay go to Happy Rest, an antiseptic flat-roofed hospice in the middle of irrigated gardens near Phoenix.

She rolled up not expecting anything, but hoping Howard Finkel's signature would have some influence. The registrar umm-ed and ah-ed when Erin gave her the authority. She spoke softly into the intercom and the day manager appeared; he phoned the contact number beneath Howard Finkel's almost illegible scribble. He spoke a few words, nodded silently to himself and put down the phone.

'It's fine,' he told the registrar, and walked away without having said a word to Erin.

The registrar pointed down a corridor. 'Third door on the left. Room 12. Poor dear's not long for this world. He used to be a singer or something, did you know?'

'So I've heard,' Erin said, and made sure she retrieved the authority, figuring she might need it again.

She knocked on the door to Room 12. She heard a reply but could not make out the words. She risked opening the door wide enough for her to peek inside.

‘Zac Feelgood?’

He was looking straight at her. Brown eyes that seemed too young for the pale dying face they peered from. He was sitting in a wheelchair, wrapped in an old checkered bathrobe. Thin grey hair was combed back over his head, ending in uneven tips above a silver cravat. His hands tightly gripped the chair’s wheels as if he was afraid they would suddenly fall off.

‘I said I was busy,’ he said in a wheeze. Spittle flecked his lips and Erin felt queasy.

‘My name’s Erin Kay, Mr Feelgood.’ She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. ‘Your son Howard said I could visit you.’

‘That was good of him, considering he never visits himself. The little spiv. I should have given Dot my name. My real name. Her kids visit all the time. Good kids. But he was the only legitimate one left, so he gets everything.’ Feelgood’s mouth curled, showing a full set of yellowing teeth. ‘You one of his lawyers? What the fuck do you want? More papers to sign?’

‘I’m an historian, Mr Feelgood, not a lawyer.’

‘Don’t call me Feelgood,’ he said curtly.

‘Pardon?’ For a second Erin had the horrible thought that she had knocked on the wrong door.

‘It’s Finkel. Get that right if you’re gonna write a book.’ He growled at her. ‘I read all those books about me and my brother. All they talk about is the booze and drugs and dames. It’s like our act meant nothing at all. But we put smiles on the faces of millions.’

‘I know, Mr Fe ... Mr Finkel. Look, can I call you Zac?’

She held her breath while he stared noncommittally at her for a long moment.

‘Isaac,’ he said distantly, as if he was remembering the name of a friend long dead. Then he came back to the present. ‘Talk to me? About what particularly?’

Erin knelt down next to him. ‘About what came before,’ she said, almost in a whisper, because that was how everyone talked about what

came before.

‘Why me?’ he said suspiciously. ‘There are hundreds of us left from those days.’

‘They didn’t go through what you and Leonard went through.’

‘How would you know?’

‘A long time ago I met Dot. We were friends. She told me things.’

‘And Howard still let you come and see me?’

‘I didn’t tell him about Dot. I told him I was interested in music hall and vaudeville. I told him I was writing a book about Zac and Lenny Feelgood. But I’m more interested in Isaac and Leonard Finkel.’

He leaned towards her and said, ‘You know, almost no one knows the secret history of Isaac and Leonard Finkel, and how we saved the world from a fate worse than ... well, worse than death.’

‘I know some of it. Dot told me a lot before she died. She said forget about everything I’d read, about the movies, and about how you changed your name from Finkel to Feelgood —’

‘And how we married too young, how we got hooked on hash and hooch, how we deserted Benny our first manager, poor dumb bastard, and how we ignored our kids, like poor dumb Dot, and how Lenny died from cirrhosis in 1953, and how I’m here forgotten in an old peoples home in 1965 and telling the nurses stories they don’t believe.’

Erin said in a subdued voice, ‘Something like that.’

Isaac’s face went flat and hard. He stared at Erin like he didn’t care about anything in the world. ‘Why the fuck should I?’

‘Because you’re dying, Isaac, and this is your last chance.’

Isaac’s breath rattled somewhere in his chest. ‘Why do you care?’

‘Because it really happened,’ Erin said.

There was another long pause, and then Isaac looked away from her and outside his room’s only window. Hard Arizona light slanted across his

face. Erin thought she had lost her chance. She sighed heavily and stood up. But before she could move to the door, Isaac started talking, the words coming out slow as treacle, and Erin retrieved her tape recorder from her purse and turned it on.

