

Goliath Is Waiting
By
Jamie Mathieson

MY involvement commenced with a phone call at 2.30 am the night of the crash. My mobile was configured to only ring during the night if called by a handful of numbers, most of which were family.

This was not a call from my family.

Three hours later, I was facing proof we are not alone in the universe and wishing I'd worn my wellies.

Base camp was a little village of tents and prefabs unloaded from lorries. The sound and fumes of diesel generators filled the air. Shouted orders. Floodlights illuminating the drifting rain.

We were all shivering in the drizzle, maybe a dozen of us: theoretical physicists, linguists, metallurgists, even sign language experts. Some of us had met before, called out on other nights to false alarms, but the body language of everyone on site told me this was the real thing. As they gave us our jabs and issued our hazmat suits, the soldiers were as professional as always, but there was a nervous energy, a wildness to their eyes.

They had already seen the ship.

I was technically there because of my qualifications in biology, but as usual I felt like a fraud. My field was brimming with scientists eminently more qualified than me. Understand me, this isn't false modesty. The only reason I was called, the only reason I was *ever* called, was because of my own stupidity and laziness.

Let me explain.

When I was twenty-four years old, I wrote a paper for my masters degree on the topic of theoretical exobiology. It was, and I quote, a “speculative rumination on the effects of differing environmental pressures on the potential forms of extra-terrestrials”. Which was a long-winded way of saying: what might aliens look like?

In choosing this as a topic, I thought I was saving myself a ton of work. Aliens were theoretical. There was nothing concrete to research. In addition, no one could disprove my conclusions on these theoretical beings. I figured I could wax lyrical for a few thousand words, cite some worthy sounding studies on deep-sea vent sulphur creatures and the effects of low gravity on astronaut bone density and coast to a B minus.

The paper got an A. It also got the attention of the intelligence community, was widely circulated at NASA and, by the time I graduated, was part of a briefing pack for first contact at the CIA.

I was utterly unaware of any of this until I was contacted by Her Majesty’s government a year later and informed that, seemingly without any choice in the matter, I was now at their beck and call 24/7, should, say, a UFO happen to crash in the centre of The New Forest.

All because I thought writing about aliens would save me work.

Once we were all suited up, we were informed that it was apparently too far to walk, so we were directed to a couple of Humvees. They didn’t have headlights on and the drivers were wearing night-vision goggles, which was disconcerting. As we set off, I asked our driver if this was for security reasons and he didn’t answer. He didn’t even look at me.

We drove for twenty minutes in pitch darkness, before another oasis of floodlights told us we’d arrived. Another village of tents, this time pitched beside the ship. We all got our first look at a craft from another world.

Frankly, I was expecting something bigger.

It was roughly the size of a three-storey building and sat at the end of a long muddy trench it had gouged as it landed, a deep scar running through the centre of the forest that I realised we had just driven down. Most of the trees had been flung aside, but some had been pushed before it, forming a tangled lattice of pines. It now sat in the centre of that nest like some otherworldly egg.

In the days that followed, the nickname that came to stick was “The Teardrop”, which was roughly accurate, as far as it goes. The ship was bulbous and spherical at one end and tapered to a fine point. It never looked like a teardrop to me, though. It looked like the massive skull of a bird. The tapering point I saw as a gigantic beak. Large indented domes, deep scollops in the hull stared back at me like empty eye sockets.

We all clambered out of our Humvees and they U-turned and left, disappearing back into the darkness. No one came to greet us. We watched the activity around the ship. Workers with chainsaws were cutting away some of the more precarious-looking trunks from the nest of debris. Others were erecting tents or putting down walkways. All ignoring the miracle in their midst.

As we drew closer, I noticed a bank of floodlights directed at a jagged breach in the hull, perhaps twenty feet across. Hazard tape on poles bordered a path leading right up to it. I was expecting some kind of briefing or instructions but a Major in a hazmat suit spotted us and simply gestured for us to follow him as he strode into the ship.

The alien was fifty feet tall and appeared to have been killed in the crash.

A metal strut the size of a tree had impaled him through the centre of his chest, pinning him to his chair. The jagged tip of the strut had impacted with sufficient force to pass through his chair and the bulkhead behind it. Clear viscous fluid had pooled around his seat. We assumed it was his blood.

We stood staring up at the alien for quite a while. It towered above us. Everything did, the whole ship designed for the use of

creatures many times our size. All the control panels were way out of reach, simple doorways loomed like cathedral archways. The psychological impact was subtle, but we all remarked upon it later. It left us feeling infantilized, brought back in our minds to a time when we were all helpless children.

