

## On the Obelisk

The view from the top was absolutely stunning but it was difficult to hold on. From that eminence, the crowd was a festive quilt of anger and good will, a hundred thousand people pressed into the park, activists and ordinary folk, greens and reds and anarchists and even liberal-democrats, picking up kids and perching them on shoulders, couples cuddling, folk with carry outs. Every so often they clapped or they cheered. The folk at the back could have no idea what for but they clapped anyway out of solidarity.

Her banners flapped gently in the wind and strained at the webbing straps that secured them to the point of the obelisk. Chas could see policemen percolating through the crowd towards her. A van and two landrovers were nosing a path like icebreakers through spring pack-ice. Kaos Injun was resting now, letting the speakers have their say. In the distance, near the edge of the crowd, she could see Martín's pink overalls. The strain of the position was beginning to hurt her calves.

At the foot of the column, too far below, Rob and Gav were inside the railings which surrounded the obelisk, holding the rope.

She had expected it to be difficult and she had been right. The obelisk, built in 1848 of soft dressed sandstone, was buttery-crumbly but the seams between the blocks had been re-pointed only a few years before, reducing the available points of purchase. The square plinth at the bottom was simple enough - it was rough hewn, incised with lettering - but they had to reconnoitre the obelisk a couple of times before Chas decided that it was scaleable. Strips of zinc lightning conductor ran down the North and South faces of the column. The strips were nailed in every two feet or so. Chas exploited their scant purchase. She had already rehearsed the climb in the wee small hours of Wednesday morning, checking the security of the zinc strip and widening a number of the cracks so that gear could be quickly and safely inserted on the day. Even so, it hadn't felt secure half way up with very little purchase on the stone and the arrest of her fall dependent upon dodgy pointing and a thin metal strip. She had been glad to get close enough to the top to rig the webbing harness around the pinnacle and lean back against it. She clipped a safety link to the alarmingly slender spike of the lightning conductor

Still. People would see their message. She might even make *Reporting Scotland*, squeezed in before the football results and the shinty scores.

The police were clambering over the fence now. Glancing down, Chas could see Rob remonstrating with two blue uniforms in silly hats and yellow bibs. The pigs inside the fence were gazing up and talking into their radios. A substantial portion of the crowd had transferred their attention from the distant speakers on the podium to her matchstick figure perched on top of the obelisk.

“No imperialist aggression,” someone was shouting through a loudspeaker. “No to imperialist aggression. No imperialist adventures. No empire.”

Chas saw Kaos Injun split and begin to seep through the crowd, moving closer to the monument. As the first of its members formed up they set up a slow steady beat which Chas thought a bit creepy and tempting fate.

Beat Beat          Beat Beat Beat

A scuffle broke out between Rob and one of the policemen. Two megaphoned voices now competed for her attention.

Miss Imperialist Miss No Imperialist Please come Adventures Miss Please

And then all hell broke loose from Kaos Injun as the troupe got the whole Burundi rhythm from *Summer Lawns* going and really bashed it out with whistles and shakers and that daft bitch in the silver lame leotard breathing gouts of flame to left and right to the alarm of the police horses recently arrived.

Chas could see that the guy on the podium was losing heart. Over half the crowd was focussed on her now and the space around the bottom of the column was swirl of black-bloc anarchists and east end neds and policemen with dogs and horses and Kaos Injun in their silly costumes. Scuffles broke out on the edge of the crowd and more and more people were trying to climb across the railings into the narrow space at the foot of the plinth. There must have been ten policemen in there now and twenty activists and Chas guessed they would be wanting to arrest Rob but couldn't figure if it was safe for him to let go the rope and anyway how would they get him over the railings if they cuffed him? Rob sat down. Gav and the others followed suit. It occurred to Chas that she wasn't going to see Martín after all. Just like Prague, she thought. She should have known. Someone was trying to pull Gary's drum off of him. Gary was pushing the guy away. Someone went down and got trampled. A police horse kicked. Chas' arms were hurting and she was worried the webbing might slip. There wasn't much pro down there and the council would get pissed off if she tore out the whole lightning conductor. And the park looked so nice and the sun glinted on the windows of the Winter Garden and she could see people in the

penthouse flats across Greendyke Street gazing from their living rooms. A magpie wafted by. One's a wish, she thought. And two's a kiss. Her arms hurt now and her palms were slippery.