

THE OLD ROUND HOUSE

by Dave Hawkins

CHAPTER THREE

The Message

Terry awoke with a start and cried out as a dark, hovering figure stooped towards him. Maybe some dreadful part of his nightmare had entered reality to haunt him, to drag him back into the depths of despair; yet the voice that spoke was surprisingly quiet and gentle. A hand touched him, not to clutch and tear, but to stroke feather-light across his brow, smoothing his hair. "Terry, are you alright? It's only Mum. You must have been dreaming. I heard you calling out."

The boy sat up to feel perspiration on his face and the cool dampness of clothing against his skin. There was a click as his mother switched the bedside lamp on. The flood of light was puzzling. He glanced at the window to see only the reflection of the lamp on the glass - outside it was night. Had he been asleep *that* long? It seemed like only moments.

"You were having a nightmare, Terry," his mother said, trying to sound reassuring.

It was good to hear her voice; but despite the comfort it extended, it was inconvenient at this time. He wanted to hear the voices that had been calling him just moments before she must have come in. She had interrupted them and he really wanted, needed to hear what they had to say - the ones from the old round house. There had been more than one - he knew that now - and the power of their chant had been far more distinct. And - here was the big one! - they had called his name... *his* name!

He shivered. Mrs. Savage was quick to notice. She left the room and returned just minutes later holding a glass of clear liquid - mother's cure-all. "This will help you sleep. Drink it down and get into your pyjamas. Do you want me to stay a while?"

Terry shook his head. She stayed long enough to make sure he took his "medicine" and seemed pleased at the face he pulled when he swallowed it down. According to parents, if it tasted foul it must be good for you. He waited for the door to close behind her before climbing off the bed. There was noticeable stiffness in his legs, and he had to limp across the room to the chest in the corner. His hands stung as he pulled out a drawer. Examination of the palms revealed a mass of broken blisters and red skin, presumably from the makeshift paddle. On his way back to the bed he noticed his gashed shoe on the floor. Here was yet another reminder of a fantasy that apparently wasn't. Actual physical evidence was too real to be ignored, even by him.

He eased out of his damp clothes and into the fresh pyjamas; then sat down on the bed with a thump. The aching limbs, the blistered hands, they weren't imagination – they hurt too much. He hadn't experienced a dream, or even a nightmare – what he'd been through had happened. And that meant the old round house was actually a time machine. It had taken

him back to 1817; then returned him to his own time in a matter of a minute or two. It was as simple as that. If he stopped trying to change the facts to satisfy what others believed to be normality, he might get somewhere.

Okay. It's an experimental transporter built in the inventor's back yard. So, where was the inventor? He had obviously been absent for some time which would explain the state of the house and grounds. Or had he? Maybe he just wanted it to look that way; same with the plastic spiders on the machine's windows – just to deter sticky-beaks. In any case, it still didn't explain where the owner was.

That was problem number one. Number two was the medallion. What connection did it have with the machine, or the inventor, for that matter? And, was it a communicator as he suspected? Pulling it from under the pillow, he gazed into its starry depths, a dazzling phenomenon which told him nothing. The cord suggested it had been hanging round someone's neck until it broke and they lost it. Who, though? While absently re-tying the cord it came to him. Perhaps the voice had been that of the inventor trying to contact him from somewhere in time. Of course! The man was lost in time... But there had been many voices; not just one – an echo, maybe?

The jewel itself was certainly a fascinating thing. He held it up to one eye and tried to look through it like a monocle. That was when he heard the voice - his mother's voice! "Into bed, young man." Whipping the pendant behind his back, he put on his butter-wouldn't-melt expression. Obviously it didn't work too well. "What's the matter, dear? You're as white as a sheet."

"N-nothing, Mum." The medallion was still supportive and warm in his hand. "Honest."

Mrs. Savage frowned. "Honest-ly. I think perhaps I'd better call the doctor."

"No, Mum. I'm fine." What did he have to do to convince her? Perform amazing acrobatic feats, or something? He tried a grin instead. It wasn't up to his usual standard, but she seemed a bit happier.

Once she had gone, Terry brought the pendant out where he could see it. This was the one item of concrete proof nobody, not even himself, could deny. He switched off the light. The glow from its shimmering lit up half the room. Which was great and really eerie, but even Blind Pugh could see it if he happened to blunder in. He switched the light back on.

Turning away from the door, he held the medallion tightly in his palm and pressed the back of this hand against his forehead. Closing his eyes, he concentrated, calling out with his mind for someone to answer. No-one did.

It was possible he wasn't doing it right, so he tried again. Then he glimpsed himself in the mirror and realised how stupid he looked – a boy trying to perform a magic trick. With a shrug of resignation, he slipped the thong over his head and let the charm dangle on his chest. That was when he heard them! They were louder than ever before and were calling his name over and over. "What do you want?" he heard himself whispering, "Who are you?"

"Toooo faaar Te...rrr...eeee... ttmmmmm....mmm...aaa... sshh...eee...," moaned the voices.

The door latch clicked and his mother entered. "You still up? Into bed, young man, or I *will* call the doctor!"

Terry waited for ages before continuing. He even crept along the hallway to his mother's room to listen at her door. There was no movement from inside, so he assumed she must be asleep. Once more in his own room he sat, this time in bed with the blankets at the ready, just in case she might decide to look in on him again. What were the voices saying? 'Too far' was the first part. That was obvious. But was *he* too far, or were *they*? And what was Tma-She? A person? Another world? Guessing was just causing more confusion. What he needed to do was get closer for the words to become clearer. But closer to where? They were relatively easy to hear inside the old round house, even if he hadn't been able to understand them. In his own home, the voices were distorted as if echoing down a long, long tunnel.

The tunnel of time, was that it? A shudder ran down his spine as he made the connection: the old round house *was* the closest he could get to the voices. *It* was the key, acting like a relay for the pendant which was a communication device. Then it was obvious. It had been staring him in the face - Tma-She *was time machine!* He was too far from the *TIME MACHINE!*

"Is that it?" whispered Terry to the pendant, "Am I too far from the time machine?"

The medallion shimmered. Yeee...eees, Te...rrr...eee... Caaa...aaamm... tooooo... mmmmaaaa... ssshhh...eeeeeeee..."

An Awesome Responsibility

Other messages came to him from the voices, different words, few of which he was able to understand; but each had one thing in common: it was expressed in such a way that it left no doubt in Terry's mind that the callers were in some frightful trouble. Their pleas were desperate. This belief urged him on to try and understand what they were telling him; but they were like babies who cried and cried, unable to explain why they were crying at all. He'd have to keep trying to find out what they wanted, or they might never leave him in peace.

When he eventually did fall asleep, it was two hours to sunrise. He was exhausted, his head was booming, and he was no nearer to solving the riddle. He awoke with a start as his Mother opened the bedroom door. Sunlight was streaming through the net curtains and the clock said 9.30. "Is that the time?" Terry shot out of bed and dived for the heap of clothes on the floor.

"Oh no you don't." Mrs. Savage tugged them off him.

Terry's heart slumped. He had terrible visions of doctors, thermometers, and a week in bed. "But I'm alright now, honest, Mum."

"Now, Terry? Are you admitting at last that you *weren't*?"

"Well, maybe I was a bit crook." He looked at her from under raised, hopeful eyebrows. "Probably psychosumantic."

"Psycho-*so-ma-tic*," she corrected. "If you must use big words I wish you'd look them up in the dictionary first." She turned to leave. "Anyway, I'll be the judge of your recovery. A day at home certainly won't kill you. Neither will doing some of that homework you never even looked at yesterday."

"But, Mum..."

"No buts, young man. Shower, then breakfast." She swept towards the door. "I've got to go out for a while. I expect you to be hard at it by the time I get back."