The alien had thick overlapping bone plates reminiscent of an armadillo. His feet were bare and three-toed, each toe ending in something like a hoof. The top of his head was flat and crested with a wedge of bone that looked like the prow of a ship. He didn't appear to have facial features as we understood them. The later autopsy revealed that his eyes and mouth were retractable. When not in use, they nestled safely behind another cluster of bone plates. The same was true of retractable tentacles at the end of his arms, which ended in fearsome clubs at all other times.

I tried to apply the cold logical principles of evolution to the features I could see. There was no conclusion to be drawn from the alien's appearance other than the fact that it had clearly evolved on a world with fearsome predators and perhaps a different gravity. That was all. The fact that it had piloted a ship to another world spoke of a highly evolved intelligence. This was no mindless brute, in the same way that our canine teeth and sharp fingernails didn't make us automatically aggressive.

All of these well-reasoned arguments rattled around my conscious brain - but another, deeper, instinctive part of me was fighting the urge to flee. I simply couldn't imagine this creature holding out a hand in greeting or conversing calmly. I could, however, quite easily imagine it rising from its seat and bludgeoning us all to death.

The chamber we were standing in was largely spherical and the only room in the ship, taking up the majority of the interior space. There was only one other seat in the entire vessel and it sat empty beside the corpse. Once these factors - along with the adjusted scale - had been taken into account, it began to feel less like a landing craft and more like some sort of escape pod.

The chamber was swarming with technicians and soldiers. They had already constructed scaffolding and a raised walkway around twenty feet from the ground, allowing them to examine

the various control surfaces within reach of the alien. We were invited to walk up the ramp to join them.

One of the technicians was excitedly examining what I initially took to be a monitor screen cracked by the girder that killed our giant friend; but as I drew closer, I realised that it was actually the glass wall to some sort of box, six feet across. The interior seemed familiar, at least in principle. It was a terrarium, a transplanted cube of soil, rocks and foliage from another world. Purple fronds and bristling blue cacti artfully placed around undulating sand.

Quite why it was part of the control panel of an escape pod wasn't immediately clear.

I was the first to spot the other alien. That it had gone unnoticed until then was hardly surprising - it was comparatively tiny, perhaps the size of a hamster, and its fur was exactly the same shade as the sand. It was also clearly dead, the back half of its body crushed by the girder, which had concertinaed most of the terrarium's roof.

In many ways, it looked like a conventional earth creature, perhaps some distant offshoot of the squirrel family. Had I been told that this species had been discovered in some remote corner of the Amazon, I would have accepted it. Large eyes, here half-closed in death, over a bulbous snout, its front legs ending in delicate three-fingered paws. Short sandy fur with a darker mottling along the spine, which we discovered, on freeing the back half of his body, led to a long bushy tail.

We mused a little over the reason for the presence of the terrarium. Was it purely decorative? Some wag suggested that perhaps the big fella liked his food fresh. Some of us laughed.

I didn't. It seemed just as likely as anything else.

The Major called us down from the gantry. He said he had something else to show us.

Aside from the breach in the hull we had entered through, there was only one door in or out of the chamber. It was open to the night, sixty feet high and around thirty wide. As we approached, I noticed that it was cordoned off, technicians on their knees carefully working in the mud outside. I soon saw why.

There was a clear set of huge three-toed footprints leading away from the ship.

There had been a survivor.

The soldiers had set up a line of floodlights following the footprints fifty feet until they reached the edge of the river. They did not reappear on the other side.

There was quite a gap between each footprint and they were definitely deeper at the toe than the heel. Assuming our survivor was the same height as their dead companion, they'd been running. I later read a twelve-page report that came to much the same conclusion, in a hundred times the words.

I wish they hadn't been running. I wish they'd been staggering. Running implied vitality. Running implied purpose.

But running could also imply fear, and who wouldn't be afraid? They'd just crashed on an alien world, their shipmate had been killed on impact. They were probably hiding in the woods not far from here, listening terrified as we picked over the corpse of their companion. I tried to bring that image to mind, to picture a living version of the impaled giant cowering and hiding, but somehow I couldn't.

The footprint analysis I later read also mentioned, almost as an afterthought, that several much smaller pawprints had been found meandering around the larger footprints. These matched the tiny dead creature we found in the cracked terrarium.

Our giant survivor had not been alone.

We spent the next three hours studying the crash site, cataloguing, measuring and speculating about every aspect of the creatures and their craft. We were then ferried back to base camp for decontamination and lunch before being returned to the crash site for another three hours of the same.