‘This is the only story that matters, and the only reason most people haven’t heard it before is that it was too good for stage or screen let alone real life, even if the Committee for Conciliation had felt like letting it through the censor. It starts a long time ago, long before common memory, and long, long before history.

‘The first date to remember is May 1894...’

\* \* \* \*

... when all the way from Danzig, as hopeful as birds in spring, the Finkels arrive in London. Jacob, a cobbler, his wife Magdalena and their two children, Isaac and Leonard. But as Magdalena always said, ‘An unlucky person is — kaput! — a dead person’, and Jacob was as unlucky as they come. The Martians arrived three months after the Finkels set foot in England, and as the world soon learned the Martians had no respect at all for people with good hearts and modest ambition and a determination to work hard.

Jacob Finkel did not live out the first onslaught, and Magdalena, with her two small boys, was taken prisoner and put in a camp in London with thousands of other survivors, all homeless and bewildered and watched over by monstrous machines with heat rays and no mercy at all.

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‘They were terrible and beautiful, the Machines. I remember their long silvery legs moving in the morning mist from the Thames like the fingers of some giant Jehovah.’ Isaac walked three fingers on the arm of his wheelchair to show Erin how they moved. ‘And when the sun was low in the afternoon the metal on the Machines looked like molten gold.’

Isaac paused again while he remembered the Machines, the great striding of them.

‘Now listen, Erin Kay, because the second date I’m going to give you is the one to remember, because that’s when it all really starts. It is 1897 ...’

\* \* \* \*

... and in the refurbished rooms of Mr George Cochrane, manager of the Empire Theatre, the aforesaid Mr Cochrane is on the defensive.

‘Maggie, Maggie, Maggie.’ Cochrane said the name as if it was the start of a sigh.

‘I prefer Magdalena. From you, in fact, Mrs Finkel is even better.’

‘After all we’ve been through.’

‘Which is less than you imagine and more than I can bear to think about,’ Magdalena said stiffly, and gathered her boys around her to prevent any unwanted advances. Mr Cochrane may have been a cad, but Isaac and Leonard sometimes played with his own children and he was sensible about rumours.

‘Take my advice, my good lady. Change the name of the act.’

‘It is very English. I have heard English say it.’

‘Froth and Bubbles.’ Cochrane shook his head. ‘No. It sounds like the name of a female revue, you know, with the fan and ti ... feathers.’

Magdalena looked blankly at him.

Cochrane cocked one heel and lifted invisible breasts. ‘Bristen ... boosten?’ He wiggled his backside. ‘Toches?’

Magdalena was horrified and tried to cover her children’s ears, but they were already tittering.

Blushing, Cochrane cleared his throat. ‘Much better if it was something like ...’ He waved a hand in the air. ‘What are they doing again?’

‘Some jokes, some song, some jokes, some dance, some jokes ...’ Magdalena started, but her voice was drowned out by the cranking, stomping sound of a passing Machine. The walls of Cochrane’s office shook a little, and dust sprinkled from the ceiling. The boys ran to a window before their mother could stop them and caught a glimpse of a huge metal leg.

‘Land dreadnought,’ Isaac said with certainty.

'No. Cruiser. Four heat rays —' Leonard said.

Isaac interrupted his younger brother. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'

They were jerked away from the window, Isaac by Magdalena and Leonard by Cochrane.

'Fool boys!' the manager said shortly, handing Leonard to his mother, then craning his head out the window to make sure the Machine had gone on.

Magdalena shook her sons by their stiff white collars. 'Idiots! What are you? *Meshugeh*? Don't you know better, as if I haven't taught you myself? You want to disappear? You want to feed the monsters?'

'Sorry, mamma,' Leonard squeaked.

'It didn't see us,' Isaac said.

'And how does Isaac Finkel, twelve years old, know what a Martian can or cannot see?' Magdalena demanded. 'Are you an expert on Martians, all of a sudden?'

'He thinks he knows all about them,' Leonard piped enthusiastically.

'More than you, anyway,' Isaac said under his breath.

\* \* \* \*

'Both Lenny and me collected cards,' Isaac said. He pointed to a set of drawers next to his bed. 'In there, Erin Kay. In the top drawer.'

She opened it. There was a wallet, toothbrush and toothpaste. And what looked like a pack of miniature cards held together with a rubber band; the back of the top card had on it a picture of a packet of cigarettes and the word 'Players'.

'Bring the cards to me,' he said.