Terry groaned. "Sure, Mum." He went over to glare out of the window. Did Rambo have days like this? No way. His mother probably loaded the bullets into his magazines *and* made him a packed lunch. So, how could he go out and avoid incurring more of his Mum's wrath? Somehow he had to: the voices were depending on him. It was probably life and death! But he'd given his word, sort-of. He thought back - what had actually been said? No going out? He didn't think those exact words had been used. She'd told him to have a shower which wasn't a problem because he was going to get one anyway. As for breakfast, he could eat that in a flash and leave the dirty bowl on the table as evidence.

Okay, he was getting there. Think, man think! What else had she said? That she was going out for a while, which could mean anything from half an hour to all morning. And she would expect him to be hard at it... when she got...

That was it - the legal loophole! Terry stood up straight and curled his fingers around a pair of imaginary lapels. "I submit that your exact words were: '*I expect you to be hard at it by the time I get back*' Is that not so, Mrs Savage? Which means, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that my client was expected to be '*hard at*' an unspecified task in an unspecified place. As, indeed, he fully intended to be."

It was one of those occasions when the next part was to vault over the garden gate and spread his arms to his waiting cavalry. Banners would be waving, the cheers would have been deafening, and the men would have been chanting his name for all to hear: "Cid! Cid! Cid!" But it wasn't a fantasy mission this time. This one was for real; so, he sneaked out the back way.

Even minus imagination, the journey was fraught with complications he didn't need. First, old Mister Johnson turned the corner and was heading his way. The lonely widower liked to stop and chat, repeating his stock of nostalgic anecdotes many times over. Terry hid behind a dumpster until the pensioner had shuffled his way past; then, following a quick check, he took off. The thought never occurred that he wouldn't be able to find the house. Three times he ended up back at the park where he had dried off yesterday. The entire street of old houses seemed to have disappeared.

He felt in his pocket for the medallion. Maybe the voices would lead him to it. Wrong pocket, he thought, and tried the other one; then the two back ones. He went through them again. Sweat broke on his face as he discovered a hole in the lining!

Panic increased as he began to retrace his steps. A number of times he saw something that looked likely, but each turned out to be a piece of shiny rubbish. The harder he searched, the more convinced he became that the pendant was lost forever. As he bent to examine a chunk of broken bottle, something growled at him. Looking up, he came face to face with a runt-of-a-dog just about big enough to fit in an average size shopping bag. Its teeth, however, looked very white and extremely sharp; and dangling from them by its cord was the medallion.

Trying to take a new toy from a dog, especially one with an attitude, is no easy task. He talked to it, threatened it, pleaded with it and threw sticks. The terrier might have considered all this very interesting, but it knew a scam when it saw one and didn't intend giving up its prize to a mere kid, even if he was cute. There appeared to be only one way left. Terry lunged for the pendant. The dog took off. The chase that followed was fairly one-sided as far as victory and enjoyment went. While the animal seemed to be deriving great pleasure from a bit of harmless fun, the boy was scratched by branches, was quickly winded, and became decidedly uncharitable as the game proceeded.

He rounded another bush. The terrier was waiting, but this time not for Terry: it was mulling over the exciting prospect of a new challenge. Before it, staring terrified, back arched, mouth wide and spitting violently was a black cat. Terry's problem was solved in a flash. The cat flew. The dog bolted after it, barking. The pendant lay neglected on a carpet of dead leaves. Terry picked it up and slipped the cord over his head, dropping the medallion inside his shirt.

It felt warm against his skin as he wandered over to a wall which bordered the small park. As it was there, it was worth taking a look over before continuing his search. The view from the top was not what had been hoped for: small houses with ordinary back gardens, and off in the distance some new apartment blocks. Beyond that was a large area of bitumen which served as a car park for the tenants of the towering buildings. It seemed stark and ugly compared to the lush green of the trees which surrounded it.

He was about to turn away when something caught his attention. Butterflies began rioting in his stomach. There, peeping through a gap in the trees was the roof of an old house. It had to be the district he was looking for. No wonder it had escaped him before: he hadn't bothered searching past the apartments, believing he would find only more new developments. It would be a long hike unless he took a short cut; so he clambered over the wall and made a bee-line for the apartments.

As with most spur-of-the-moment plans, this one went wrong. Terry ended up facing an eight-foot high security fence which seemed to stretch forever in both directions. But he was too close now to give up. Glancing at his surroundings, it appeared he had wandered into a construction site. There were piles of bricks and sand and equipment galore. Surely there

would be a ladder. He saw one but it was tied to the back of a truck; another was leaning up against some scaffolding. There didn't seem to be anyone around. Maybe they were on strike. Something was working in his favour for a change. He rushed over to it.

The foot of the ladder scored a track in the sand as he dragged it towards the fence. Then someone called out: "Oi!!" Terry cowered as he looked back, ready to break and run if the situation demanded. At first there was no sign of anyone; then there was more shouting. It was coming from overhead. A worker up on the first stage of the scaffolding was yelling a stream of abuse down at him. Terry had taken his ladder! Well, at least he was stuck up there and couldn't give chase. The man obviously disagreed with the theory and was starting to climb down the metal poles. Terry quickened his pace, heaved the ladder upright against the fence, and began to scramble up the rungs. He was easing carefully over the barbed-wire strand on the top as the sound of running feet stopped. The ladder shook. The man had grabbed it and was yelling more unrepeatable language.

Terry jumped. His jeans caught on the barbed wire and he hung for a second or two. Then he was falling to the ground. At least he was on the right side of the fence – for him, anyway – but as he took off, it became apparent that he was now in someone's back garden with every likelihood of being caught by the owner. The fence rattled as the workman's huge hands clutched the mesh and shook it. "Thievin' little mongrel!" he yelled at the boy. Then he roared even louder: "Hey! In the house! Vandals!"

A dog began to bark as Terry reached the building and made for the side gate. The barking increased. The back door thudded as something large (and probably very hairy) rammed against it. More barking. The boy lunged through the front gate and slammed it behind him. His feet crunched noisily on the gravel of the driveway but nobody appeared at the front door. Heart still in mouth, he ran off down the street.

After turning a few corners, he decided he could afford to slow down. In fact, it was essential that he did. He was too close to mess up now. Then he was turning into the familiar street of old houses. He stood for a moment and casually slipped his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. That was when he felt the flap of tattered denim - another souvenir thanks to the barbed-wire. He'd probably need a real lawyer to explain this one away. It was, he guessed, one of the fortunes of war.

Once he had located the house and was in the tangled garden, a warm sensation began to burn on his chest as he approached the old round house. Terry caught hold of the thong around his neck and pulled out the medallion. It shimmered with dancing stars. Voices drifted into his mind, distant at first, then increasing in volume until they boomed painfully. "Stop! Stop!" he whispered. "You're too loud." The voices ceased. Then he 'sensed' a feeling of apology. It was a *feeling*, he knew, because no word was spoken; no-one actually said, 'Sorry'. There followed a long silence, time enough to figure that if anyone spotted him talking to himself he would be hauled off to an asylum. The safest place was inside the round house.

Maybe that last thought had triggered what happened next, or it was more likely mere coincidence. Whatever, the fact remained that someone had seen him climbing through the fence. “Hey, you,” called a man’s voice, “Police. Stay where you are!”

Terry’s heart jumped into his throat. In panic, he yanked open the old door, lurched through and immediately slapped a hand on the square beside the opening. The wooden door slammed shut, followed seconds later by the sliding panel. He waited, not knowing if the policeman had seen him entering the old round house.

Still staring at the door panel, he suffered the anomaly that was fast becoming a habit – a teenage heart attack. This had nothing to do with the concern over the police. The shock was triggered by a voice, one he didn’t recognise. It was inconsistent with those that had come from the pendant. This sound was nowhere near as soft and reassuring as *they* had been. It was harsh, accusing, was as clear as a bell; and the words were spoken by someone inside the old round house: “So it was YOU!”

Enter Cannie Annie

Terry spun to find himself staring at a girl on the far side of the room. The window shutters were beginning to rise; but rather than appearing startled, she just moved away from the wall and glared at him, demanding: “What have you done with my grandfather?”