We were dimly aware of other activity in our peripheral vision. At daybreak, dogs had been brought in and set to search the woods, along with infra-red drones. At one point, I was pulled aside and asked if I could make a back-of-an-envelope estimate of the larger creature's running speed, based upon its speculated

biology and length of stride. I didn't ask them exactly what they meant by "speculated biology". My calculations led to a large circle on the map of its potential location, growing wider with each passing minute. There was another set of circles based upon the idea that the alien had been washed downstream.

No one asked for an estimate of the smaller creature's speed.

Well aware of the danger of decomposition, an entire group had a priority of packing the giant in ice until it could be removed for autopsy. At some point, it was given the codename of GOLIATH, which felt a little on the nose to me. The smaller rodent was codenamed DAVID, which read like a lazy afterthought.

Night found the more fortunate of us checking into B&Bs in neighbouring villages. I was not amongst that group, instead being instructed to pick one of the bunks in a mass dormitory at base camp. I slept fitfully, my dreams filled with visions of Goliath rampaging through the camp, overturning cars as it roared.

I awoke to TV news bulletins filled with an obvious MOD cover story, a fairly blatant attempt to keep people out of the woods. Apparently, a top-secret spyplane had crashed containing several cannisters of a potent bioweapon. One nice touch was the idea that exposure to this toxin could cause hallucinations. No, you didn't see a fifty-foot monster, you got poisoned. Here, take this cure and go home.

By the way, where did you see the monster?

By the end of the next day, the corpse of Goliath had been cut from the chair, packed into a huge refrigerated crate and removed from the crash site by means of crane and articulated lorry.

The corpse of David travelled with it, inside a glorified coolbox.

Given my specialism, I left with them, travelling in a convoy with six other biologists and geneticists. We were told we were being taken to the nearest military base with the relevant facilities to allow autopsy and biological analysis. That was the last time I saw the ship in one piece.



Three storeys of concrete and glass office block were bordered by a well-maintained lawn and a modest car park. A sign proclaimed the company to be HELLING DATA: “Your Memories, Safe In Our Hands.” Across a service road was a large warehouse, bristling with air-con units, which I assumed to be its server farm. I could see smiling staff in white shirts and pencil skirts enjoying their lunch in the open-air cafeteria.

I genuinely thought we’d taken a wrong turn.

Our Goliath convoy had left the motorway twenty minutes ago and had been whipping through countryside, I assumed en route to a military base of parade grounds and barracks. And now this.

Our MOD minders ignored all our questions, as usual, and instructed us to disembark. We were led into a small service lift, which - to our surprise - went down rather than up and continued to descend for an alarming length of time. We emerged, blinking, on to a floor that felt like a private hospital. It proved to have laboratories stacked with enough high-end analytical equipment to put CERN to shame.

The company above was a front, of course, with no military links on paper. They were effectively the guardhouse for the twenty floors below that did not appear on any blueprints.

We explored our new home and were all just marvelling at the efficiency of the whole operation when someone pointed out that there wasn’t a room anywhere on our entire floor big enough to contain the corpse of Goliath.

Ultimately, the only space big enough for our needs proved to be the third floor “vehicle storage bay”, a greasy car park lined with jeeps and trucks covered in tarpaulins. We ferried up whatever equipment we could and the crate containing Goliath was brought down to us by means of a truly impressive cargo lift that I was informed could carry a tank.

By contrast, we conducted the autopsy of David on a small metal table around three feet wide.

Before we opened the Goliath crate, we sealed it in a clear plastic tent to avoid any risk of contamination. Portable

refrigeration units blew icy air over the body as we worked.

I say “we”, but I did none of the actual dissection. As someone with supposed dazzling insight, I was made part of the team collating and analysing the autopsy data as it came in. I pitched in, moving equipment when it was needed, but most of my working day was spent running the mass spectrometers and watching video feeds of the autopsies.

The two corpses had recognisable DNA, which shocked all of us. Not only that, but the DNA was composed of the usual four bases: adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine. The geneticists immediately began arguing about the likelihood of this. Either all life everywhere could only evolve down the same narrow route that would lead to DNA as we knew it, or we were looking at something else.

Their biology also followed rules we were very familiar with. Recognisable digestive, nervous and circulatory systems, lungs, heart and brain, although sometimes of a surprising number. Both bodies had two hearts and brain tissue dispersed in small clusters throughout.