Erin gave him the cards. He slipped off the rubber band, turned them face up and spread them in his two hands. Each card had a vivid three-colour illustration of a Martian Machine. Erin could not believe her eyes. She had heard descriptions of the machines from other old folk, but

had never imagined they could look so lethal and so utterly alien. And yes, beautiful, too.

‘Zac and I collected them. Had every one, except the sea cruiser, which was rarer than ...’ He frowned in concentration. ‘Rarer than an acorn.’

‘Acorn?’

‘From an oak tree. The red weed killed most of ‘em. After the defeat of the Martians, Players started making cigarettes again and put cricketers and racing cars and battleships on their cards. The Committee for Conciliation didn’t want any reminder of the Martians, and the world soon forgot how close it came to having no history at all.’

\* \* \* \*

A cat leaped onto the windowsill and looked into Cochrane’s office just long enough for everyone to notice it, including Leonard who sneezed violently.

‘Cats,’ Mrs Finkel explained to Cochrane. ‘His allergy. Also geraniums and coff —’

‘Bubble and Squeak,’ Mr Cochrane said.

The three Finkels looked at the chairman with puzzled expressions.

‘Bubble and Squeak,’ he went on. ‘A name for the act. That’s as English as breakfast. And your boys are good with the jokes, I know, so the name fits. Like a suit, Maggie.’ Magdalena glared at him and he forced a laugh. ‘I mean Mrs Finkel.’

‘Bubble and Squeak,’ Mrs Finkel said slowly, frowning. ‘What do you think?’ she asked her boys.

Isaac and Leonard exchanged glances. They were not sure what to think; Magdalena usually did that for them.

\* \* \* \*

‘Tell me about the Empire,’ Erin said. ‘Dot showed me a picture once.’

‘What’s to say? It started life as a hole in the ground where Trafalgar Square used to be before the Martians hit London. The bastards created a natural amphitheatre, y’know, like the Greeks used, a fact not lost on



Cochrane. The world has never seen an entrepreneur and entertainer like him, and never will again. When he first put on a show — Gilbert and Sullivan's brand new operetta, *The Grand Duke* — no one came, including Sullivan who had been harvested the day before. Everyone was afraid the Martians would attack the audience. But nothing happened. Some say one of the Machines walked by, stopped and swayed a little, as if it was dancing, but no one believed it.

'Cochrane's shows were the only bright spot in our lives. He did such a great job raising everyone's morale that the Council for Collaboration made sure he and his entourage were free from any harvesting.'

'Did you ever see anyone harvested?' Erin interrupted. She could not help swallowing.

'Saw plenty taken,' Isaac said, hollowly. 'But not what happened after. Not for a while, anyway.'

'What happened with the Empire?'

'Like I said, Cochrane was a clever man, and he saw what people wanted was music hall. He put on afternoon matinees as well as night shows, and took up the acts from the destroyed Hackney Empire and the Hippodrome, the Grand and Hoxton Hall. In time, the council assigned labour teams to build proper seating and a proper foyer and ticket office; the council even wanted to build a roof over the amphitheatre, but Cochrane knew that would screw the acoustics so he didn't let it happen. In the foyer Cochrane placed the head of Nelson from the column. It was his way of saying "fuck you" to the Martians. And "fuck you!" to the council, too.

'The labour teams didn't stop with the Empire. The council extended the building program to cover the whole of the prison camp, which by then had spread to include most of the old city and held survivors from the whole bloody island. The prison was turned into a metropolis. The Martians didn't seem to mind, as long as the collectors from the Council for Collaboration were given free reign to harvest when necessary and no one got in the way of the Machines.'

He cleared his throat. 'We started at sixpence a show. Threepence each. Oh, and a shilling for mama. We did well, figured out how to work the audience, and in a few weeks had fifth billing for the afternoon matinee. You had to be good to get that. Cochrane started paying us a shilling. The family was clearing two bob a show, nothing to sneer at in those days.'

His eyes seemed to dim for a moment. 'Not real shillings, of course. Not real money. Little metal disks the council gave out. We just called them threepences and zacs and bobs.

He rubbed his right forearm. Erin watched his blue veins jump up and down. 'You know what got Cochrane?'

'Influenza, wasn't it?'

'That's what they wrote for his obituary. Really it was boredom. He hated the movies and the musicals that started after the Martians were gone. His heart was in revue and operettas. He couldn't believe the nineteenth century ever came to an end. For Cochrane even the Martians were better than what came after. He belonged to the Empire, and always would.'