Terry had no idea who she was talking about. “I haven’t done anything with him. I don’t even know him.” Then a spurt of recall had him frowning and squinting at her face. “But I do know *you* - from school. You’re one of the Nerd Brigade - Canny Annie.”

That clearly ruffled her feathers. “My name is *Annette!*” she snapped, “And I know you too, *Cuddly Terry.*” She leered, adding insult to the emphasis. “Unlike the other girls, I don’t happen to be one of your admirers. I like you even less now. You obviously knew how to close the door because, presumably, you’ve done it before. Whatever you did after that must have interrupted the program.”

“I didn’t really know...” Terry started.

Annette cut in: “You knew enough to interfere; not enough to leave well alone. Now the machine’s back, but without Harold.”

“Who’s Harold?”

She rolled her eyes and groaned. “My grandfather, of course! I was in the lab watching him go up. When the power core came back down five minutes later, he wasn’t on it. Where is he?”

Terry’s puzzled frown deepened. “I don’t know,” he tried to explain, “By the power core, I guess you mean the centre gizmo. It just came up out of the floor...”

“So you must have seen Harold – he was on the platform.”

“Nobody was on the core when it came up,” said Terry meekly. “If there had been, I could have asked them – *him* - to let me out instead of trying to open the door myself. I kind-of panicked and pressed a few buttons...”

“You stupid, interfering idiot!” she grated, “Your meddling must have compromised the reverse program. That’s why Harold didn’t come back. Now he’s probably stranded God knows where!”

“He wasn’t on the island,” said Terry, “At least, I never saw him.”

“What island?”

“The one the machine took me to,” he said, “Kingston told me it was 1817. I thought he was joking at first. I mean, if he wasn’t, that would have meant I’d somehow gone back in time; but next thing I was on a pirate ship and the French were firing at us, and...”

The girl was clearly stunned by his casual acceptance of a fact that most people would have dismissed as an impossibility. “You know it’s a time machine?”

Terry shrugged. “What else would it be? One minute I was here and it was 1997; the next I’d been transported to some desert island. And the clock on the console confirmed what Kingston said – I’d gone back to 1817.”

She was even more disbelieving. Terry began expanding on his adventures but she had stopped listening, was instead talking to herself as she mulled over the eventualities. “So, it *does* work. Granddad was convinced of it, but he wasn’t one-hundred percent sure. That’s why he refused to take me with him, claiming it was too risky.” A sudden thought jerked Annette out of her reverie. “You say you were transported to a desert island. Was it just you, or did the machine travel with you?”

Terry frowned. “Of course it did, otherwise...”

“Was it the same as this?” She waved a hand indicating the inside of the old round house.

“It was a silver dome...”

“But *inside*,” she emphasised, “Was the power core still the same – the controls, I mean?”

“I guess,” he replied, “I didn’t really take much notice. When the voice said that the reverse program was activated, I just touched the Transmit panel and kept my fingers crossed. In seconds I was back here and...”

“So why didn’t Harold return?” Initially she was pondering the question in her head; then she was glaring at Terry as if her grandfather’s disappearance was his fault. “Well?”

The boy had stopped listening to Annette. The voices were with him again: “You do not need to speak, Terr...eee: just think. We have interpreted your mind pattern. We are tuned-in, as you say. As long as you have the thought stone, the medallion as you call it, we can communicate with you.”

Assuming it was some kind of ESP, Terry entered into a strange conversion in which no words were actually spoken. The voices just seemed to put information in his head that answered some of his questions, particularly relating to Harold. “He visited our planet, Rahl,” they explained, “But it was not intentional. His silver dome just appeared. It was as much a surprise to Harold as it was to us, for Rahl is not in your solar system, or even your galaxy.

In some as-yet unknown way, his passage through time was deflected and he was thrown off course."

"But the silver dome was there," said Terry, just to confirm the fact. Unfortunately, he spoke the words out loud.

"You said it was." Annette was puzzled, even more so when the boy claimed he hadn't been talking to her. "You have a reputation for being weird," she reflected sourly, "Now I know it's true. Who were you talking to – the fairies?"

The voices were in Terry's head again: "Time is running short, Terr...eee. It will take too long for you to pass on what we tell you to Annette; and it is doubtful she would believe you. There is a better way."

"What's that?" he asked, but aloud again, "Can you get into her head like you can mine?"

"Excuse me?" retorted the girl. "No-one's getting into *my* head..."

"I'm not talking to you," he snapped. "Can you please be quiet? I need to concentrate."

"We can communicate with both you and Annette at the same time, Terr...eee," crooned the voices, "Just hold one of her hands, have her place the other on the thought stone, and we will do the rest."

Terry extended a hand towards the girl. "You have to hold my hand," he said simply.

"You have got to be joking!" she hissed emphatically, folding her arms to tuck both hands tightly against her sides. "In your dreams, buster!"

At first he let out a deep sigh, then quickly became frustrated and angry. "For Pete's sake! Do you want to find your grandfather, or not?" This was a side of Cuddly Terry she had not seen and was backing away. He lunged for her hand and grabbed it. She protested and tried to break free. Terry held on, snatched her other hand and pressed it against the medallion on his chest.

"You're crazy!" she blurted out, struggling to pull away. The next moment her eyes flew wide and she gasped; then she became quite calm and relaxed.

Presumably she was experiencing the same as Terry; but even for him there was a difference this time. All he could see and 'feel' was yellow. It masked everything; it was everything. He was consumed by it; and once inside the all-pervading colour he began to understand. There were no words, nor even pictures. The messages were sensations and the recall of memories; but not ones he had ever had before. These were new memories of a world he hadn't heard of until now, accompanied by the emotions and concerns of a race he knew only as voices. He was subconsciously experiencing a lesson in Rahl's history. In a flash, his mind was imprinted with over four centuries of Rahlian cultural development and progress; and although this was being related to him at that moment as a mere student, it was as if he had actually *been* there to see it all unfold!

Now he appreciated the urgency. Rahl was a dying planet, its people destined for extinction. But there was more and it involved greed, oppression and betrayal. The voices which had been communicating with him were those of The Group; scientists trying desperately to find a way out of a seemingly impossible situation. When Harold arrived in his

time machine, it was like a gift from the Gods: a means of transporting a few good people to another planet, perhaps to another time where the Rahlians could begin again. Harold had taken their leader, Yanu, to search for that new and safer world; then it had all gone wrong.

This was when the yellow faded. Terry experienced a peculiar blank spot in his thoughts, almost as if his mind been switched to another channel. Maybe it only lasted a second or two; it was hard to know; then he was picking up a voice; just one this time. It seemed older, wiser; and, although calm, it was laced with that same sense of urgency Terry had been indoctrinated to feel, despite being unable to fully understand it. "After it left Rahl, the time machine did arrive somewhere," said the old voice, "But not, we had to assume, in a place of safety. When the door of the silver dome opened, something attacked them – an animal, we believe. This must have been when Yanu lost the thought stone."

"But I found it in the garden near the old round house..." Terry broke off as he re-capped and it started to make sense. "The cord must have broken in the struggle. If it fell off inside the machine, once the silver dome returned, the vacuum process must have blown it out into the garden. What I don't understand is why Yanu and Harold didn't come back in the machine too."

"Because they left the silver dome," the old voice explained, "Yanu said he had driven off the animal, but during the attack, Harold had fallen and broken his leg. Obviously he still had the stone and we could receive him quite clearly. He went on to say he had seen a village nearby and was going to take Harold there. His last thought was when he was picking Harold up to carry him. The stone must have fallen off then. Contact became faint. Moments later it stopped altogether."

"When they left the machine," said Terry unnecessarily. "That doesn't explain why it suddenly returned on its own; but Yanu's last communication confirms they are alive; at least they *were*."

"Stay positive Terr...eee," encouraged the old voice. "There is still hope, provided you can find them and return Yanu to us." There was a brief pause. "We must go, Terr...eee, said the Old One, great urgency resonant in his tone. "The Sens are coming. With luck we will be able to evade them. If so, we will talk soon..." In a flash, the yellow had gone and Terry's mind was blank.