Most of the surprises we found in the body of Goliath. The bony armour plates covering its skin were found to have been infused with a titanium alloy, as was its skull. It was wearing armour that it could literally not take off. One of our military overseers asked if the armour could deflect a bullet. We told him we genuinely had no idea. Once the plates had been cut from the body, he took one of them with him to test at their firing range. He returned some time later, looking ashen. He wouldn't reveal the results of his tests, but insisted that we provide him with a diagram indicating any gaps in the plating on the creature's body.

The gaps we did find contained more surprises. Sleek thorns were discovered embedded deep under the skin in any area that wasn't armoured. The purpose of these thorns wasn't immediately clear until deeper cuts revealed a pressurised gas bladder beneath each thorn. One of them was accidentally triggered, resulting in the thorn being ejected at speed, shattering an overhead light.

I tried to keep an open mind, tried to view these discoveries

dispassionately. But it became harder and harder to reconcile the idea of peaceful explorer with the body lying before us. And there was another living specimen out there somewhere, somehow managing to avoid our best efforts to locate it. Hiding. Waiting.

Additional teams arrived. We began to work in shifts, which made a lot of sense. The impulse was to work until you dropped, but nobody wanted errors due to fatigue. At the end of the first day, I assumed we would be sleeping at barracks on another floor, so I was surprised when our military minder led us all up and out of the base.

We were taken by minibus to the centre of the nearby village of Croworth and informed that we had all been allocated separate cottages. Our confusion must have been evident, but our minder did little to alleviate it, simply handing us our keys and telling us he would return for us in eight hours.

We soon came to realise that, despite appearances, the entire village of Croworth was actually the dormitory for the base we had just left. It was wonderfully idyllic on the face of it, with rows of thatched cottages built in rings around the focal point of the village green, which was in turn bordered by the black-beamed King's Shilling pub, corner shop and post office. It felt like a little slice of calm normality to return to after a day spent studying the innards of creatures from another world. Several of us began to make a habit of enjoying a pint in the beer garden that overlooked the village pond before retiring.

It was all fake, of course. The village didn't exist until 1955 and our thatched cottages all had concrete walls. We were the only civilians for miles and our smiling bucolic bar staff were actually military police in disguise. I kept expecting to bump into Patrick McGoohan.

Still, it was a damn sight better than a bunk bed underground.

Two months went by. Both David and Goliath had been autopsied to destruction. Every cell, bone, fluid and organ had

been harvested, catalogued and analysed to the best of our ability, before being forwarded to other specialists. We could feel the labs winding down as we ran out of things to usefully do.

I had actually got as far as starting to arrange transport back home when I became aware of a commotion. Soldiers and scientists were running past my lab and I overheard one of them excitedly repeating, “We’ve caught it! We’ve caught it!” I followed immediately. I had visions of a huge cage in our dissection bay containing the living Goliath, spitting with rage. Instead, I found a group gathered around a table in our main lab.

And there, sitting calmly in a small perspex cage, chewing happily on a poppy seed, was a living, breathing David.

We had a substantial programme of tests primed and ready to go for just such an opportunity. In addition, it turned out that a team of animal behaviourists had apparently been living in the village, sequestered on standby for the past two months. They joined our team within the hour.

We had just taken blood and stool samples when I was informed by the MOD that I was to be temporarily reassigned. The timing seemed very odd until I realised that they wanted my “unique perspective” on the location where the creature had been found. I protested, in vain, and was soon leaving the base in a lorry full of hazmat suits and containment tents, along with several other similarly irritated scientists.

Our destination turned out to be Wythenshaw Police Station in Manchester, two hundred and fifty miles away from the crash site, which was something of a surprise. Some of our colleagues were already on site, preaching the familiar gospel of chemical leak to keep the station clear. We smoothly took over and began isolating the rooms we were told had contained the creature. There was also a group of very nervous policemen not used to being on the other side of an interrogation table.

The story of how the creature came to wind up there is long and complicated. It’s a sequence of events I obviously wasn’t involved with at all, but which can be pieced together with a fair amount of certainty from police reports and witness statements.



Approximately six miles east of the crash site, there is a former dairy farm belonging to a man called Roger Twitchell. The farm had been in his family for at least three generations, but recent money troubles caused by Roger's gambling habit had led him to turn over most of his milking sheds to the cultivation of several highly profitable cannabis strains.

Two days after the crash, Roger was, by his own account, in the middle of "quality control" of one of his latest batches, lying on a recliner and gazing idly out through bay windows of the farmhouse at his garden. It was at this point that he noticed "a very unusual looking squirrel" raiding his bird feeder.

The squirrel was still there when he entered the garden half an hour later to refill the feeder. As he drew closer, he noticed that it appeared to be pregnant and completely unfazed by his proximity. He fed it directly from his fingers then reached out to stroke it.