\* \* \* \*

'You know, Mr Cochrane,' Mr Cochrane said to himself, 'those two boys aren't half bad.'

Isaac and Leonard weren't sure whether or not they were meant to say anything to that, so said nothing. They waited.

Cochrane lit one of his precious cigars. The boys watched enviously. International trade had died with the invasion and nothing was imported any more, including tobacco, but Cochrane had somehow obtained a few pre-invasion boxes of cigars for his personal use. Purple smoke curled into the air, stale but still seductive.

'There might even be a part for you in Gilbert and Sullivan's new piece.'

The boys could not hide their surprise. 'Their new piece?' Isaac said. 'I thought Sullivan was taken?'

'He was, but Gilbert is adapting an earlier piece. He is changing his lyrics to HMS *Pinafore* and telling the story of our slimy tentacled friends.'

The boys blinked. They had a vision of the new Empire being melted to the ground with them and mama in the middle of the puddle. 'Won't the council stop it?'

Cochrane snorted. 'The Committee for Collaboration won't care, so

long as the punters are happy. I admit, Gilbert's first title for the musical, *HMS Thunderchild*, was a little close to the bone, but we've settled on *HMS Minotaur*, martial without being exactly provocative.'

Cochrane looked appraisingly at the boys. He took a long puff of his smoke and said, 'Gilbert has added new characters as well. There are parts for two young lads in the piece. I was going to give them to Marie Lloyd and Vesta Tilley, but you can hold a tune and act well enough.'

'And we're cheaper,' Isaac pointed out.

Cochrane smiled. 'You heard Marie's latest?'

The boys shook their heads. Their mama still pretended they knew nothing of the world and would not let them in the audience when Lloyd or Tilley performed.

"'She Sits Among Her Cabbages and Peas.'" Had the audience rolling in the aisles.' Then, strangely, he grimaced. 'Not quite the standard I expected to introduce into the Empire.' He looked down at his cheroot and sighed heavily. 'Still. I don't suppose we should expect anything at all to go our own way. The future doesn't exactly belong to us any more.

'One possible problem, though. The name. Finkel? No good at all. Too foreign. Too Jewish.'

'Mama.'

'Tell her it's just for the posters and bills. Finkel just won't work. Tell her it's not English enough.'

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'And what did your mama think of the idea?' Erin asked.

\* \* \* \*

'If Finkel was good enough for Jacob, your father, it is good enough for Mr High-and-Mighty. Tell him that, Isaac'

As arguments went it was a hard one to fight, so Isaac said to her, 'Mama, you have to see it his way. Mr Cochrane is an impresario; he sees the big picture. He knows what's best for us.'

'I know what's best for you, thank you very much. I am your mother, who brought you all the way from Danzig in a leaking boat filled with fish and your father sick over the side. We survive pogrom, the North Sea and the Martians. I know what's best for my sons.'

'It's entertainment,' Isaac said. 'Nothing more. We can call ourselves Finkel in the street, in the home, we can shout it from the mountains for all Cochrane cares. But not in the Empire, not if you want us to do Gilbert and Sullivan.'

'Finkel is your name and that is the end of it.'

In the distance, the family could hear a Machine patrolling the walls. They could feel the vibrations through the floor of their small apartment.

Isaac had a sudden idea. 'Mama, what do we call ourselves in the matinee? The Finkel Brothers? No. We call ourselves Bubble and Squeak. *You* were even going to call us Froth and Bubbles. How is Isaac and Leonard Feelgood any different from that? In fact, how about Zac and Lenny Feelgood? Now that's not bad.'

'It is a long way from Isaac and Leonard Finkel,' Mama said.

Leonard said, 'It's a long way from Danzig.'

Magdalena fell silent. The boys waited for her to make a decision. The sound of the Machine faded as it walked away from them.

'Not just a long way from Danzig,' Magdalena said solemnly. 'Very well, Isaac, if you think it's for the best, have it your way. Have it the way of Mr High-and-Mighty CoMchrane.'

Later, when Magdalena was preparing their daily meal and the sound of the patrolling Machine was still fresh in their memories, Leonard said, 'Jack Bissel says everyone will be harvested in the end.'

Isaac looked up from his sewing, glancing first at Leonard and then at his mama.

'Jack Bissel is a *schmuck*,' Magdalena said.

'Mama!' Isaac and Leonard said together. It was alright for them to say such words, but they could not believe their mama knew the word let alone spoke it out loud.