The sudden break in contact shocked both of them. Annette was starting to pull away. "The thought stone's gone cold." She looked at Terry and noticed grave concern etched on his face. "I guess that means we're on our own."

She was right about the thought stone: it was now quite cold. He turned it over to look into its depths. The colour had faded and the gem itself now appeared dull and lifeless. A lump appeared in his throat as he said: "I didn't like the comment about the Sens. From what we've just learned, they're police out of control. They really are brutal pigs!"

"If The Group can avoid them, Yanu might know what to do," said the girl. "The Old One seemed to think he could. Our job is to find him and take him back to Rahl."

"Yeah, right," snorted Terry derisively, "And how are we supposed to do that?"

“In this, obviously.” She turned on the spot to indicate the time machine. “At least we know enough now to program it.”

Her seemingly casual statement of fact irritated Terry even more. “Oh, we do, do we? I don’t remember being given a crash course. I’m still no wiser than I was before.”

“But I am,” she stated with confidence, almost arrogantly. “I know Harold’s settings, the ones that took him to Rahl.”

“He actually spoke to you, did he?” sneered Terry sarcastically. “Funny, but I missed that bit.”

An exasperated growl preceded her explanation: “You don’t have to get all snaky. And no, I didn’t speak to Harold; but when the history lesson got to the part where the silver dome arrived on Rahl, I felt I actually *was* Harold. It was like I was in his head, remembering things he knew and had done.”

Terry was nodding understanding. “That was probably when I was put on hold.”

Annette frowned, then dismissed the observation. “Whatever. The point is, now I know the settings, you can program the machine and we can re-trace Harold’s journey.”

“Why me? *You’ve* done the mind-transfer bit. You do it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You must know I can’t.” She watched his face and it was clear he had not been witness to her link with her grandfather’s memory; maybe because it was a purely-genetic mind transfer. She didn’t know and sighed. “Look, you’ll just have to take my word for it. We have to do this together.”

“Together?” He frowned. “Why together? I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I didn’t,” said Annette with a smirk. “But that was before I needed you.”

Terry was thoroughly confused. “I don’t get it – one minute you hate me; the next we’re an item?”

“Not *that* kind of needed,” she said with a snort. “I’ll re-phrase. In order for the time machine to work, *you* have to program the settings.”

Terry was shaking his head in confusion. “I still don’t see why.”

“Because,” droned the girl pedantically, “When you started meddling, you unknowingly changed Harold’s signature to your own.” She walked to the console and pointed at the square panel he had put his hand on; the one with the light that had shone through like an X-ray. “The machine needs a unique profile of the operator before it will function – as a failsafe. Originally, that was Harold’s. Whatever glitch occurred, it wiped his profile. You must have activated the Reset; so, when you placed your hand on this, the machine scanned your profile and accepted it. Now it is linked to you and you alone. For the time being, you are the only person in the entire Universe it will recognise and obey.” The girl allowed a few seconds for that to sink in, before adding: “So, Cuddly Terry, like it or not I’m stuck with you. It’s now a case of: I know how, and you do what I tell you. Are you averse to taking orders from a woman?”

After a moment’s thought accompanied by a resigned slump of the shoulders, he admitted: “I guess I don’t have a choice, do I?” Her head was shaking, her eyebrows were raised, and

there was a wry smile on her lips. Terry caved in and nodded. “Okay, Commander, wilco, roger and all that; but why do we have to go to Rahl? You reckon you know Harold’s settings, so you must know the ones that sent him and Yanu to wherever they are now.”

“I do,” confirmed the girl, “But you’re forgetting that something threw them off course; and it didn’t happen from here: it was when they left Rahl. The only way we can find them is to replicate Harold’s actions at that place in time and space.”

Terry closed his eyes, going over the implications. “So, we go to Rahl, put in Harold’s exact calibrations, and hope to encounter the same glitch that threw him off course. Am I right so far?” She was nodding. “What happens if we don’t have a glitch and we go straight to wherever Harold intended in the first place; where will we end up then?”

Annette shrugged and tried to look casually confident, which she definitely was not. “Haven’t a clue. If you’re lucky, it might be Las Vegas.”

Another Place, Another Time

The pair was standing before the console. For Terry, it should have been easy: merely a case of painting by numbers; following the step-by-step directions of Cannie Annie. She, on the other hand, was deeply concerned that her mind might not recall the exact programming sequence of her grandfather’s implanted memories. The atmosphere was growing tense and needed de-fusing. Terry reached out with a finger to trace over a bank of buttons, pausing occasionally. “Which one takes your fancy – this... or this?” He grinned. “Hey, maybe we could beam to Honolulu first for a bit of R & R...”

Her composure snapped and she barked at him: “Will you STOP clowning: this is serious!”

The boy spun on her, eyes blazing. “I know that! And *clowning* is how I cope!” He was bristling. “I’m frightened, Annette: of the responsibility; of screwing up.” The girl was clearly stunned by his outburst. Still trembling, he bowed his head and tried to mellow for her sake. “Sorry. That was uncalled for.”

Annette found herself repeating her grandfather’s actions when he was pondering: palms together, fingers extended touching her pursed lips, peering over the top rim of his spectacles, even though she wasn’t wearing any. After a short pause, the hands dropped and she was looking at Terry, seeing the fear in his eyes, realising that he was just a boy who was having to grow up too quickly. “No, *I’m* sorry,” she said, “I over-reacted. And if it helps, I’m scared too.”

“You could have fooled me,” grumbled Terry sourly.

She forced a smile. “That was the idea. I need you to keep trusting me, and I can’t imagine you will if you think I’m just another wimpy schoolgirl.” Contrasting with the heated exchange, a subsequent prolonged silence waited to be broken, but neither of them seemed

prepared to speak. Eventually, Annette decided it ought to be her. “Can we start again? If you can tolerate me being grouchy and bossy, I’ll put up with your clowning. Is it a deal?”

His lips curled in a sneer as he looked sideways at her. Then he couldn’t maintain the pretence any longer and grinned widely. “Who am I to argue with She who must be obeyed? Lead on MacDougle.”

“MacDuff” she corrected.

Terry groaned. “You’re beginning to sound like my mother.” Noticing a twitch of disapproval in the corner of her eye, he hurried on: “So be it,” then he switched to his worst German accent: “Your Vish is my commant.”

They were hesitant at first: Annette thinking twice before issuing the next instruction; Terry’s hand pausing over each sensor-panel or button, his attention on the girl’s face, waiting for confirmation that she was happy for him to proceed. She didn’t growl or complain about his delays. As for Terry, clowning seemed furthest from his mind. His usual sense of humour had deserted him to be replaced by an austere, adult concern he never knew he had. How long it took to complete the programming was anyone’s guess; but at the end of it, they both felt mentally drained.

There was just one final thing to do; and that was Terry’s job – touch the Transmit panel to set the silver dome on its way. A nagging worry over the time-setting had him staring at the destination clock. “Are you certain that’s right? The year seems definitely out of this world which I accept; but the rest of the date worries me. We’ve got it set for 10.13 on September 16. That’s yesterday!”

“When Harold left to visit Rahl for the first time,” explained Annette. “He went from 1997 to the year 8349 – the future. It worked without a problem then. Let’s hope we’ve got the settings right to replicate his journey...”

“You don’t seem all-that confident about the settings.” He paused to think about what he was going to say next so that he didn’t sound like a complete dummy. “As I understand it, Harold transported there in this time machine. Now, it’s a computer of sorts; and computers have memories, so there must be a record of the journey saved somewhere.”

“There will be,” Annette confirmed.

He was surprised at her complacency; even more so at her patience and that she hadn’t yelled at him. In a way, it was comforting. “Pardon my ignorance, but why didn’t we call up the saved file and use it to log in the old program? At least we’d know it was exact.”

“But the machine wouldn’t have recognised it as valid,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong – I’m not blaming you, not now – but Harold’s file was created with his profile. It’s like a password. You’ve given the machine a new one – yours.”