Twenty minutes later, he found himself lying on his back in the centre of the garden, having just experienced one of the most profound and euphoric trips of his life.

None of us had any idea. I suppose that's where the scientific method falls down a little. Our contamination protocols were so rigorous, I don't think any of us had breathed the same air that surrounded the David corpse, let alone stroked its fur with our bare hands. The idea was unthinkable.

Oh sure, we'd studied the fur through a microscope, noticed that each follicle was hollow and filled with fluid, which had then been extracted for later analysis. We'd even noted the sharp needle-like points at the end of each hair, theorising that this was perhaps part of a defensive mechanism. But that was as far as it went. We'd had so many other wonders to ponder in the bodies before us.

Roger regained consciousness in the middle of his garden. There was no sign of the creature that had caused his trip anywhere near the bird feeder. Nevertheless, he went inside to

find a suitable cage and some marigold gloves. The creature returned an hour later and was quite happy to be handled and placed in the cage.

It gave birth that night on Roger's dining room table. A litter of ten. Roger then made a phone call to Ian Legrand, his usual contact in the cannabis supply chain. Upon hearing Roger's tale of the narcotic squirrel, Mr Legrand assumed that he was either winding him up or tripping on something else. Either way, he saw no reason to hurry over and refused to visit any earlier than his scheduled day.

In the interim, Roger continued to provide food to the mother and her litter. He also began to remove his marigolds at regular intervals to stroke the mother through the bars of the cage. His later account of the highs he experienced are florid and verbose. Suffice it to say that the quality and strength of the euphoria did not appear to wane in the intervening days.

Ian Legrand visited the farm five days after the call. At Roger's insistence, he stroked one of the new litter and, after recovering from his trip, agreed to purchase one. Roger refused to sell him a breeding pair and Ian had to be satisfied with a single male, which he purchased for one hundred pounds.

The next part of the story unfortunately relies on speculation, as Ian Legrand's contacts higher in the cannabis chain remain unknown to us. However, we can reasonably assume that they fully realised the commercial possibilities of his new acquisition, mainly because of the team of heavily armed criminals that descended on the farm less than a day later, relieving Roger, at gunpoint, of his entire stock of creatures.

Within six weeks, police reports in both Manchester and Liverpool began to mention a new drug appearing on the streets. It took the form of a tiny square of what was initially taken to be fabric and was known by the street name of "mink".

They were breeding and skinning the creatures.

A few days later, a live specimen was taken in a drugs raid, along with several hundred squares of harvested fur. Photographs of this mystery creature were sent up the chain, and, at a certain

point, happened to cross the desk of someone with sufficient clearance to have seen photographs from the crash site.

Within a few hours, the captured creature was in our lab and I was standing in the station that had recovered it.

Our rigid contamination protocols around the David corpse suddenly felt ridiculous. How many hundreds of people had already been exposed to either a living specimen or samples of its fur? Nevertheless, lacking any other ideas, we sterilised the areas of the police station where the creature had been stored. We also passed around the Official Secrets Act, made sure that any more creatures the police recovered would be sent our way, and set off back to our bunker.

I returned to discover that precious little new information had been gleaned from our live specimen. The animal behaviourists had tested the creature at length and concluded that, in terms of intelligence, it was slightly dumber than a cat. Frankly, after seeing footage of the tests, I thought they were being generous. When it wasn't eating or defecating, it seemed to spend most of its time staring off into the middle distance. Some half-hearted attempts had been made at communication, but it tried to eat any flash cards left in its cage.

I wondered if it was affected by the narcotic in its own fur. It would explain a lot.

The story finally broke in the media. The focus in the report was not the animals, but instead the squares of their fur - this new mystery drug sweeping the north. The MOD swept in with gagging orders, but the problem by this stage was too large to be brushed under the carpet. Mink squares were appearing everywhere, from nightclub toilets in Edinburgh to stockbroker parties as far south as London.

The creatures initially existed in something of a bizarre legal grey area. As aliens, their very existence was highly classified, yet they were now a common fixture in the illegal drug trade of the country. Ultimately, a very tightly worded bill was rushed through parliament, making possession of the creatures or derivatives

thereof illegal, without mentioning their extra-terrestrial status at all.

A week after we received our first live specimen, we received four more, also recovered in a raid. Within a fortnight, we had seventeen of them. They kept coming at regular intervals until it got to the point that we were running out of room and they were diverted to other facilities.

It was around this time that we stopped calling them Davids. Having both male and female specimens, it didn't really scan anymore. Taking our cue from the drug dealers, we started calling them mink.