‘Don’t you two “mama” me. You think I came in the last shower? I know what Bissel is because I know what his father is and what his mother is. Jack Bissel is lower than Martian’s *petsl*.’

This time the boys laughed they were so surprised, but they stopped when Magdalena glared at them in challenge. ‘Some things are not to be laughed at.’

She was chopping squash and carrot and cabbage into a cooking pot, vegetables that were now grown in the small market gardens that had started almost as soon as the city had been rebuilt. The gardens had produced their first crop just in time, for the Martians had turned virtually the whole of Britain into a red wilderness where nothing grew that was of use to people. Even the Thames, which for a short period after the invasion had become filled once again with fish that could be eaten safely, now carried water that was crystal clear and completely barren of all life. At least the water could be used in cooking and to drink.

‘So,’ Magdalena continued, ‘Jack Bissel does not know what he is talking about. We are not going to be harvested. We are going to live. We have not gone through all that we have gone through so the Martians can take us. It is not God’s will, I am telling you, and it is not *my* will.’

Isaac and Leonard both knew God’s will was irrelevant — how else could the Martians ever have invaded the Earth and caused so much death and destruction? — but the will of Magdalena was a natural force, like the wind and sunshine. For the first time he could remember, Isaac started believing he would survive, that he had a life whose course ran so far into the future he could not read it.

He returned to his sewing, and the glimmer of elation he had felt was reduced by the knowledge that he was now cannibalising his last spare pair of pants to keep his best pair in decent order. Soon Magdalena would have to spend some of their hard-earned coins to buy material from the looters and scavengers who searched through the ruins in the red wasteland for things that were no longer produced, such as cloth and fabric and kitchen utensils and even coal for heating and cooking.

Isaac dropped the sewing, stood up and went to the window and looked out over London. It had rained an hour before, but now the sky was clear and the sun shone on a city that shimmered. He thought London looked like a glittering diamond set in red velvet, and for a moment he realised the Martian landscape held a soft and muted beauty of its own.

Almost immediately he felt guilty, as if he had betrayed his own race, his own planet, by admitting such a thing. But it was true, and he sensed he understood a small part of how the Martians saw the universe.

What if this *is* God's will? he wondered. What if the Martians were His Chosen People and the rest of us the chaff to be winnowed from His creation?

He heard Leonard say in a thoughtful voice, 'You are right, Mama, Jack Bissel is lower than a Martian's *pets!*'

Isaac could not help laughing again.

And cut it short as the Machine they had heard before returned suddenly, its shadow falling across the window. It was a dreadnought. It had come so quietly he had not heard it. The Machines did that sometimes, stalking through the city as silent as silver spirits as if to prove a point to their prisoners, that death can be as unexpected as lightning from the sky. The dreadnought seemed to hover outside their tenement for a long moment, and brought one leg down so hard the whole building shook. Then it was gone.

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'Did you ever go over the wall? Outside of London?' Erin asked.

Isaac sucked his lower lip. His yellow teeth looked like thick tortoise shell pegs. 'Well, once,' he said after a while.

'With Leonard?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Just you and Leonard?'

'Nope. One other, a boy who did the act before us. He was a couple of years younger. Cleverest boy I ever met. Tiny bugger, but as agile as a monkey.'

'What was his name?'

'Charlie Hawkes.' He wheezed as he remembered. 'Poor fucking Charlie Hawkes.'

'What happened.'

\* \* \* \*

'Jesus, it goes everywhere,' Charlie said. 'All the way to Timbuktu, I bet.'

'Not over seawater,' Isaac said. 'None of that red stuff goes near the ocean.'

'How do you know that?'

'Heard it from others who saw it first put down,' Leonard said.

'Well, who's to say the Martians didn't land in Sudan and Siam and all the way to Mexico?'

Isaac and Leonard didn't want to think about that, so they shut up.

The rolling red hills of England spread out before them. The landscape stank like old seaweed and dead squid.

Leonard sneezed.

'Cat,' Isaac joked.

'What?' Charlie said.

'He always sneezes when there's a cat around.'

'Do not,' Leonard protested.

The air thrummed. All three boys stared at each other. You only got that sound when *they* were real close ...

'I can't see it,' Leonard said, almost squealing.

Isaac looked over his shoulder to the hole in the London wall. If they were real quick, maybe the hole wasn't as far as it looked.

'We have to run!' he said to the others. 'Now!'

Leonard didn't wait, but scooted faster than a rat down a drainpipe with Isaac only a tenth of a second behind. Charlie, though, he was braver.