The boy seemed satisfied. She was about to go on when he said: “This is probably irrelevant: you keep referring to him as Harold, yet he’s your grandfather.”

“So?”

“Isn’t that kind-of disrespectful?”

“On the contrary: we have a very special relationship. He asked me to call him Harold; and he calls me Lill-O. That’s short for Little Orphan Annie.”

“Oh, are you an orphan, then?”

“None of yours,” she grated sourly.

“Sorry,” said Terry, feeling very awkward. “But Lill-O is pretty cool; less formal than Annette.” She was scowling again. “Seeing as we’re sort-of friends now, would you mind if I called you Annie?”

An expression he hadn’t seen crept onto her face. On reflection, however, it was very familiar – one his mother frequently adopted when he was trying to be over-smart. In consideration of this, what the girl came back with was fully expected: “Fine, provided I can start calling you Terence.”

Touché. “Right, Annette it is, then,” he said; then after a pause followed by a sigh of resignation: “Back to business. Are you ready for me to Transmit?”

Annette didn’t answer immediately, apparently harbouring some concerns of her own. “Assuming we don’t get lost in time. What I was going to say before you chose to butt in was that I didn’t follow Harold’s settings to the letter. I made a slight change to the day of arrival.”

“You’ve done what?” he exploded. “Are you mad?”

“I don’t think so,” she said quite calmly. “Harold and I often talked about the time/space continuum; but in reality no theories had ever been tested. He believed that returning to an exact time and place that had been visited before wasn’t possible. That would mean re-playing part of his own life as someone else; yet actually still being the same person. You can see the problem.”

Terry was totally baffled. “Not really, but do go on.”

“Well, I thought that by arriving on Rahl a day later, after Harold had already been and left, that would hopefully avoid compromising the continuum.”

He was blinking, trying to understand; but numerous episodes of Doctor Who and Star Trek didn’t help. “Sorry, Annette, you’ve lost me. I’ll have to take your word for it. Why did you just add a day, though? Shouldn’t we travel there on today’s date? That would be well after Harold and Yanu had gone.”

“Not a good idea,” she stated, sounding absolutely positive. “Remember the Old One saying the Sens were coming. If The Group is in trouble, the last thing we want is to land in the middle of it. We need to meet up with them a day before it actually happens.” Judging by the blank expression, he was still confused. “You’ll have to trust me, Terry.”

He sighed and nodded. “I suppose,” then a cheeky smile split across his face. “Looking on the bright side, if you do succeed in killing us both, we won’t need to worry about Christmas cards.” Her raised eyebrows declared she was prepared to accept the comment as nervous clowning. At least she wasn’t screaming at him. “You know,” he added, “You look kind-of pretty when you aren’t being superior.”

She frowned. “If that’s your best come-on, forget it.”

Terry shrugged. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“Well don’t.”

“Okay.” He produced a weak smile accompanied by a nod as a sign of surrender. “Now,” his hand returned to hover over the Transmit pad. “Are you ready for me to fly you to the moon?” He waited.

Annette took a few seconds, then said: “Hold my hand, please.”

Terry smirked. “Does that mean we *are* an item now?”

Following a deep breath, she said: “Maybe later – I’ll think about it. For now, I’m simply terrified. I need to know I have a friend.”

The boy closed his eyes in a long, sagely blink. “I can live with that.” One hand took Annette’s; the other descended slowly, cautiously onto the Transmit pad. About to touch it, in a tinny, nasal imitation of a loudspeaker, he announced: “The train now standing at platform three is about to depart for the planet Rahl. Hold very tight there, please.”

A Dying Planet

Terry had experienced the machine’s transport phase before; Annette clearly hadn’t because she was squeezing his hand so tightly his fingers were going numb. Even after the transfer process stopped, she continued to cling on. “It’s okay,” he said softly, “You can let go now.” While he flexed the fingers to bring life back to them, he pointed with the other hand at the clock. “We’ve arrived. It’s 10.13 on September 17 8349. Exactly where we are is still unknown.” He walked towards one of the windows. “Come on, let’s find out.”

They both waited impatiently as the window shutters came down. As they did, the dome gradually filled with light; from which sun, though, remained a mystery. The little that could be seen of the landscape wasn’t much help; at least not for Terry. To him it could have been any desert anywhere in the Universe. Colours were dismal and unspectacular - mainly grey, but with faint hints of blue or purple. It was like looking at an old black and white movie that had been colour-tinted. Annette gave a sigh of satisfaction. “We’re here,” she said, “This is Rahl.”

“How do you know?” he asked, “You’ve never been here. And when we were given our lightening history lesson, I don’t recall seeing any pictures of Rahl or the Rahlians.”

Annette seemed annoyed as if she expected him to have understood. “That’s because what they and their planet looked like was irrelevant. We received the background in the form of sensations and emotions. It was just mental stimulation – pictures weren’t necessary.”

“So, how do you know and I don’t?”

“Because Harold saw it first-hand,” she explained, “It’s in his memories.”

Before the shutters were fully down, a face appeared at the window. Terry gasped and backed away. Oddly enough, he had not, as yet, formed an idea what the Rahlians might look like; only that they would probably be alien. This face, however, looked decidedly human.

A beaming smile spread across Annette's face as she flapped a hand at the window. "It's Gannah!" she said excitedly, "One of The Group. They're still safe."

"Only for a day," he reminded her grimly.

The smile fell from her face. "You're right. I hope for all our sakes it's enough." Then a sudden thought cheered her up. "The way you talked about your pirate adventure on the island, you must have been there for a good part of the day; but when you returned, you said only two minutes had elapsed. If that's the way time travel works, as long as we do what we have to and return to Rahl before tomorrow when the Sens come for The Group..." She broke off as something else occurred to her: "We have to tell them what's going to happen tomorrow, about the Sens. Maybe they can hide or something until we get back."

The door panel of the silver dome swished aside. Terry stayed back to peer out cautiously. Annette, on the other hand, rushed to the door. There were a number of people clustered outside the silver dome, and as she greeted them one by one it was a peculiar scene. Aside from the fact that they were much taller than the girl, none of them could be seen speaking. They must have, though, because Annette responded to each in actual words. Terry figured it was the mind thing again, and that suspicion was confirmed when one of them stepped forward into the doorway. He recognised the face as the one looking through the window and said: "Hello, Gannah. Saw your light on, thought we'd drop in."

The Rahlian was rubbing his hands together, and his pencil-thin lips opened to let out a strange screeching that startled the boy. "Welcome, Terr...eee." Another odd thing – when he said the words his lips didn't move, so Gannah must have been just thinking them. He went on to add: "I apologise for my rude outburst – that is our expression of joy. You do not know our language yet; so, for the time being, we will have to use thought transfer. And I am sorry we do not live up to your ideas of alien creatures."

Terry blushed. He had to look up to take in the facial features - the 'man' was over seven feet tall at least and had to stoop to be seen through the doorway. "These others are members of The Group." Terry only half-'listened'. He was more intent on gazing from one Rahlian to the next, trying to find some characteristic which would distinguish the individuals. There were few to choose from: all had the same thin lips, squat noses and wore identical, shiny black uniforms and boots which clung to their apparently frail, half-starved bodies like a second skin. The most prominent feature, however, was in fact a lack of it - they had not a strand of hair anywhere on their heads. No eyebrows or lashes, even. This tended to make their bald heads seem overlarge.

Gannah extended bony hands towards him. "Come and meet them." A grin spread on his lips. "They will not bite."

Terry edged warily through the door and took hold of Gannah's hands. Although he didn't know why, he expected them to be cold. They were anything but, warmer even than his own. As he stepped out of the dome, he noticed that his skin had taken on the same grey tinge as the Rahlians. Like the walking-dead, he thought, and he felt Gannah smile in his head at the notion. "I don't think I can get used to this," the boy said out loud. "Not talking, I mean."

"You would not like the way we speak," said Gannah, still tight-lipped. Then his mouth began to move and Terry's ears filled with a high-pitched jumble of sounds which reminded him of a record being played backwards at double-speed.