Given the speed with which the criminal underworld had managed to establish factory farming, we had our suspicions about the length of their breeding cycle. We sought permission to confirm this by allowing several of our pairs to breed. In normal circumstances, I've no doubt that request would have been denied, but common sense prevailed. We were playing catch-up, after all.

Our mink gestation period, from conception to birth, took roughly eight days. For comparison, a brown rat has a gestation period of twenty-two days. Our mink had litters of between six and eleven pups, significantly less than that of a rat, which can have litters of between eight and eighteen. However, the female brown rat reaches sexual maturity and is able to reproduce eleven weeks after birth.

Our mink reached sexual maturity within two weeks.

If those numbers don't terrify you then you're not paying attention.

They certainly terrified us. Given average litter size and an equal gender split, two mink could become one hundred and seventy in just over seven weeks.

Their potential for exponential growth was horrifying.

We passed our findings on, trying to stress the need for swift action, for containment, but it didn't really feel as though we had their full attention. Everyone we spoke to in the chain of command was much more concerned with our Goliath findings. Had we discovered any new weaknesses that the soldiers could

exploit? Did we have any ideas about how it could have remained hidden for so long?

On one level, we understood their reticence to shift focus. I remember how powerless I felt, staring up at Goliath, impaled on its throne. We knew that teams of heavily armed soldiers were still regularly searching the woods around the crash site. We also saw, in a report not intended for our eyes, that high frequency radio transmissions of unknown origin had been picked up nearby. The hope was that the living Goliath was calling for help. The worry was that it was calling for reinforcements.

But we all felt that they were watching the wrong ball. We drafted strongly worded letters outlining the very real threat of a mink plague, delivered them in person and waited in vain for a response. Our final pints of the day at the King's Shilling rapidly turned into long maudlin drinking sessions punctuated with predictions of doom. We sarcastically toasted the future and waited for the other shoe to drop.

The flat bed of the lorry steadily rose up like a hinge as the hydraulics hissed. Pouring out, tumbling in a torrent, came thousands of tiny mink bodies. As soon as the lorry was empty, it rumbled away, flat bed descending back into place as it went, ready to receive another load. The bulldozer moved in, blade fully down as it scraped the pile into the new pit, freshly dug this morning, four feet deep and twenty feet long. It was already half-full of dead mink.

Parallel to this, dozens of other trenches were visible, staggered at regular intervals. Some were already blazing, billowing smoke. Others contained nothing but smouldering ash. The whole site was shrouded in smoke, the setting sun reduced to a pale orange disc.

I stood on a small hillock to one side, watching the operation. I was in full hazmat gear and felt like a tourist. None of the workers I could see had any protection beyond a cloth facemask.

Living mink were dotted here and there all over the site. Some were obvious survivors of the poison gas that had clawed their way out of the pits and seemed bewildered and close to

death, twitching and trembling. Others were much more sprightly, no doubt locals. The workers ignored them as they busied themselves incinerating the creatures' brethren.

For their part, the healthy mink also seemed oblivious to what was happening. Some of them were drawn to the heat of the fires, basking like cats in their glow. A passing worker casually kicked one into the inferno. I tried to follow its progress but it was lost in fire. The nearby mink didn't even flinch.

The workers all moved with a practised efficiency, but there was a slump to their shoulders, a look of defeat in their eyes. I wondered how long they'd been working, how many thousands of mink they had burned.

I turned to my driver and we both climbed back into the jeep. Wordlessly, we drove out of the site, following the empty lorry back towards town.

It had all happened much as we predicted, and then some. Less than six months ago, we had all sat around in that beer garden predicting doom. And now that doom had arrived.

The collapse in the mink fur trade was the first domino. Our contacts in the police had informed us that, barely months old, it had been superseded by rival up-and-coming dealers breeding and selling live mink. The original gangs had avoided this, as it was such a short-sighted strategy - once a customer had a live mink, they never needed to contact their dealer ever again. But the short-term profit to be made was too tempting for some.

The animals were soon in the hands of the public, a dirty secret hidden in sheds, garages and attics all over the country. Like any other pet, they could now be abandoned or escape, and their phenomenally short breeding cycle came as a shock to many. Cardboard boxes full of mink pups began appearing in lay-bys and, in short order, in woods and fields up and down the country.

Taking their cue from the British government, possession of mink had been made a criminal offence in most countries. Customs forces were vigilant, doing what they could to stop the spread of both the drug and the creature. It didn't matter.

Squares of mink were soon reported on both the continent and in the US. They were lagging slightly behind us, but they soon caught up, as the trade in live creatures lead to their escape and proliferation.

