

## Scorched Earth *(Peta Culverhouse)*



Christmas didn't go as according to plan. Not this year or subsequent years.

It was a year that humanity did not show their best side. The beast that lurks within everyone escaped and tore through the civilised world. The black butterfly flapped its wings and the tsunami went across the globe. No one country was spared. It flapped again and a cyber terrorist cell, Whytecyan, came into existence. They struck at midnight on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December.

It began with the minor infraction of irritating hacking internet websites. News sites being directed to pornographic ones. Web pages affected by this were pulled down. At 1 am, other than the web pages that were pulled, other websites disappeared completely. Error 404 became common. The ghoulish Santa that shook his thumb and said you have been naughty in a creepy computerised voice replaced these websites.

People began to get emails about their accounts being hacked. Their images, credit card details, where they lived, mobile telephone numbers all displaced on their social media pages. Commerce sites started to removed money from people's accounts. By 2am, Governments began to profile who they were looking for. The composite they came up with was likely a group or groups of highly talented individuals in the field of Information Technology and e-commerce were infiltrating systems at a large-scale rate. While this "said collective" was working together, they could be across any country. They asked for their demands. Since the internet had been compromised, this was asked on other forms of telecommunication. The "regulars" were pulled in for questioning. The shy, basement-dwelling, stereotypes were cuffed and questioned.

At 3am, the cloud servers Meadowland, Strawberry Field, Hay Bale were taken down and their contents dumped onto a webpage created by Whytecyan. Details of government conspiracies, horrendous images of millions of deaths from murders, suicides, wars and bombings were splashed across the internet. The notion that pharmaceutical companies had the cure for cancer was no longer a conspiracy. Aliens did exist and that they were using human eugenics to produce a hybrid. Conspiracies no longer. No demands were yet made. Governments rushed to quell the rising violence in the streets as people were being telephoned and told to check the internet. Then their smart phones went dead.

At 4am, the riots in the streets were out of control. News agencies in countries not yet affected were bracing for further attacks. Some Governments thought they were immune and assured their population that everything was fine and to go about their daily business. Merry Christmas. Once a country hit midnight on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, the cyber-attacks came. They were relentless. Error 404 was becoming more disturbing, Rudolph the glowing, beheaded red nosed reindeer graced computer screens.

Urgent UN and NATO meetings were called. Nations pointed fingers, threatened retaliation, declared war. At 5am the powergrids and other essential services were attacked and went

down. Complete darkness was restored to the night. People were dying in hospitals. An announcement was finally made by Whytecyan. They told the world who could hear or was listening, that they now had the nuclear codes for several countries that held these weapons if their demands were not met. The demand was simple. Stop the hate. Stop the lies. Stop the fear. Stop. Just Stop.

No one heard aside from the people who lived off grid. The tin foil hatters, the hippies, the freedom fighters. When they approached the authorities, no one listened. The crackpots had the key to human salvation and no one listened.

At 7am snow began to fall. White ash from a nuclear world. The dulcet tone of thunder, a rumble of an earthquake, a mushroom cloud sprouted and disappeared. The winds were warm. The smell of scorched earth permeated everything. Then, all was still. The earth shook, buildings collapsed and everything sighed. Nothing stirred. This was all witnessed by the last remaining humans on the international space station and Whytecyan, a rogue satellite that was de-orbiting because no one was around to ensure its stable orbit.

25, 000 years later and the glow of nuclear waste could be seen through the cracked bunkers. The aliens observed a devolved world, evolving again, Michael Jackson could be heard playing in the ship. The earth was recovering.