He clapped his hands over his ears. "Okay. You win." He frowned at the screeches which started up from the entire Group, all bobbing about and rubbing their hands together. "You're laughing at me, right?" Great! He was risking life and limb, and they were making fun of him! They probably figured he looked cute, too!

The Rahlian laughter stopped, replaced by thoughts in his head. "Please do not mind them, Little One. Happiness is something we rarely experience of late. Your arrival is, for us, a time of joy and one of renewed hope." It was the lone voice that had spoken to him before. As the soft, gentle tones drifted into his mind, he looked around The Group to see if he could tell who was addressing him, but not one of them seemed old enough. "No, I am not with you, Terr...eee," he continued to croon, "But we will meet shortly. The others will bring you to me now and we can prepare you for your journey."

The sounds of the invisible Rahlian drifted away. Some of the Group began to walk off. One of them pointed to the time machine. "You should close the door of the silver dome, Terr...eee."

He frowned. "How do I do that?"

"There's another sensor switch on the outside," said Annette. "Just touch it and the door will close."

He hesitated with his hand over the panel. "Maybe Harold did that when Yanu carried him out of the machine, and look at the mess they're in!"

A feeling of reassurance fluttered in his head: "But when they were here before, Terr...eee, Harold closed the door and the silver dome did not disappear. It should not do so now." This voice was different, sounded female and was a bit like his mother's. Maybe because of this he trusted it. So, he touched the panel and closed the door. The time machine didn't budge. Terry breathed a sigh of relief. "Where are we going?"

"To my home, Terr...eee. I am Maiaa." She led him by the arm. He really did feel like a little kid again, holding the hand of his mother who towered above. "There we will have some refreshment and you will meet the Old One. He will explain what we have in mind for you."

"His was the voice," commented Terry unnecessarily. Confirmation was merely a pleasant sensation in his head. Even before meeting the Old One, he had the feeling he was going to get on well with him.

As they walked, Terry took a wide look at the countryside. It was inhospitable with little in the way of recognisable vegetation - a few clumps of large wrinkly balls which were probably some kind of fungus and the odd patch of moss or lichen. The rest was mainly sand and rocks. The lack of greenery caused him to think of death.

"Long ago, as you already know from your history lesson," explained Gannah, picking up on the boy's thoughts, "The air was poisoned by the machines and warfare of our ancestors. We now live under the protection of the domes." He noticed Terry looking up to the sky apprehensively and added. "The initial pollution has dispersed marginally and a few plants have started to grow producing oxygen enabling us to walk in the atmosphere for short periods; but this reprieve is unlikely to last. Poisonous gases still remain in the upper skies and have been added to by a greedy, unthinking industrialist who discarded toxic waste and materials. They created the permanent cloud which hides our sun; and, despite the evidence that it is destructive, the practice continues. The unfortunate creation of Jannik's Belt is the result and is, we believe, the phenomenon that may have instigated the interruption to Harold's program."

"So, living in the domes is the safest option," said Terry.

"For the moment," said Maiaa. Anger crept into her thoughts. "And it suits the Eldaas. they find it more... convenient. It is easier for them to keep a watchful eye on us in the cities."

"But they still allow you to come outside?" Terry was confused.

"Field trips," replied Gannah, "To gather specimens and take air samples. Our reports, however, are never released publicly and our recommendations are always ignored."

Terry was nodding as he scanned the countryside again. "Now I see it for myself, I get why you pushed us into coming. You really must be desperate."

An old sigh drifted into his head. "If we were not, Little One, you would not be here."

Under the Domes of Rahl

They rounded a rocky outcrop. Gannah extended a hand towards a transparent, plastic ball which hovered a few centimetres off the ground with no visible means of support. "Our transport awaits, Little Terr...eee." The vehicle shone dully in the cloud-veiled daylight. It did not seem exceptionally large, certainly not big enough to carry everyone. "There are two more hidden a short way off," explained Maiaa.

Terry and Annette climbed aboard and settled into chairs at the rear of the transport. Maiaa and Gannah took the last vacant seats; while the operator, a Rahlian called Lohinn, was seated before a control panel at the very front. His long, bony hands rested momentarily on the console as he glanced around through the clear shell of the sphere. The action and a general air of suspicion caused concern in Terry. Maiaa turned in her seat and smiled back

at him. "Nothing is wrong, Terr...eee. We have learned to be cautious. That is why three of our number and their transport skip will remain behind to watch over your silver dome. We wouldn't want it falling into the hands of the Sens."

Far from setting Terry's mind at rest, this caused him anguish which increased when Gannah's thoughts popped into his head: "Watch how Lohinn controls the transporter, Terr...eee. You may find it useful." Did that really mean he would have to drive one of these things some day? Suddenly, he'd forgotten his fears and shifted his position so that he could stare at the hand-movements of the lanky pilot intently.

Annette must somehow have picked up on his concerns. "Look, learn and inwardly digest, Cuddly Terry. I won't be able to help you with this one."

"Thanks a bunch," he replied sourly. "You'd better watch too, in case I forget something. Anyway, there's no reason you couldn't do some of the driving." Then he had another thought: "Maybe not a good idea – women have a reputation for being notoriously bad drivers." She dug him in the ribs and the Rahlians laughed out loud. "Still," he added hopefully: "It probably won't come to that."

She gave him a wry smile. "Considering your track record to date, I'd say that's wishful thinking."

She had a point, so he went back to concentrating. The controls were similar to those on the console in the silver dome - a flat panel decorated by a confusion of coloured shapes. Lohinn's hand moved to cover one of them. The circular hole which had been the entrance instantly became just another part of the sphere's wall. Then they were moving. The sensation this passage caused was visual rather than anything else for there was no sound, no vibration; just the sight of the alien countryside flashing by at an ever-increasing speed. Closer features became a blur. Terry felt a little sick and concentrated on the mountains of the far horizon.

It seemed only minutes before the domed city was looming ahead. The boy gripped his seat as they rushed at full speed towards a high, very solid-looking wall. Lohinn touched another shape. A purple beam of light spread from the front of the sphere to play on the wall. At the same time the speed dropped. The transparent ball glided through a hole which the beam had apparently made.

Terry's mouth was already open and remained that way as they entered the city. It was such a contrast to the land outside with towering buildings extending up to almost touch the roof of the giant bowl which protected them. Spheres of varying sizes drifted about the outskirts. Known as city skips, they were like civilian cars, except they didn't merely drive along bitumen streets. These pods, as transport spheres were also called, travelled in a strange but orderly manner, some close to the ground, others ten, twenty and thirty metres above. Each seemed to select a particular height before entering the desired space between the buildings.

Lohinn climbed their transport before entering the 'road'. It was a two-way, three-dimensional traffic system where transport kept to the right and followed a height which

corresponded to the various levels of the buildings. At each level, a pedestrian walkway ran alongside the road, a clear plastic screen protecting those using it as a footpath. A sphere had stopped ahead in their lane and people were exiting onto the walkway. Lohinn slowed down, glanced at the control panel, then lifted their transport to the next level, dropping back down as soon as they were clear of the stationary vehicle.

Life here seemed very orderly and methodical. Very adult; particularly so. They must have passed hundreds of Rahlian pedestrians moving along the walkways, but Terry had not seen a single child - peculiar. There was no time to ask the question. The sphere had stopped. The purple beam shone sideways onto the transparent safety barrier. Lohinn crabbed the machine until its shape fitted perfectly into the hole in the walkway shield. Part of the skip seemed to melt as a circular doorway appeared in the transparent shell.

"Wait, please, Terr...eee and Annette." Maiaa seemed rather concerned as she left the transport and went to stand before the blank wall of the adjacent building. She did something Terry could not see and a door was suddenly before her. Looking both ways along the level, then up and down, she eventually beckoned them. Gannah encouraged the two young time-travellers out of their seats; then hurried them across the walkway and through the hole in the exterior wall of the building.