After that, it was just a matter of brutal mathematics to bring us here.

The wheat field had been stripped bare. The road bisecting it was alive with the creatures, but most of them scattered in our headlights. Others just blankly stared at the jeep until we ran them down.

We reached the outskirts of town as night fell. Workers were shovelling dead mink from the foot of an electric fence. They stopped and watched us as we passed. We were waved in through a high metal gate and drove over a cattle grid covered in electrified mesh.

The streets were deserted, evacuated before the extermination crews moved in. Each house we passed inside the fence had a sign on the door proclaiming that it had been cleared of mink. Some of the windows were still sealed with hazard tape.

The crews were expanding the fence as they cleared. We could see them working within a second cordon, huge plastic tents covering each house as they pumped in the gas. Other teams were conducting controlled burns of gardens and verges, or shovelling dead mink into piles, which a JCB would then scoop into the back of a lorry.

I wondered about the man hours all this was taking, the cost to keep the fences running.

Thank God they didn't burrow.

It's possible we could have come back from this. If it was just their breeding cycle to contend with, maybe we could have prevailed. But that isn't what finally brought us low.

There was a clue hidden in plain sight, in the police report concerning the very first man to encounter the mink, Roger Twitchell. The marijuana farmer who found what he took to be a pregnant squirrel on his bird feeder.

The summation of the police report mentions armed criminals forcibly taking his stock of mink at gunpoint. But if you read the full report, as I have, you discover that that isn't exactly what happened.

He fought them.

Even though they were armed and he wasn't, he fought them. So they shot him in the leg. Then he got up and tried to fight them again. So they broke three of his ribs and one of his arms. He kept coming. And, lest you should be tempted to read this as some misguided altruistic attempt to save the lives of those poor mink, by his own account it was nothing of the sort.

They were taking his drugs away and he really didn't want that to happen.

Remember, this is after just six days of exposure, six days of contact high from their fur. After which a man without so much as a criminal record, let alone one for violence, was prepared to blindly rush into battle with no thought for his own safety, all in the name of safeguarding his next fix.

Understand, by necessity, what follows is all anecdotal evidence. It would have been nice to have the luxury of a long peer-reviewed study, with test subjects and control groups, but things went south too quickly for that to ever be an option.

Here are the facts as we came to understand them.

The drug dose delivered from a square of the minks' fur was reasonably addictive, seemingly on a par with cocaine. However, a dose from the fur of the living animal had a level of addictiveness for which we simply had no comparison.

It varied from person to person, but it seemed that around sixty to seventy per cent of people would be addicted after just one hit. Craving for a new hit would occur approximately an hour later. During that time, the addict often felt compelled to do nothing at all but wait beside their mink. All other desires could well leave them. There appeared to be a component of the drug that actively suppressed normal, rational thought in the period between highs. We read shocking reports of emaciated addicts starving to death only feet away from fridges full of food.

All of this paints a very grim picture for the risk-takers who

chose to get high using the mink. But there were thousands of people who became unwitting addicts. It's worth remembering that these were creatures that appeared to have no natural fear of humans. They would happily approach anyone they saw and allow themselves to be stroked. With our woods, hedgerows and soon even our parks and gardens rapidly filling up with them, accidental addiction became a very real possibility.

As soon as the true measure of the hazard was appreciated, public service warnings were made, alerting people to avoid the creatures, to cover their skin, their hands, their legs.

All too little, all too late.

Social media was overflowing with heartbreaking stories, tragic litanies of accidental addicts. Dog walkers in parks, ramblers, outdoor workers, parents confiscating mink from their teenage children. All now addicted and inseparable from their living fix.

We drove on through the deserted streets, our headlights picking out looted shops, burned-out cars. Things collapsing. The only other intact vehicle in sight was an ambulance and, lacking any other destination, we headed towards it. It was parked beside a bungalow with peeling paint and blankets over the windows instead of curtains.

Two dead-eyed medics were wheeling out a body bag strapped to a gurney. I hoped they were dead before the gas was pumped in, but I doubted it. More likely, they hid from the exterminators as they searched, ignoring their calls and warnings. Anything but surrender their mink. Surrender their high.

We drove past the ambulance without slowing down. We reached the perimeter fence, turned and drove along it. We were soon approaching the original gate. Just before we reached it, all the street lights went out. Another power cut. A shout went up and we heard diesel generators kick into life.

The fence was still on. For now.

We passed out of the gate and headed back towards the bunker.