When the two brothers got to the hole, Isaac saw Charlie still hadn't moved an inch.

'Damn you, Charlie, get your arse over here!'

Too late. The Machine first appeared around the corner of the wall and one triple-step later was standing over Charlie Hawkes. No argument this was a dreadnought, Isaac thought. Clear hundred and fifty feet straight in the air with a cabin on top shaped like the head of a beetle, four heat rays under and four on top in twin turrets, legs three-jointed and splay-footed, and around the front of the cabin were clumps of metal tentacles like the whiskers of a catfish. It reflected red in the red landscape except for Charlie's oblong face all distorted and gigantic in the concave underbelly of the thing. Two of the tentacles extended out, fell down and wrapped themselves around Charlie, then whipped him up to the cabin. And he was gone.

At first Isaac thought it was Charlie screaming, heard all the way from inside the cabin, but then his brain recognised the clear bell tone of Leonard's sweet, sweet eleven-year-old voice.

'Shut up, Leonard! Fuck's sake, shut up!'

Another of the tentacles slithered down, but this time it didn't wrap around anyone, just pointed at Leonard as if it was seeing him and sniffing him at the same time, then was gone.

Leonard shuffled backwards until he was back behind the wall, then dragged Isaac back after him

'We can't leave Charlie!' Isaac said.

Before Leonard could say anything, there was a slurping sound from the machine, and out of the cabin dropped a small red bundle with bones sticking out of it.

\* \* \* \*

'And you think that was Charlie?' Erin asked.

'Don't know what else it could have been. Anyway, he was never seen again, poor bastard.' Isaac wrung his hands. 'Had to tell his mama and that was hell. Never seen anyone cry so much as Charlie's mama. It drove her mad in the end.'



‘Did you get in trouble?’

‘Nope. Everyone was so relieved the Machine only took Charlie they never minded us, except ordering us never to go near the wall again. We were happy to oblige.’

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Isaac was kissing Mary Ester’s pink ear lobe while his hand fumbled in the top of her dress. He had just managed to cup her left breast when Leonard barged into the dressing room and said, ‘Oh, there you are!’

Mary yelped, pulled away from Isaac and ran out, straightening her neckline as she went.

‘She’s nice,’ Leonard said approvingly. ‘I saw her with Oliver Mark the other day.’

‘Shut up,’ Isaac said.

‘Be nice or I’ll tell mama. She thinks you’re holier than Moses.’

‘What’d you want to come in and spoil things anyway?’

‘We’ve got a date.’

‘Date for what?’

‘For HMS *Minotaur*! Five days from now!’

Isaac grinned. ‘Really?’

Leonard grinned back. ‘Yup. Mama told Cochrane he can change our names, so Cochrane told mama we were in, and mama told me, and now I’m telling you.’

‘Zac and Lenny Feelgood,’ Isaac said, trying the billing out loud.

‘Lenny and Zac,’ Leonard said. ‘Things should be done alphabetically.’

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When the nurse came to test Isaac's blood pressure, Erin looked out the window, but the sigh of the trees depressed her. They were the fast growing species that had been planted almost everywhere else in the world over the last century, like Monterey Pine, Karri and Yellow Box, in their way all reminders of what had come before and of everything that had been lost. So she turned away from the view and pretended to study the painting on the wall above Isaac's bed while the nurse pumped and pumped the wrap around Isaac's poor thin arm.

The painting was one of Munch's *Scream Series Two* with a woman's face distorted into a silent, consuming shriek with a Martian walker striding over the bridge behind her. The background comprised swirls of red weed, their rootlets extending off the edge of the painting's borders. She remembered red weed from her childhood; some had been preserved in her local Museum of Conciliation. Well, pink weed then because of the formaldehyde, and getting paler year by year. It was nothing, really, a specimen as pointless as the jars filled with fetuses and two-headed lambs. But seeing Munch's painting, Erin could almost feel what it must have been like living in those times.

Isaac was swearing at the nurse, but he ignored the language and when he was finished helped Isaac back into his wheelchair, thanked him politely for cooperating and walked out, nodding sympathetically to Erin before closing the door behind him.