Maiaa followed, closing the door behind her. "Welcome to my home." She produced a tiny screech and rubbed her hands lightly together, then led them along a short corridor into a large, circular room. Off to one side, an old man appeared to be floating on thin air. He waved a hand at the new arrivals. "Perhaps Annette would like to help the others prepare some food. While they do, come sit with me Terr...eee and we can talk." The old Rahlian sensed the boy's wariness. "It is all right, you will not fall - it is not 'thin air' as you thought but quite the reverse. Come, try the thick-air relaxer, Little One."

The old man screeched as Terry gingerly leaned forward to sweep and pat the space around him with obvious embarrassment. Then he actually felt something solid, but soft. He turned around and began lowering himself. The Old One rubbed a pair of stringy hands together in delight. Terry blushed as usual. He looked around the empty room. "Is there other furniture?" He had visions of himself walking about, falling over invisible chairs and tables.

"Only if you want," replied the Old One, "And if you have one of these." He showed Terry a circular gold disc fastened to his wrist. "Gold for old," he mused. "When you get to my age you need some luxuries. Maiaa and Gannah are only youngsters - they have to make do with platinum which is nowhere near as comfortable." He stroked his squat nose with a skinny finger. "The absence of children disturbs you, Little One?"

Perhaps he was getting on in years, but this old man's mind was still sharp enough to pick up on a concern which Terry had almost forgotten. The Old One didn't wait to be asked for an explanation. Apparently children up to the age of three years never left their homes, a custom found necessary during the early days to protect the infants from the polluted air outside. The practice had now become a way of life. They left their parents before their

fourth birthday and were taken to a school for a further seven years to study and to learn the necessary life and academic skills. At the age of eleven they reached maturity.

It was a strange kind of childhood, Terry decided. He was glad he wasn't a Rahlian. It also explained why they had not hesitated when asking a couple of fourteen-year-old Earth kids to help - according to their society, Terry and Annette were adults by three years already! "Not quite, Little One." The old man invaded his private thoughts, "But your mind is older than you think. I must admit, though, your body is a little little." The Old One screeched at his own joke. Terry never appreciated references to his height. The old man picked up on it, realised his mistake and leaned across to pat him gently on the shoulder. "Do not take offence, Terr...eee. It was just an old one's humour getting the better of him. I meant no disrespect."

Annette came in holding two bowls. Maiaa and Gannah followed carrying a large, oval platter between them. The girl hovered uncertainly, wondering what to do with the bowls because there was no sign of any table. Just before reaching Terry and the Old One, the Rahlians lowered the platter, then released it. Instead of dropping to the floor, it hung suspended on an invisible table. Annette used it as a guide and put the bowls close to the platter. Maiaa was amused by her caution and thought: "You will be used to our ways in time."

Annette said: "I'll go fetch the drinks." As she turned to leave she noticed a cheeky twinkle in Terry's eyes. "I know that look. Don't think I'm going to be waiting on you hand, foot and finger for the duration. This is a one-off, so make the most of it." Then she spun and swept out of the room.

The 'food' comprised a number of cylinders like lipstick holders. These were neatly arrayed and grouped together in colours. "Try one," said Annette, "They're good." Catching his 'do I believe you?' look she smiled and raised her eyebrows, so he guessed she had already sampled some of the strange-looking finger food. He selected a brown stick which resembled chocolate and sniffed at it. There was no smell. It felt like plastic. He touched it carefully on his tongue. The tip melted instantly, leaving a pleasant mint taste in his mouth. Unsure about eating habits, he looked up as he placed the whole of the stick in his mouth and closed it. There was no sign that anyone in the room disapproved of his manners.

"Somewhat sweet for me," commented the Old One. "I prefer *quillusian*." He indicated a pale green stick.

The boy took one and popped it straight in, smiling. The smile fell away instantly as a roaring fire spread from his mouth, down his throat to his stomach. He coughed and spluttered. "Ahrgg! Chilli and fish!" Accepting a container of peach-coloured liquid, he gulped at it without thinking. He was luckier this time. The burning eased and his mouth felt fresh once again. "Sorry," he said out loud. "Think I'll just go with the mint."

Although the sticks of so-called food seemed to have no actual substance, they were surprisingly filling. This was presumably a business lunch because they all continued to nibble as they talked. There were frequent references to synthesisers and teachers; all very interesting, but Annette was concerned about a more important issue. She waited for a

break in the conversation, then addressed the Rahlians: "I didn't want to spoil things before, but we've seen what tomorrow will bring you and..."

"We know, Annette," said the Old One, "We have seen it in your thoughts, and we will take measures to ensure we avoid the coming visit of the Sens."

"That's a relief," said the girl, "But, if you knew that, you must also know we have less than a day to leave. I can't imagine there'll be time for the teaching you mentioned, or anything else, come to that."

Maiaa rose from her platinum relaxer and beckoned them. "Come. Your lesson will not take long, and you definitely need some new clothes. You are conspicuous enough because of your size, and your Earth clothes only add to it. If you look more like us, you will attract less attention."

A Rahlian Transformation

They were escorted to another room and some of the earlier conversation started to make sense. The 'teacher' on everyone's mind was a transparent sphere with a seat inside. This, it was claimed, would enable them to speak the Rahlian tongue and acquaint them with some of the finer customs. "Is it really necessary?" asked Terry. "We seem to get on quite well with the thought contact."

"At the moment you are both close enough to us for it to be effective," explained Maiaa, "Over a distance we would lose contact. And should you encounter other Rahlians who do not possess our mental talent, it is best you know how to communicate normally."

"But the thought stone," said Terry, "You reached me on Earth thousands of years away from here. As long as I have it with me..."

"That is an integral part of our plan. The thought stone will be essential when you go to find Harold, Terr...eee." Her thoughts became grim. "Although Yanu no longer has his stone, his mental powers are greater than ours; except for the Old One's, of course. With luck, and the thought stone, you should be able to contact him, providing he is not too far away. So, ensure you have it on your person at all times; and you *must* keep it safe. We cannot risk losing another stone. There were three, but now only two remain and they cannot be replicated."

Annette frowned. "What happened to the third stone?"

A wave of deep sadness seemed to permeate the room. Maiaa's thoughts filled in details which had not been covered in the previous history lesson. They were painful for the Rahlian to relate. "It was my Father's. He was captured by the Sens along with some of The Group." She was finding this next part even harder. "He and the others payed the ultimate price for their alleged treason; but before the sentence was carried out, he managed to destroy his stone to prevent the Sens using it."

Maiaa put a hand up to her neck and pulled on the cord to reveal the last medallion. “I shall be giving this to you, Annette, so that you can stay in contact with Terry in the same way that I did with my brother before he lost the one you found.”

The boy was puzzling. “Two things: you and Yanu are sister and brother, right?” He waited for the mental nod of confirmation. “And after what you just said, I’m guessing I’ll be going on my own. What about Annette?”

“She must remain here. We cannot risk losing both of you,” explained Maiaa. “Wearing my stone she will be able to pass on the correct calibrations for the machine even over the span of time. That will be especially important to ensure your safe return to us.”

Terry let out a long sigh as he took it all in. “Let’s hope Harold knows how to fix the glitch.”

A heavy silence followed, then: “You have to be prepared for the possibility that both Yanu and Harold may no longer be alive.” Maiaa paused to look at the girl. “I am sorry, Annette, but we must face the facts.”

Terry sensed how the strong possibility had rocked the girl and tried to lighten the mood. “Hey, keep the positive vibes. We’ll *all* be coming back, no worries.”

Annette took a few moments to compose herself. A quivering smile rippled across her lips. Wiping the hint of a tear from her eye, she said rather forcefully: “You’d better get back, Terry Savage! I don’t want to be the only short person on Rahl.”

A sense of urgency crept into their minds. “Now you must enter the teaching sphere.” Maiaa pointed to it with a slim finger. “There may come a time when you will have to communicate with Rahlians who do not possess mind-transfer abilities. The Sens, for example,” she added seriously; then passing her medallion to the girl, she added: “Both of you wear the stones in the sphere: your lessons will be quicker – just a minute or two.”