The number of people addicted to mink worldwide was very hard to estimate. Accurate statistics were hardly a priority in a global crisis, but for every addict there would be families whose lives were massively disrupted as they struggled to care for these new strangers in their midst. The ripple effects were incalculable.

Power cuts were becoming more and more common. There was some debate as to their cause. The idea that a huge amount of power station staff - far above the normal percentage - had become addicted, seemed unlikely. One theory was that the problem wasn't the plants themselves but the infrastructure, the power lines and substations, all of which required maintenance from engineers in the field, who would have been exposed to the first wave of mink before warnings had been issued.

Whatever the reasons, every time the lights went out, I found myself counting the seconds until they came on again. And every time, the number I reached was higher.

I asked my driver to drop me off at the King's Shilling. I had nothing useful to report to my MOD paymasters. My little fact-finding mission had uncovered nothing that we didn't already know. Besides, I seriously doubted they'd even noticed my absence. The focus within the bunker had totally shifted to any and all methods of destroying the mink. Pathogen and viral specialists now prowled the corridors, discussing myxomatosis and contagious sterility. Labs that had been taken up with cute little side projects, like observing mink sleep cycles, were now devoted to their extinction.

I ordered a pint of bitter and, as I entered the beer garden, discovered that I was not the only scientist taking refuge there. Haskins was around forty, lithe and dressed in a hooded top and combat trousers. I'd never seen him in anything else and I understood that he liked free climbing in his spare time. That was the limit of my knowledge about the man.

My path had not crossed with his often, as his specialism was 3D simulations of things, such as the crash trajectory of the UFO. As I understood it, his most recent project had been an attempt to create a computer simulation of Goliath's gait, based

upon the muscular and skeletal data we had gleaned.

I nodded hello and was going to take a different table, but he beckoned me over as though we were old friends. As soon as I sat down, it became abundantly clear that he was morbidly drunk. I attempted to excuse myself, but he was having none of it. He plainly needed to unburden himself to someone and I was to be the unlucky recipient. Much of what he was saying seemed to centre around the Goliath simulation, which apparently couldn't be made to work. I offered a couple of platitudes about teamwork and believing in yourself, but he seemed determined to self-flagellate so I tuned him out.

It was then that I noticed the mink. It was sitting in a copse of trees around twenty feet away, staring blankly into the middle distance.

It shouldn't have been there at all. Our little fake town was one of the first to fence itself off. It had been assumed that a house-to-house search was unnecessary, given our usual level of security. It seemed that that assumption had been a little premature. Someone would have to be alerted.

I stood and was about to make my excuses, but Haskins didn't even pause in his flow. He wasn't even facing me anymore, looking off to one side, eyes unfocussed, rambling something about the bones of the dead Goliath. Apparently, he'd been sent incorrect figures for the creature's bone density from another department and they totally broke his simulation. The numbers were so low that its skeleton wouldn't have been able to support its weight in Earth's gravity. Someone had obviously screwed up somewhere.

I walked towards the mink. I would have to pass it on my way to the bar anyway. I wanted to see if it was alone. I noticed that it appeared to be using a twig to scratch in the dirt, which was unusual but not unprecedented. Tool use had been witnessed in mink if food was at stake, when their problem-solving abilities seemed to suddenly improve. They had been observed using rocks to rip open garbage bags.

As I walked over, something about Haskins' words began to trouble me. The bone density figures would have been checked

and rechecked before they left that department. And even if the incorrect figures were sent, alerting them and obtaining the true figures would have taken one phone call. But Haskins was behaving as though the sky was falling. Drinking like a man trying to forget.

The mink appeared to be gouging a series of small trenches into the earth. Perhaps in search of worms. Something about the shape of the trenches rang a bell.

A slow feeling of dread began to settle in my gut.

I knew why Haskins was drinking. I knew what he'd figured out.

The bone density figures had been accurate. A living Goliath couldn't even stand erect on Earth without breaking his legs. Which begged the question: what had been hiding in the woods? What had we been searching for all these months?

I realised what the mink had been gouging in the mud with its stick and it all fell sickeningly into place. A crashed UFO that had been nothing of the sort. A dead giant that had never even lived, designed and built by committee to do nothing but fill us with fear and distract us from the real threat until it was too late.

The mink paused in its work and looked directly at me with a steady calculating gaze, the pretence of stupidity finally dropped. They had won. There was no longer any need for subterfuge or deception. And, as a final twist of the knife, they wanted to show us exactly how easily we were fooled.

Because there, carved into the soft earth, was a perfect replica of the huge Goliath footprints that had led humanity off the cliff.

The power cut out again and the lights in the beer garden flickered and died.

I stood in the darkness, counting.