'It's not my fucking heart they should worry about,' Isaac spat, and jabbed at his skull. 'It's the fucking blancmange in here. I can feel it oozing out of my ears. I tell you, Erin Kay, I won't have anything left soon. I will be all skin and bones and spit and in the middle my heart beating like a clock but no brain anywhere. They'll scoop me up and put me in a bin, and that'll be the end of Isaac Finkel, all the way from Danzig, and Zac Feelgood and Bubble and Squeak and all the stories. No one will remember the Martians any more. The Committee of Conciliation wants us to forget any of it ever happened because that way none of them can be hanged for what they did when they were the Committee of Collaboration. History gets stuck in their gullet like ... like ...'

He coughed and slumped in the wheelchair. He waved his right hand in the air, signalling Erin to invent a metaphor for him.

'Like a fishbone,' she said weakly.

'Jesus, no. Like shit made from cement.'

‘So tell me, Isaac, so I can tell everyone else.’

‘Tell you what? I’ve talked myself into a stupor. I feel like I’ve got nothing but slag in my lungs.’

‘We’re not finished yet. What happened on that night? The opening night of HMS *Minotaur*?’

Isaac closed his eyes. ‘So long ago. You know, it isn’t the grease paint and the lights I remember?’

‘No?’

‘Never was. Never is for anyone in music hall. That’s just for the songs and the memoirs, you know, “I remember the smell of the grease paint, the heat of the stage lights”. It’s all bullshit. When you’re working on the stage all the time it’s just background.’

‘Then what do you remember about it?’

‘I remember the women, Erin Kay.’ His eyes opened and his mouth curled into a smile. ‘I remember being around twenty women or more, all taller than me and done up and sweating in their costumes, and the glass beads, and the powder on their breasts like flour on rising bread, skin so pale it was almost blue, and the pins and broaches and parasols and the way they let me look at them because they thought I was a kid and it was kinda cute, but Jesus I wanted them. I wanted Mary Ester and Lorna Dixon and Jane Fremont, all at once, and Annie Beaumont and Victoria Denny. All of us crammed into the wings waiting our turn to tumble out and entertain all the poor sods waiting their turn to be turned into fertiliser. You know, all that dying around us made us horny as the devil. I was fourteen when I first did it; that was with Annie, during the third act. My first time. It was over so quick we didn’t have time to clean up and then we were on and afterwards mama looked at me like she knew.’

Erin swallowed. She had not expected these confessions and did not want to hear any more; still, she could not help wondering what Annie had thought of it. Had she seduced him? Or was sex like alcohol for people who had no other way to relax, or maybe even to relate to each other? Maybe Isaac was right, that all that dying made everyone horny as the devil. How many conversations can you have when you know the world is dying around you? In the end, perhaps that was the only thing you could talk about, so maybe sex was a way to avoid it and a way to remind yourself you were still human when so much around you was not.

'Not that mama minded, I think,' Isaac went on. 'With everything else going on. Besides, I reckon Cochrane was right. He and mama now and then. You know.'

'The opening night,' Erin prompted. 'Tell me about the opening night.'

\* \* \* \*

Running up from the dressing room, Isaac and Leonard caught their breath in the wings. The stage manager glared at them disapprovingly, but they didn't care. There was no way they were going to miss the spectacular opening number, and when Cochrane walked onto the stage the entire audience, the biggest ever seen in the Empire, fell silent as if all were struck dumb by the hand of God. Cochrane knew exactly how long to speak, how far he could build up their expectations before losing them, and when he had finished he lifted his hand in a flourish and the curtains behind him rose as he left the stage.

And then the orchestra in the pit started up. Lime lights swung across the stage as if searching for the cast, and then the prow of HMS Minotaur was pushed into view and the audience erupted in cheers.

For Isaac, though, it was the costumes that made his eyes glitter. Cochrane had made sure the cast were decked out in the best costumes the Empire had, many saved from theatres and music halls long gone and never used since. The women wore dresses made from silk and chiffon with satin sashes, and on their fingers wore rings with fake pearls the size of peas, and in their hats wore peacock feathers and pins made from gold and silver. The men wore uniforms so covered in braid and toggles and brass buttons they would have made any real ship top heavy, and the dress swords that swung by their sides were broad and heavy enough to have come from giant Mamelukes. Even Isaac and Leonard, the only children in the cast, carried long knives suspended from their belts with bejeweled hilts and inlaid scabbards.

The opening number was so spectacular, so loud and audacious and fast moving, Isaac was overwhelmed by the glory of it; he did not think the court of the Sun King could have been half as brilliant. And then he and Leonard heard their cue and from that point on they were a part of it, the whole glittering show, their nerves succumbing to the excitement the whole cast felt, singing with such grace they could see people in the audience leaning forward in their seats to be closer to the sound of it.