Not without reservations, Terry climbed in and sat waiting. Before he realised what was happening, a ball of hazy, white light had descended to envelope his head and shoulders. He felt a tingle and seemed to remember trying to get up. Then nothing. Eventually, he blinked. The light had gone as had the tingle. Nothing else had changed. He was glad he’d stayed seated. “When do we start?” he asked Maiaa.

“It is finished,” replied the Rahlian.

“Of course it is,” replied Terry. He frowned. That was a peculiar thing to say, and he’d actually spoken the words. At least, his lips had moved, but the sounds he had uttered weren’t English! Maiaa spoke again. Actually spoke - out loud! And Terry understood perfectly - no recordings in reverse this time; just the pleasant, lilting language of Rahl. A strange sense of happiness came over him and he noticed that he was rubbing his hands together. He let out a screech of laughter. Annette scowled at him. He hooked a hitch-hikers thumb at the sphere. “Your turn,” he screeched in Rahlian, switching to English for a bit of banter that would hopefully reassure her: “Don’t be all day.”

Once the teaching procedure was over, Maiaa led them to an adjacent room. There was no need for either of them to ask where they were going: their “teacher” had already informed them of what was coming next. “You know what to do,” said Maiaa and let out a tiny hiccup

– a Rahlian chuckle. “I will wait in the other room so as not to embarrass you. I have seen your species is uncomfortable about undressing in public.”

Once she left, the boy and girl looked at each other. “I think I’m going to leave my jocks on,” said Terry as he stripped off his T shirt.

“You can’t. Naked is the only way it works.”

“So you’re going to take your panties off, right?” he said.

“And my bra.”

His eyebrows raised. “I didn’t realise you needed one.”

“Don’t be so bloody rude!”

“Sorry. I’m just feeling a bit awkward,” he said. “I’ll go first. Promise you won’t look.”

Annette began to turn her back on him and said: “Promise. As long as you do the same for me.”

Terry placed a hand over his heart. “Scouts honour.”

Terry’s instructions had been gained in the teaching sphere. Stripping off all his clothes, pausing occasionally to make sure the girl wasn’t watching, he stepped cautiously into the synthesiser cabinet. Skin prickled as invisible beams probed and measured. It hummed for a while; then went quiet. This stage completed – he knew instinctively that it was – he exited the cabinet, making sure Annette’s back was still turned, and walked around to the other side where there was an identical chamber. His new clothes were hanging on a plastic replica of himself. He put them on and admired himself in the mirrored side of the cabinet. The black shiny boots and uniform fitted perfectly. Presumably starting to think like a Rahlian, he couldn’t help noticing how small he seemed; and for some reason his face looked odd - quite alien, really. Far too much hair from a Rahlian perspective. He shrugged and stepped out, saying: “I’m done. What do you reckon?”

Annette turned to look at him. “Very suave, but still cuddly – in a human kind-of way. Now, turn your back.” Her transformation complete, she came out to a waiting Terry. “Does it meet with sir’s approval?”

His head rocked from side to side. “Pretty neat, but the English part of me preferred the jeans.” She gave a look of ‘so who cares what you think?’ then said: “I have a confession to make. I did peak, once or twice.”

Terry smirked. “Me too. I really don’t know how I can live with myself, but it was worth it. And I apologise for my former observation – you definitely do need to wear a bra.”

Annette was annoyed. “You said you wouldn’t look! You gave me your word.”

“Ah,” he admitted with a sly wink, “I was never actually a boy scout.”

When they returned to the members of The Group, a wave of complete satisfaction swept Maiaa’s lounge room. Their Rahlian hosts thought they looked *ch’mut* - ‘mega-fantastic’ in English. Terry was about to sit with the Old One again when he felt something tug in his semi-consciousness. It was the kind of awareness which came with apprehension. The expressions on the three Rahlian faces had frozen. “The Sens have become suspicious,” said Terry gravely, “I can feel it.” This was a new experience for him. The teacher must

have included another mental skill - being able to pick up messages from those of The Group elsewhere in the city.

"You have become more Rahlian than you might have expected," said the Old One. "It will be easier for you to communicate now; and in time you will be able to do many things with your mind. But it will take practice." He clenched his wiry fist and extended the small finger upwards. "But you must go. Farewell, Little One. "

Maiaa broke the tension. "Come with me, Terr...eee. Annette, you must stay with the Old One. It will be safer now that the Sens are mobilising. You can use the stone to pass on Harold's settings for the new journey from here, or wherever you have to go to avoid capture."

Sensing the boy's concern on having to leave Annette behind, the Old One said: "We will take care of your very special friend for you. And I see you are worried about how you will manage on your own. Whatever you encounter and how to deal with it, trust your imagination, Little One," he crooned. "It has served you well, and will continue to do so. I am certain it will help you return to us soon."

Terry nodded mentally, then pointed his little finger to the ceiling. "Goodbye, Old One. I promise to try; and I hope I don't let you down."

"That will never happen, Terr...eee." The Old One stopped actually speaking and was in his head. The positive vibrations flowing through couldn't be described in words – they just were; and they were all the boy needed to carry on.

Terry raised a finger to Annette. "I'll be back before you know it."

Annette's finger rose and it was trembling. "And don't be late, buster, or you'll be eating *quillusian* for a week."

In a matter of twenty Earth minutes he was back at the silver dome; then it was down to business. To start with it was peculiar: no words were spoken; only by thought-transfer as, over a considerable distance, Annette began relaying the settings to replicate Harold's last journey. Terry was following her directions to the letter; but he hesitated with his hand over the control that set the time. "I'm still confused over the date and time thing," he said; or actually he thought it. "I understand it doesn't work the normal way; and I accept that Harold at least thought he knew what he was doing by leaving Rahl on the same date, give or take a few millennia; but I was wondering if we should add half an hour to his time," he continued. "I know how to do that, if you agree."

"I do," Annette came back, "And I also think it might be an idea to shift the point of destination – just a tad, maybe a hundred metres, no more."

"Good thinking, Ninety-Nine." Having made that clowning comment, Terry realised how scared he was. "Sorry," he added, "Back to serious. I've re-set the time. Tell me what to do to shift the destination."

Surprisingly, it all seemed easier than before when he had lacked technological self-confidence. No doubt this was another Rahlian talent he had acquired. An association of

ideas sparked a thought – weren't they now both Earthling and Rahlian, dual citizens? That sounded really cool, especially as there were only two of them in the entire Universe. A picture of Annette washed through his mind. He made the mistake of reflecting on his new-found companion: sure, she was a pain at times, but she was growing on him; and he was missing her already.

Annette gave him a mental dig in the ribs. "I'm missing you too, Cuddly Terry. And if you don't come back to me, I'll tell your Mum; and you know what that means."

Those words stayed with him as he waited, hand poised over the Transmit panel. With the ones he cared about so far away he suddenly felt alone and vulnerable. She nudged him again. It was a warm sensation, gentle; almost like a hug, and it made him blush. Although he couldn't actually see her, he knew she was smiling when she said: "Do it, Terry. Faint heart never won fair lady."

How could he possibly refuse an offer like that? His hand came down and remained for the obligatory five seconds. The swish, swish started. He held his breath. It seemed to be going well for a few seconds; then the whole dome began to shudder! Sweat broke on Terry's forehead.

The shaking ceased a moment later. His eyes darted from screen to screen, trying to discover what had happened. The smooth curve of what he had come to know as the time graph had a small peak on it. Otherwise everything seemed normal. Whatever had occurred was, for the moment, irreversible.

The machine eventually completed the programmed journey and stopped. Wherever that was might not matter; the kind of reception he was about to face definitely did.

"Stop worrying," Annette's thoughts floated in. "And don't open the door until you've had a good look through the windows, just in case there's a wolf or two on the prowl."

Terry sent her a mental scowl. "Now you tell me. You might at least have done that before I left – I could have brought some dog biscuits."