At the end Isaac and Leonard had their duo, the grand finale where the rest of the cast gradually joined in until the piece reached its crescendo, and as the singers filled themselves with air and seemed to stretch on their toes to give the greatest voice they could, the audience stood, pulled to their feet by the music and words stirring inside them, something they had not felt since the invasion.

And then the last verse, sung like an anthem, rang out.

*I humble poor and foreign born,  
The meanest in the new division —  
Despite the red-tentacled dawn —  
The mark of Harvester submission —  
Have dared to raise my wormy eyes  
Above the dust to which they'd nail me  
In mankind's glorious pride to rise  
I am an Englishman — behold me!*

When it was done, the last note lifting into the dark sky above, there was a moment of condensed silence as if the whole world had fallen quiet. Then the applause started, rippling towards the stage like waves that grew larger and larger as the cast took their bows, the loudest and most sustained being for Isaac and Leonard. Isaac glanced at the wings and saw his mama there, tears pooling under her eyes, and at that moment, for the first and only time in his life, he felt invincible. Until he looked up and saw the dreadnought. It was almost completely hidden from view, revealed only by the thinnest sliver of silver that outlined its cabin and one of its three legs. It stood before the Empire, towering over the amphitheatre, not moving at all. One by one the others in the cast followed Isaac's gaze, themselves becoming as still as the Machine, and soon everyone in the amphitheatre was looking up at it.

\* \* \* \*

Isaac said nothing for a long time. Erin, who had finally reached the climax of the story of how Isaac and Leonard Finkel had saved the world, was torn between wanting to know how it ended and wanting to be suspended forever there at the moment before knowing, filled with a wonderful anticipation and tension.

In the end she surrendered. 'Dot told me Leonard sneezed,' she said, almost in a whisper. 'Right on a Martian.'

Isaac's gaze settled on her as if he did not know who she was.

'He was allergic to them,' Erin went on. 'That's what Dot says.'

'No,' Isaac said slowly, the word squeezed out from tired lungs. 'It was nothing like that. That's just myth; sometimes we'd go along with it, but mostly we said nothing.'

'Then tell me, Isaac. What *really* happened?'

'The dreadnought walked away, clumping through the city back to the walls and its own red kingdom. Everyone in the Empire waited and waited for something to happen, not making a sound, half expecting to die, to be picked up and squeezed like a ripe peach. But nothing happened.'

Isaac coughed loudly, making Erin jump. It was a deep wet sound, almost all phlegm and no air.

'And then the Machines started dropping, one by one. All over the land, all over the world, the Martians died. I saw one crawling out of its machine. A huge grey thing that pulled itself along with its tentacles. It reminded me of a dying cow I'd seen during the invasion, its rear legs burned off and the stumps cauterised, pulling itself through the field with its front legs, a huge sack of dying meat. That's what the Martians had become — huge sacks of dying meat.'

'They caught a cold,' Erin said. 'That's what all the autopsies showed. Influenza or something.'

'Maybe,' Isaac whistled. 'But I think we defeated them because we survived, and kept on surviving no matter what happened. It wasn't the singing and the acting and the jokes, or Cochrane and the Empire, although all of that helped. It's simply that we hung on and hung on, and in the end it was the Martians who let go first.'

\* \* \* \*

Isaac and Leonard were looking out the window of their tiny room.

'I can still see Mars,' Leonard said.

'You thought it would go away, did you?' Isaac jibed.

'Kind of, I guess. Will they come back?'

Isaac shrugged.

‘If they do,’ Leonard piped up, ‘we’ll just build another Empire.’

‘We’ll sing them away.’

‘We’ll joke them away.’

‘Mama will scare them away.’

They almost laughed at that, but it sounded forced even to their ears. They turned away from the window.

‘What do we do now?’ Leonard asked, almost forlornly.

‘Get our names up in lights,’ Isaac said. ‘We’ll start here, in London. Then Paris, maybe, and Manchester, when they build it again. Edinburgh, too. Maybe even New York one day. I can see it now, little brother. Zac and Lenny Feelgood conquer the world.’

\* \* \* \*

## AFTERWORD

‘Empire’ came from an interest in Gilbert & Sullivan and H. G. Wells that collided in that part of my brain reserved for the most bizarre story ideas. The glue that held the two themes together is the idea of survival, that it isn’t the heroes who make a victory, but the great masses of people who just hang on and keep working and dreaming no matter what.

— *Simon Brown*